



In Search of a Bond

by Fran

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PART ONE – THE SEARCH FOR A GUIDE

Heading Home

There were four patrol cars, lights flashing, parked around the small store on Prospect Avenue when Lieutenant Jim Ellison pulled up. Jumping out of his truck, he flashed his detective's shield and ducked under the yellow tape that indicated a crime scene before crossing over to stand near the store's entrance. Looking in, Jim saw a forensic team working a room damaged by fire. In the center of the room, a body already in a bag, was being put on a rolling cart.

Turning, Jim looked out to the street where a fire engine and police cars waited, the firemen talking with two Detectives from Cascade's Major Crimes division.

"Hi Jim," Detective Henri Brown, aka H, greeted Jim as he walked over to stand by the entrance looking in. "Not that I mind, but why are you here? I thought you were heading home to pack for your camping trip?"

"I live a couple of blocks away, down Prospect, right by the bay."

H nodded his understanding as his partner, Detective Rafe, walked over. "Hey Jim," Rafe greeted, as he watched the body being rolled out before turning back to Jim and H. Rafe and H had been successful partners for several years. In appearance they were complete opposites, Rafe was a striking man of South African descent who dressed like he was coming from a GQ photo shoot. His partner, Henri Brown, was a heavysset African American man with a bald head, neat mustache and a penchant for loud print shirts. But it was what they had in common that made their partnership work so well. Both had a keen intelligence, a strong work ethic, and a high regard for justice.

"Rafe," Jim nodded his greeting. "What's going on here?"

"Murder. The perp tried to cover it up with arson but didn't realize there was an automatic sprinkler system. We were near-by so we answered the call, but Homicide will be picking up the case."

Jim was about to ask about the case when he heard some commotion over by the police line where two officers were standing.

"That's CSU's sentinel guide team," H nodded at the pair. "We're waiting for them but they've been arguing for five minutes."

"What's their problem?" Jim asked quietly, all too aware that the sentinel could hear his conversation with H and Rafe.

"The guide, Officer Mark Dean, doesn't want the sentinel, Detective Anthony Glover, to go in the store. He says there's too many pollutants."

Jim considered this as he turned to watch the pair. Sentinel guide teams were rare, especially in the PD. CSU could boast one team and SWAT the other team in the PD. Most sentinel guide teams worked for large government agencies such as the FBI and Homeland Security. Jim had heard his captain, Simon Banks, repeatedly bemoan the fact that Major Crimes didn't have a sentinel guide team.

"You can't go in there," the guide was insisting in a loud voice. It was supposed to be said in concern but to Jim's trained ear, it sounded arrogant.

“It’s a crime scene, Dean. I have to,” Glover answered.

“You can’t,” the guide repeated.

“I’ll come back out if it gets to be too much.”

Dean shook his head. “I’ve asked other CSU agents to give us copies of all the pictures but you know you can’t go into an arson scene,” Dean hissed, impatience creeping into his voice. Dean sounded like he was talking to an unruly child.

Without a word, Detective Glover turned toward the scene and started forward, but Officer Dean put a hand on his arm. “Don’t make me make this an order,” Dean demanded louder than necessary, so the three detectives could hear him command the sentinel. Glover, his face red, turned and glared at Dean before turning and without a word walking over to the firemen. Guide Dean watched him go a moment and all three detectives could see the smug smile on the guide’s face before he turned to follow his sentinel.

H and Rafe glanced at each other. “I’m glad I don’t have a guide breathing down my neck,” Rafe said quietly and H nodded his agreement. Sentinels and guides were “presumably” equals, both receiving same pay and advancement as a team, but guides had the final say when it came to anything related to the sentinel’s medical needs on the job. If a guide believed a scene was too dangerous for his or her sentinel’s senses, the guide could demand that the sentinel not enter or, if the sentinel refused to listen to the guide, have the sentinel forcefully removed from the scene for his or her own good. It wasn’t something you saw often; most guides didn’t try to outrank their sentinels, but Guide Officer Mark Dean was not like most guides and enjoyed ordering around his sentinel and anyone else he could. Younger patrol men always complained about him. Before Dean entered the guide program, he couldn’t keep a partner because of his attitude.

“Dean was an arrogant bastard at the academy and he’s still one now,” Jim agreed, watching the sentinel stalk back to his car, Dean sauntering along behind him. “I heard he switched to guiding when he couldn’t get out of street patrols. But why a sentinel would choose him as a guide, I’ll never know.”

“I know the answer to that,” Rafe said. “He was the only available guide when Glover came out of the academy. We don’t get many guides in the PD and a sentinel is not allowed at a crime scene without a guide. The scuttlebutt around the PD is that Glover refuses to bond with Dean, so they’re not at peak performance.”

“You have to feel bad for Glover,” Jim shook his head before deciding it was time to get moving. “Well, I’ll be heading home, see you in a week.”

“Have fun camping,” H answered before Jim made his way to his truck and then home to finish packing before leaving for the Cascade Hills.

Jim had been planning a vacation camping trip for weeks. Needing some down time, he had asked his girlfriend, Carolyn, to go with him and she had agreed. A forensics expert, Lieutenant Carolyn Plumber, also worked for the PD. She wasn't a great camper but she thought it might be a way to deepen what was little more than a convenient relationship with Lieutenant James Ellison of Major Crimes. Unfortunately, at the last minute, Carolyn had received a frantic call from her sister who needed emergency surgery and someone to watch the kids and, instead of camping with Jim, she was heading off to San Francisco to take care of her sister.

Deciding not to change his plans, Jim had put away the extra equipment he had brought for Carolyn. In all honesty, he was somewhat glad she had canceled. He liked her; she was pretty and smart, a pleasant partner when he wanted to go out to dinner or dancing but he suspected they were not totally compatible and would never make it as a couple. She was always at him to talk and tell her what he was feeling. She had told him just the other day that he needed to communicate more. Jim didn't get the suggestion. He said what he needed to when he needed to. And as for sharing feelings or "getting in touch of his feminine side," as she put it, Jim felt he would rather have a root canal. So, though he would never tell her, he was relieved the next morning when he loaded his F150 Ford and headed out.

Home Again

One week later.

Jim decided the week away had been just what he needed.

He had spent the week fishing and hiking, frying up what he caught and relaxing with a couple of beers before a campfire at night. It had been a peaceful week and had helped relieve the stress of his job.

Jim considered his body a tool to be used in his job. Accordingly, he hit the gym at least three times a week but that wasn't done for enjoyment. That was part of who he was. To him, a vacation of hiking and fishing in a quiet wilderness were pure enjoyment.

Arriving home early Sunday evening, he stowed his camping equipment in the basement before heading upstairs and frowning at the smell. He didn't think he had left food anywhere in the loft but there was a strong smell. Tracking it down to its source, he found a small loaf of bread in the kitchen. It didn't look moldy but Jim tossed it and opened a window to let in the late spring air. There was a lot of loud traffic outside and Jim shook his head with annoyance as he headed into the bathroom to grab a shower before bed.

He'd be back to work tomorrow and wanted a good night's sleep in his own bed. Jim had no problems roughing it with a sleeping bag, tent, and "outdoor" plumbing but now he needed a shower and shave to make him look human again.

Getting a look at himself in the mirror, Jim gave a quiet laugh. He had a week's growth of beard and a beard was definitely not a good look for him. Starting his normal routine of shaving, Jim noticed his skin seemed extra sensitive, like he could feel each follicle of hair being cut, and he slowed down, working carefully.

Finishing in the bathroom, he closed the windows and headed up to bed. He sighed as he stretched out on his bed but frowned. The sheets felt rough, and that certainly didn't make sense. He'd been sleeping in a tent, on a sleeping bag for a week; the bed should have felt like nirvana. Not quite sure why this was happening, he dismissed it and used the discipline he learned in the army to relax his muscles and, despite the noise outside, drifted off to sleep.

The alarm was incredibly loud the next morning and Jim jumped reaching for it, knocking the clock to the floor. Sitting up and letting a hand run across his face, he glanced around and then closed his eyes, pinching the bridge of his nose. He had a slight buzz of a headache as he made his way to the bathroom and then the kitchen, putting up a pot of much-needed coffee. The first sip told him something was weird - it tasted like there were chemicals in it - but he forced the coffee down, needing caffeine.

Turning on the television to catch up on a week of missed news, he listened to what had been going on around Cascade as he rummaged around in the fridge. Finding nothing edible, he turned to grab his keys and looked out the balcony windows trying to gauge the weather.

Jim noticed a boat down in the bay and two people on the boat and he frowned as he realized he was looking at what they were doing. The one man was mending his fishing net and the other was arranging bait and rods. Glancing past the two men, Jim could see in the distance something sparkling in the water. He focused on it, watching it bob up and down, on the calm sea.

The ringing of the phone made him look away and he realized he had been staring for twenty minutes at a boat in the distance.

Shaking his head to clear it, a frown marring his face, Jim grabbed the phone.

"Ellison," he answered.

"Jim, I'm glad I caught you before you left," the voice answered. Jim recognized his boss, Simon Banks.

"Sir?"

"On your way into the office, can you stop over on Main and St. Andrew's Place? I know you pass near there. Joel called and said there was some kind of bomb threat there again. It's the

third this week and none have panned out but we have to send a team to check it out. Maybe, you can look around; see if you notice anyone who could be sending these threats. They're wasting a lot of time and manpower and disrupting the financial district."

"Will do," Jim agreed, absently reaching for his keys.

"I'll see you later then," Simon hung up.

Grabbing his keys, for the most part ignoring his twenty-minute lapse, Jim headed off.

At Main and St. Andrew's, Jim flashed his badge and walked over to Joel Taggart, Captain of the Bomb Squad. "Hi Joel," he called stopping next to the large African American man.

"Hi Jim," Joel nodded from the command post, as teams with dogs moved toward the building.

"Simon called and asked me to come and look around. He says this is the third bomb threat this week."

"Right, oh, you weren't around."

"Vacation," Jim said, his eyes sweeping the building. "So what's going on?"

"Someone is making bomb threats from pay phones. All the threats are focused around the Main Street law offices. So far there's been no bombs, but each time we have to evacuate the buildings and send in teams just to be safe."

"I'm willing to bet the person doing this is in the crowd watching," Jim answered.

"I know," Joel agreed. "I've had an officer take pictures of the crowds at each scene but so far, nothing."

"Captain Taggart," one of the officers walked over, a shepherd with him. "The dogs can't pick up the scent. Just like the other scenes, bleach has been poured all over the place."

"Damn," Joel cursed, a rare thing for him. "Tell the teams to go carefully, room by room, fully outfitted."

Putting on his own heavily padded vest, Joel started for the building, Jim keeping step with him. "Jim you're not outfitted."

Jim shrugged. "Get me a vest and helmet, I'm going in with you."

"You sure?" Joel asked as he signaled one of the team to bring protective equipment.

Jim nodded and accepted the equipment, putting it on as they entered the building. The strong smell of bleach hit him immediately and he paused putting a hand to his nose.

“You okay?”

“Yeah, the smell is pretty strong,” Jim answered, gritting his teeth and breathing through his mouth.

“It’s how the perp keeps the dogs from sniffing out explosives.”

Forcing himself to ignore the smell assaulting his nose, Jim finished adjusting the heavy padding, careful to breath through his mouth, though his eyes began to water and sting. Wiping at them, impatiently, Jim followed Joel over to the other men. There were two teams inside and Joel directed them to move left and right down the halls, keeping in contact at all times, and identifying exits. When the two teams had set off, Joel indicated the back of the building. “We can start back there.”

Crossing the lobby, they moved toward the back of the building, their eyes scanning the area for anything out of place. The smell was intense and Jim, wiping again at his eyes, wondered how Joel and the others could stand it as they moved further into the building. They were just reaching the back elevators when Jim put a hand on Joel’s arm, stopping him.

“What is it?” Joel asked.

“The smell’s stronger here and I can hear something.” Pulling off his helmet, Jim spun in a circle and then followed a beeping noise to a small utility closet opposite the elevators. Opening the door, Joel and Jim stared down at the floor where a ticking device was counting down time.

Lifting the microphone attached to his uniform, Joel reported finding a bomb and warned the other teams before bending down to exam it closely. “It’s on a timer,” he said, looking at the numbers counting down. “It looks like we have about 25 minutes. I don’t see any pressure switches. It looks like a simple incendiary device.”

“Can you disarm it?” Jim asked.

“Yeah, I think so,” Joel unrolled some tools, his eyes on the device. “Jim you better get out of here.”

Instead of answering, Jim knelt beside Joel, his eyes scanning the device. “Joel there’s some corrosion on the leads,” he pointed to where the wires attached to the timer.

“I don’t see corrosion,” Joel answered, looking even closer and squinting before lifting a wire cutter. “But if there is, that could make disarming the bomb tricky,” he answered, quietly. “I don’t want any corrosion landing on any of the wires.”

“I can see it,” Jim said, putting out his hand. “Give me the cutters and tell me what to do.”

Joel took a breath to steady himself, “You sure?”

Jim nodded and Joel handed him the cutters, his eyes on the device, following the leads. “Green, blue and then black and you can’t come in contact with the leads or let corrosion flake off and come in contact with the wires,” Joel warned in a whisper.

Moving close, Jim clipped the first wire, his finger under it to keep it still. Glancing at Joel he got a nod and moved to the blue wire, cutting it. “When you cut the black wire, it should stop the timer,” Joel said quietly. Glancing at the timer, Jim gently clipped the last wire and both men held their breath as they turned to the timer.

The clock stopped.

Sitting back with a sigh of relief and mopping a sweaty brow, Joel called for a containment box. “After we separate the explosives, maybe we can get a fingerprint,” he suggested, glancing at Jim and noting his red face and watery eyes. “You okay?”

“The bleach is bothering me,” Jim admitted.

“Well, go ahead outside and I’ll meet you there after this thing is boxed.” Jim, beginning to feel a headache behind his eyes, got up and headed out.

Outside the building he slipped off the vest while taking in gulps of air, his eyes scanning the crowd that had gathered behind barricades in the distance. There was one man there that seemed out of place and Jim frowned watching him. Just as he was thinking of heading over, Joel emerged from the building and clapped a hand on his shoulder. Jim glanced at Joel and then back at the crowd but the man was gone.

“Thanks Jim. I don’t know how you heard that bomb or saw the corrosion but you stopped a lot of damage.”

“Let me know what you find out about the device,” Jim answered, heading back towards his car.

Jim entered the Major Crimes bullpen 20 minutes later and made his way to Simon Banks' office. Knocking and hearing a loud voice call, “Come in,” he entered to find his boss standing by the window.

“Hi Jim,” he turned. “Welcome back. I hope your vacation was good.”

“It was relaxing and quiet. Carolyn bailed at the last minute. She got an emergency call from her sister in San Francisco.”

“And you still went?”

“Sure,” Jim answered.

“I’m not sure I would have gone if the person I was going with canceled.”

Jim waved a hand and turned to Simon’s coffee pot. Unlike the one in the breakout room, this one usually had good coffee. “It was nice and quiet.”

“Joel called. He told me you found the bomb.” Simon watched Jim closely. “He said you could hear it.”

“I caught the beeping sound,” Jim agreed. “It was a lucky break.”

“He also said the smell of bleach really bothered you.” Jim didn’t answer, just poured coffee and turned to Simon. “He also said you could see some corrosion on wires that he couldn’t see.”

“Joel talks a lot,” Jim observed, not understanding where this conversation was going.

“It’s not a description I’d normally use for Joel,” Simon answered, softly.

“He had just finished deactivating a bomb. If I were him, I’d be nervous and wanting to let off a little steam too. I’m hoping we’ll get a fingerprint off the device,” Jim continued.

“Do I have to point out Detective, you were with him, deactivating the bomb.”

Jim sipped his coffee, grimacing at the chemical taste, his light blue eyes resting on Simon. “Is there something you’re trying to say here, Sir?”

“Maybe, but I’ll get back to you about it later.” Simon moved back to his desk. “Did you see anyone suspicious at the scene?”

Jim paused and frowned, putting down the mug. “There was someone in the crowd that caught my attention but before I could approach him, he disappeared. I’m not sure what it was, but there was something off about him. I’m going to look over the scenes at the two other bomb threats and see if I can find him.”

“Good. Let’s hope forensics gets something from the device.”

Jim nodded and turned to go. “Don’t you want your coffee?” Simon asked.

Jim picked up the mug and turned to the door. “I think there’s something wrong with the coffee. It tastes funny,” he muttered as he walked out.

Jim spent the morning reviewing and updating his open cases. At one, when Jim heard Joel had made it back to the PD from the bomb site, Jim went down to see him. Walking into the bomb squad's room, Jim waved off the thanks from Joel's team and knocked on Joel's door.

"Jim, come on in," Joel called out.

Jim smiled at the welcome as he moved into the office. It was a standard office for the PD. There were maps of areas on the walls and Jim could see three pins, one for each bomb warning. Joel's desk was covered in paperwork and in one corner rested a picture of his wife and two sons. "I don't suppose forensics has found anything yet."

"No," the larger man indicated Jim should have a seat. "But whoever it was, wasn't trying to hurt people." He pushed a picture of the bomb over to Jim. "The blast would have been contained in the closet. There weren't a lot of explosives but would have messed up the electric systems in the building."

Jim considered this for a moment, a hand running over his chin. "You're thinking this guy had a grudge with the company that owns the building or some connection to the building."

"That would be my guess."

"Do you have any pictures of people at the scenes?"

"Sure," Taggart turned and pulled out a folder. "I don't have from the current scene but these were the last two. Did you see something?"

"I think so." Jim took the glossy pictures and looked over the faces. "He was there today and at this scene," Jim pushed the picture over as he looked over the next photo. "And at this one," he pointed to a small face in the crowd.

Joel looked at the second photo and then pulled out a magnifying glass. "Yeah, they do look alike. And you said he was at this scene too?"

"Yeah."

"It could be a coincidence," Joel warned. "I mean all three calls were in the same area."

"There was something about him," Jim answered, slowly, thinking back to the scene. To Jim, the man had seemed out of place and nervous.

"Well, even if you weren't a sentinel, I'd go along with your gut feeling."

"A sentinel?" Jim brought his attention back to the office. "What on earth would make you think-"

"When did you come online?" Joel cut in.

“What are you talking about? I’m not a sentinel.”

“Oh, come on, Jim,” Joel began to count on his fingers. “The bleach had your eyes watering, you heard the bomb ticking, you saw the corrosion on the bomb, and just now you were able to see the faces in the crowd without a magnifying glass.”

Jim looked at the photograph and back at Joel. “I’ve got good eyesight but I’ve never had heightened senses,” he protested.

Joel looked over Jim thoughtfully, a frown on his face. “You may not have had them before, but you do now. At least three of your senses are heightened.”

“That’s ridiculous. I’d know if I was a sentinel.”

“There’s an easy way to find out. Get tested.”

“I’ll think about it,” Jim answered, rising. “Do me a favor and keep me informed about the bomber.”

“Sure thing, and thanks again, **sentinel**.”

Jim rolled his eyes walking out.

Back in the Major Crimes bullpen Jim sat down at his desk and looked at his computer’s flickering screen before pinching his nose. Damn, but he had a headache. Opening the drawer of his desk, he began rummaging around for some aspirin when Simon came to the door and called him. Looking up, he watched Simon beckon him in and, giving up on the hunt, went into Simon’s office.

There was an elderly man sitting across from Simon’s desk. The man turned and looked at Jim as he walked in and smiled.

“Dr. McCay this is Detective Jim Ellison. Jim, Dr. McCay is a doctor of sentinel medicine.”

Jim nodded his greeting and turned to Simon waiting to hear what Dr. McCay’s problem might be.

Simon glanced at Jim, looking a bit nervous as he added, “I asked Dr. McCay here to exam you.”

“What! What the hell for?” Jim stopped as he realized Simon thought he might be a sentinel.

“Oh, no, not you too.”

“Hold on,” Simon commanded to stop Jim from yelling and walking out the door. “After what Joel said about you finding the corrosion and hearing the bomb, I thought it might be a good idea. And Dr. McCay has been telling me that prolonged isolation can bring out latent sentinel abilities. You were on your own camping all last week.”

“I was tested as a kid just like everybody else,” Jim growled.

“Detective,” Dr. McCay cut in, standing and spreading his hands. “Perhaps you had latent abilities. It would be fairly easy to check if you are a sentinel. We could run a simple test or two right here, to um, work out whether we should do additional testing.”

“What kind of test?” Jim asked suspiciously. He didn’t think there was anything wrong with being a sentinel. That is, except for the fact that you ended up with a guide partner and you couldn’t do any real investigating without one. And, Jim preferred working alone.

Dr. McCay held out a small plastic card. “Can you read what’s on the card?” Jim took it reluctantly and glanced down at it. “Start from the bottom and read aloud the first paragraph you can.”

Jim frowned but then began reading the bottom paragraph aloud, “*The women of the royal harem cannot see or meet any men on account of their being strictly guarded, neither do they have their desires satisfied, because their only husband is common to many wives. For this reason among themselves they give pleasure to each other in various ways as now described...*”

“What the hell is this?” Jim stopped reading and looked up feeling a blush creep up his neck as he held out the card to doctor.

Dr. McCay smiled taking back the card. “It’s an excerpt from the Kama Sutra as translated by Sir Richard Burton. He has been credited with identifying sentinels in the western world.”

“Well, from this, it looks like he did a lot more than study sentinels.”

“Yes, he did,” McCay agreed with a light laugh. “But the point is without a strong magnifying glass a person with normal sight would not be able to read most of this card. Most online sentinels cannot even read the bottom paragraph. Your sight is extremely enhanced. I could run a hearing test if you like, but after hearing about you finding the bomb, I think we could safely say your hearing is enhanced.

“When sentinels come online, their senses start to act up within a very short period of time as environmental toxins build up, causing them discomfort. Your sight’s up, your hearing is certainly sharp and your other senses may cause problems shortly. It would probably save some time if you came to the Sentinel Center for testing and we worked out your levels.”

Jim glanced over at Simon who spread his hands. “You might as well, Jim. The word is already spreading through the grapevine that you’re a sentinel. Several members of the bomb squad have mentioned it.”

“So?”

“So, you know there are rules governing sentinels in the PD. Your abilities have to be completely documented or some defense attorney will get a perp off saying the PD used unfair surveillance.”

“Simon,” Jim complained, but the captain shook his head.

“Jim,” Simon returned. “My hands are tied on this point. Why don’t you get tested and we’ll go from there.”

Jim grimaced but nodded and turned to McCay. “I can arrange for testing right now, Detective,” the doctor offered. “It will take two or three hours.”

“Fine, let’s get this over with,” he turned to the door. “I’ll be back later,” he informed Simon angrily.

Three hours later, Jim walked back into the bullpen and made a beeline for Simon’s door. Through the blinds he could see Simon working at his desk, and so he knocked and poked his head in the door. “I’m back, Sir. Dr. McCay says the PD will get official notice sometime tomorrow.”

Simon waved him in. “So?”

“So, I came online after the camping trip.”

Simon nodded. “Congratulations.”

“Yeah,” Jim said, sounding less than thrilled. “It’s going to take me a while to get used to the idea,” he admitted.

“What did they say about your senses?”

“All are at the high end. He wanted me to meet some guides and he wanted to send a team over to clean my loft.” Jim shook his head with disgust. “I told him I’d shoot anyone who walked into my home, uninvited.”

Simon chuckled knowing his detective would say and probably do just that. “We’ll need a guide when you’re in the field. You’re not going to be able to work without a partner after this. Maybe I can borrow a guide until you find a permanent one. I’ll check and see if one is available.”

Jim groaned at the idea but nodded his agreement. “They gave me some stuff to read about sentinels and about bonding. I’m going to head home and read them.”

“Do that. In the meantime, I’ll see if I can find you a temporary guide partner.”

Guide Number 1

Captain Andre Stephens looked out of his office at CSU's operations center. He could see his officers diligently working, following up on cases and tracking information. That was all except for one officer. Guide Mark Dean was sitting back with a smug smile watching Sentinel Anthony Glover.

Captain Stephens watched the pair for a few moments. Sentinel Glover was the decent, hardworking sort. He got along well with his fellow detectives. He had come online just after the academy and, though his senses were not considered highly enhanced, his abilities had definitely proved useful.

Unfortunately, when he came online the only guide available had been Dean. Dean had passed the credited guide classes but was listed only as an intermittent guide. The notation from the guide school was he was not a true guide, whatever the hell that meant.

Captain Stephens knew Dean was a jerk. Before entering the guide program he had gotten very poor ratings. His attitude and work ethic were questioned and officers who worked with him complained about him.

Recently, his attitude had become much worse and just last week Glover had come and asked for a new partner. Captain Stephens didn't want to lose Glover but there was little he could do. He knew there were very few guides in the PD. Most went where the sentinels went, Homeland Security, the FBI, and Secret Service.

But an opportunity to get rid of Dean might just have fallen into his lap. Walking to the door, he called, "Detective Glover, my office."

Glover looked up and then stood. Dean made a move to stand as well but Stephens shook his head. "I need to speak with Detective Glover, not you Officer Dean." Stephens watched the man frown. He knew Dean hated being reminded he wasn't a detective. He had yet to receive that designation and probably never would.

Glover walked in and Stephens indicated he should take a seat.

"Captain?" the man asked, politely.

"I think you're having some sentinel problems, probably because you caught a virus or something and will need the next week off."

"Sir, I'm fine," he started to protest, but Stephens held up a hand.

"Do you know Detective Ellison in Major Crimes?"

“By reputation,” Glover nodded. “He’s supposedly a real hard ass but a great cop.”

“He just came online and Captain Banks has asked if Dean could be shared with Major Crimes while he looks for his own guide.”

Glover let a small smile play across his lips as he realized what the captain was suggesting. “Ellison will chew him up and spit him out,” he said quietly.

Stephens nodded. “And while he’s helping Major Crimes, maybe you can find a new guide. You can check the academy or check with Vera in Personnel. Who knows, maybe it will be someone you will bond with.”

“Sir, I’m not feeling well,” Glover gave a phony cough. “I think I need some time off.”

“Take Detective Kinsey into a conference room and fill him in on your cases then head on out. Maybe Jim Ellison can take Dean down a peg or two and make him a bit easier to work with in case you don’t find a guide”

Glover stood. “Thank you, Sir.” He couldn’t help the grin that crossed his face as he asked, “You will let me know how things go with Detective Ellison?”

Stephens nodded. “I’ll see you in a week.”

Jim got home and, after ordering a pizza, spent the night reading the information about sentinels. He had no desire to be a sentinel but if he was one he might as well learn to control it. A lot of the stuff he read seemed to involve common sense: stay away from overly spiced foods, (it would mean giving up spicy chili, but he could do that), try to avoid harsh lighting and loud environments (yeah, like that was going to happen in the PD; he’d have to buy a big bottle of aspirin), buy organic foods (that sounded expensive but still doable), and wear natural fibers. “Natural fibers,” Jim said aloud. He guessed that meant cotton, wool, linen and silk. So far, it was annoying but feasible.

It seemed he would be giving up a few things but he could survive. Then he read about bonding. *“There are two kinds of guides, intermittent and true. Intermittent guides can support a sentinel with his or her senses while the sentinel searches for a true guide. Just as a sentinel has a special inherited skill set, a true guide has special skills. He or she helps a sentinel control his senses, keeps the sentinel from zoning when he concentrates, and helps alleviate the pain of spikes. The true guide has the ability to connect to the sentinel’s emotions and relax overstressed senses physically and emotionally (see empathy). When a guide and sentinel bond they make the connection permanent...”*

The idea of emotionally bonding with anyone set Jim's teeth on edge and made Jim's jaw twitch with tension as he ground his teeth. Maybe, he decided, he could live without bonding. Intermittent guides seemed the way to go. Tossing the book down in disgust, unwilling to read any more about bonding, Jim headed off to bed.

The next morning, wearing cotton boxers and tee shirt beneath his regular clothes, Jim walked into Major Crimes and waved to H before heading to his desk and logging into his computer.

"Hey Jim," H walked over. "I hear you're a sentinel."

"Yeah," Jim sat back and looked up, eyeing Henri. "Where's Rafe?"

"He's being deposed by the DA. Listen man, maybe you can, you know, use your hearing and let me know if you hear Barbara in Personnel talking about me to Vera."

"Why would she be talking about you?" Jim asked.

"I took her out for a drink on Tuesday."

"And you think you made that memorable an impression?"

"Well, not to toot my own horn but--"

"But what?" Simon asked from right behind H making him jump.

"Nothing, Sir," he answered, ignoring the amused expressions on both Jim's and Simon's faces.

"Good, then maybe I can talk to the detective about things related to work?" Simon answered with a not-so-friendly grin.

"Yes, Sir," H turned and headed to his desk as Simon turned back to Jim.

"Forensics just got a fingerprint off the bomb you found. We're looking to question Martin Weiss." Simon handed Jim a picture of the man.

"This is the guy I saw at the scene," Jim added. "I knew there was something off about him."

"He did electrical work at that building back a couple of months ago. He has an electrical repair company."

"Was there a problem when he worked at the building?"

"I think you'll have to pick him up and interview him to find out. I've got his work and home addresses," he handed them to Jim. "Go with H to get him. Since, I haven't received official notice yet about the strength of your senses, I can justify sending you out without a guide partner." He glanced over Jim. "But if you have trouble with your senses, you'll need to come back in. You don't want to create a dangerous situation for yourself or anyone else."

Jim nodded, grabbing his coat and waving to H.

“Oh by the way, I’ve asked if we could borrow CSU’s guide, so he may be joining you.” He paused and then added, “Later let’s sit and discuss this whole sentinel business.”

Jim gave a resigned sigh and headed for the elevator, filling in H.

The first stop was Weiss’ place of work, where a bored secretary informed the two detectives that Weiss was working the entire week at the 3rd Street Gym. Leaving the secretary, not even bothering to tell her not to call Weiss since it was apparent she wouldn’t take the time to lift the phone and warn her boss, the detectives called Simon to let him know where they were going. Simon answered, saying a guide would meet them there.

Weiss, a smallish olive-skinned man with dark brown hair and eyes, was working on an electrical box by the deep end of an Olympic-size pool when Jim and H walked up to speak with him. The damp, moist air, smelling of chlorine, was annoying but Jim ignored it as H held up his badge.

“Mr. Weiss, we have some questions for you,” H stated, as Weiss turned and looked at the pair.

“Questions?” he asked, quietly.

“Yes, we’d like you to come with us.”

“Come with you where?”

“To Major Crimes,” Jim answered.

“Am I under arrest?”

“You will be if you don’t come voluntarily,” Jim answered.

Before Weiss could answer, someone entered the room screaming, “Ellison get the hell out of this room. It’s chlorinated.”

Jim and H both turned and saw Officer Guide Mark Dean standing by the door, hands on hips, looking like he was chastising a child. Jim and H looked at each other, neither taking the man seriously and then turned back to Weiss, ignoring Dean.

Realizing he was being ignored by a sentinel, someone he, as a guide, was in charge of and could order out of an unsafe area, Dean marched over. When he had been told Sentinel Glover was out sick and asked to assist newly-online Lieutenant Ellison in Major Crimes, Dean jumped at the chance. Major Crimes was the elite department and browbeating Sentinel Ellison would make him top dog in that department.

Dean knew this was not exactly an adverse environment, but he needed to take control and he could use the excuse that he didn't know a lot about Ellison and his reactions.

Storming over, he moved to grab Jim's arm and physically escort him from the room. H and Jim looked at him in disbelief, Jim growling, "What the hell?" as Weiss, seeing the two detectives distracted, made a break for the locker room. Cursing, H and Jim turned to grab Weiss, but Dean was holding Jim's arm and pulling him back as H ran after Weiss.

In the split second it took Jim to assess the situation, he decided Dean was getting in the way of an arrest and needed to be neutralized. Snarling with annoyance, and telling himself he shouldn't inflict permanent damage on a fellow officer, even if the man was an arrogant idiot, Jim made one smooth chop across Dean's forearm, breaking the officer's hold. Then, still needing to immobilize Dean, Jim continued his movement forward, grabbing Dean's jacket in a tight hold and spinning around. As Jim turned to face the pool, he released Dean with a healthy push that sent the officer flying forward and into the deep end of the pool.

Dean's yell of protest as he sailed over the side ended in a loud splash as he hit the water and went under. "I hope you can swim," Jim said aloud. He waited a moment to see if Dean would resurface and, when the officer did, sputtering and treading water, Jim left to help H. The furious, now-soaked guide, completely dismissed.

Weiss was already on the ground and H was handcuffing him when Jim arrived. "You okay?" Jim asked.

"Yeah, where's that idiot Dean?"

Jim tilted his head back towards the pool area. "He took a swim."

H started to laugh as he hauled Weiss to his feet, Jim beginning to read Weiss his rights as H called for a patrol to pick up Weiss.

At the station, Jim and H sent Weiss to an interview room and then headed to Simon's office to fill him in on their findings. When they arrived they found Dean already there standing in front of Simon's desk, still soaking wet, his dark hair plastered to his head. "Gentlemen," Simon indicated they should sit but when Dean moved to sit Simon shook his head, holding up a hand. "You're all wet, I'm afraid you'll have to stand, Officer Dean."

Dean bristled but nodded obediently as Simon turned to Jim and H. "Would you like to tell me why Officer Dean ended up soaked?"

H put a hand over his mouth to hide his smirk as Jim shrugged, glancing at, and then dismissing the wet man. "He interfered with our arrest of the possible bomber," Jim shrugged, "and tried to stop me from assisting Detective Brown in dealing with a fleeing suspect. So I tossed him in the water to get him out of the way. I did make sure he wouldn't drown," Jim added reasonably. It

was obvious that Jim not only was not sorry for his actions but seemed rather pleased with them. “I think I handled the situation expeditiously and with a minimum amount of force and a great deal of restraint,” he finished in a satisfied voice as H turned away and hid his laugh behind a cough.

“He interfered?” Simon’s voice reflected disbelief before he turned to Dean, his face stern. “Would you care to explain that?”

“The sentinel was in a high chlorine environment. I thought it best to get him out of there for his own safety.”

“By pulling him away from a perp he was arresting?” H questioned contemptuously as he joined the conversation.

“Did you ask *Lieutenant* Ellison,” Simon emphasized Jim’s higher rank, “if he was having a problem with his senses?”

“No,” Jim answered before Dean could say anything. “He walked in and yelled, ‘Ellison get the hell out of this room. It’s chlorinated,’ and then proceeded to try and manhandle me. He’s lucky I didn’t break his arm. He was going to pull me out of there and let H handle a suspect alone.”

“Officer Dean,” Simon turned a hard stare on the man, his eyes blazing with anger. “You do realize among other things that Lieutenant Ellison outranks you.”

“He’s a sentinel,” Dean replied, peevishly. “As a guide I can order him out of an environment dangerous to his health.”

“And just how did you know it was dangerous?” Simon asked softly, H and Jim glancing at each other as they recognized the tone. When Simon’s voice turned that soft, it was time to duck.

“It wasn’t,” Jim cut in and Simon held up a hand to silence Jim, his eyes on Dean.

“Did you ask Lieutenant Ellison?”

“No, but I had never worked with Sentinel Ellison, so I was unsure how he would react to the chlorinated air.”

“So, instead of talking to him and assisting in the arrest, you interfered.”

Officer Dean realized this was not going well. He opened his mouth to try again to justify his actions but Simon shook his head. “We will discuss this further. For now, you are dismissed and be glad *Lieutenant* Ellison is not charging you with obstruction.”

Realizing this situation was lost, Dean turned and stalked out, his face red, his shoes making squishy sounds as he passed officers in Major Crimes. Word was already out, thanks to the officers on the scene, that he had taken a bath courtesy of Ellison.

“Sorry, Jim,” Simon said louder than necessary as Dean left the office, knowing Dean would overhear his comment. “When I sent Dean I didn’t realize what a pompous ass he was.” Jim, watching Dean, could see the officer ball his fists as he stalked out of the Major Crimes bullpen.

“The gossip from CSU is he gives their sentinel a really hard time,” H said and then chuckled. “He should have known better than to try bulldozing Jim. By now the patrol officers have probably spread it all over the station that Jim dumped him in the water. I imagine he’ll be finding water guns all around his locker. Hell, I might even buy him one.”

Simon nodded, trying unsuccessfully to hide a smile before continuing more soberly. “I’m going to speak with Captain Stephens in CSU. If he agrees, I’ll push for a hearing over this incident. He created a dangerous situation and I’ll recommend that his intermittent guide status be pulled. Unfortunately, that still leaves you without a guide.”

“I’ll check with Vera after we interview Weiss and see if anyone else in the PD has recently gone through the guide program,” Jim answered, rising.

Guide Number 2

It took Jim and H under an hour to get Weiss to admit he had planted the bomb. He had gotten the idea after hearing about the two fake bomb threats. Weiss insisted it would not have hurt anyone, but his business was slow and he was hoping the building owners would hire him to fix the electrical system.

As Weiss was led off to central booking, Jim made his way into the Personnel department. Vera, the Head Clerk, was queen here and if you got on her bad side, you could run into serious paperwork problems. Once, Jim had asked her about her perfume, White Shoulders, and had made the mistake of saying it was something that his grandmother wore. Well, for the next two weeks his expense reports had somehow gotten eaten by the Gods of Paperwork.

Jim had stopped down to ask her for help and commented on how he always thought his grandmother smelled like the most beautiful woman in the world. Right after that, his paperwork seemed to magically resolve itself.

Walking into Personnel, Jim steeled himself for the overpowering smell of White Shoulders and smiled at Vera. “Hi Vera,” he greeted, giving her his most charming smile. “I need your help.”

“What do you need, Detective?”

“I recently came online as a sentinel,” Jim informed her.

She nodded. "Yes, I heard."

"Right," Jim considered Simon's words from the day before that word had spread throughout the PD. "So, I need a guide and I was wondering if any officers might have received guide certification."

"Cassie Welles," she answered.

"Cassie Welles?"

"She's the new Head of Forensics. She came from San Francisco. She only started today."

Jim nodded and then gave her a smile. "Thanks, Vera," he headed back up to Major Crimes.

Jim had every intention of checking on the woman and finding out a little about her, before suggesting to Simon that he might have found a guide. But as he arrived, H waved him back out. "Get your jacket, my man. We need to go."

"What's going on?" Jim answered, grabbing his jacket and following H.

"Rafe and I will be dealing with this case but for today you are my partner, man, and we have to get over to Bayside Bridge. Some woman was leaving work when a body fell on the top of her van."

"Was it a jumper?" Jim asked, as they made their way to the parking lot.

"I don't know," H admitted. "The officers on the scene said there was something weird about the body."

Pulling up at the site, the two detectives walked over the closed bridge, glancing down at the covered body from a point above before descending. Looking up at the bridge and then down they motioned an officer to uncover the body. The trauma was obvious. There was no part of his body that didn't seem crushed by the impact.

"This guy dropped onto the roof of a car from this bridge," Jim repeated sounding doubtful as he looked up. He had seen jumpers before but the amount of damage this body suffered seemed excessive for the distance of the fall. "I wonder if anybody saw him jump."

"Nobody saw anything. The bridge was closed for roadwork. I just talked to the bridge supervisor. The road crew was down at the south end of the span when he jumped," a woman answered, walking over.

Jim and H glanced at each other, wondering who this woman was as she joined them. She had curly red hair and bright hazel eyes that framed a pixyish face and pointed chin. Almost unconsciously, Jim noted she was pretty as she smiled and held out her hand, introducing herself.

“Cassie Welles, new Head of Forensics. Today's my first day with the Cascade PD. I used to work with the San Francisco police.”

Deciding this was a good chance to see if he could work with her as a guide, Jim nodded. “I'm Detective Ellison. This is Detective Brown. Nice to meet you.”

H shook Cassie's hand and then, crouching down by the body, asked one of the officers at hand, “Have we got an ID on the victim?”

“None that I could find. His pockets were empty,” Cassie crouched down beside Jim and H.

“You went through the victim's pockets before the detective on the scene?” Jim asked as he crouched down next to H.

Cassie shrugged. “I was here first. Is there a problem?”

Jim could think of a whole lot of problems with a wannabe detective disturbing the scene, even if she was a forensic expert but decided not to voice them just then. “Well, in the future, I'd appreciate if you waited for one of us to get here before you touch anything.” He turned back to the body, inspecting the bottom of the man's shoes.

Cassie, seeing what Jim and H were doing, pointed a finger at the shoes. “There's mud, mixed in with some kind of fiber,” she stated. “Carpet maybe. I already took the scrapings.” She looked up and smiled enthusiastically. “So, what do you guys think? Accident, suicide or murder?”

Jim glanced over at H, silently communicating his frustration with the woman. He was glad that this was H and Rafe's case. He had a feeling he was not going to get on well with Cassie Welles. She seemed to be missing a basic understanding of boundaries. Standing, he asked in a patronizing voice, “Why don't you tell us your theory? I'm assuming you have one.”

Cassie also stood, looking at the detective with a bright smile. “I do,” she confirmed, enthusiastically. “The fence on the bridge is too high to accidentally fall over. As for suicide, we haven't been able to find a car parked nearby, so it looks like he didn't drive here. The carpet fibers on his shoes indicate he didn't walk here on his own. Besides it's pretty chilly out and all he's got on is a t-shirt. All things considered, I think somebody took him up on that bridge and threw him off.

Jim glanced at H who indicated Jim should answer. “You've all the pieces of the puzzle right in line, don't you?” he answered. “There's just one thing.”

“What's that?”

“The bridge was closed, so there's nowhere to park in the north end. And what your theory is suggesting is the killer parked on the south end and carried the body past the work crew without anybody noticing. So, the killer carries the victim who's got to weigh 200 pounds give or take,

up to the bridge to throw him over to meet his death. Why go through that trouble? I mean, if you're going to kill somebody, there's got to be an easier way, wouldn't you think?

"Then you don't think it was murder?" Cassie asked.

"I don't know," Jim answered. "But as detectives," Jim waved a hand between himself and H, "we make the theory match the clues, not the clues match the theory."

Cassie's face fell as H glanced around and then tapped Jim. "Jim maybe you could see something we can't?" H asked and Jim glanced around as Cassie's eyes widened.

"He's a sentinel?" she stated, her voice rising in excitement.

H nodded as Jim pointed to a tree in the distance. "There's something up in that tree. Let's get an officer to climb up."

"Then you're his guide?" Cassie continued, as Jim moved towards the tree, signaling one of the officers to join him.

"Not me, Jim's newly online and hasn't got a guide yet."

Her eyes going wide, Cassie forcefully pushed H aside to stand beside Jim, a hand landing on his arm. "Do you need some help focusing and extending your senses?" she asked quietly but didn't wait for a reply. "I want you to feel my heartbeat. You can use it to ground and control your senses. Once we bond, you won't need me to touch you quite so much."

Jim glanced down in disbelief at Cassie's hand resting on his arm and deliberately removed it. "I'm fine and I don't need help with my senses," he gave her what looked more like a grimace than a smile. "Thanks anyway."

"I'm a guide," she continued, ignoring Jim's statement and sounding like she was talking to a child as she patted Jim's arm to calm him. Inwardly smiling at the opportunity being afforded her, she edged even closer to lean on Jim so he'd capture her scent. Cassie always wanted to be a cop but because of her asthma condition she couldn't. But as Jim Ellison's guide she could be as close to being a detective as possible. Hell, she'd be a detective, just without the title. Slowly, she reached up to rest her fingernails on Jim's neck, her nails gently teasing the skin from his ear to his shoulder, hoping to trigger a sentinel response. "You will need one. I mean there are so many things that can overwhelm you. I could help you if you wanted to extend your senses, I can walk you through zones and spikes and can help you with the oversensitivity issues," she added breathlessly, hoping Jim would respond to her.

Beyond all else, the last thing Jim wanted was a list of weaknesses inherent in being a sentinel. And he didn't want her clinging to him and coming on to him like he had no control and could be led around by her. He was more than some sense-driven caveman. Grabbing her wrist, he pushed her hand away, watching as she staggered backwards. "Thanks but, as I said, I'm fine."

Jim moved to stand closer to H and looked up at the officer climbing the tree, ignoring the woman.

Cassie watched him move off. Okay, Jim wasn't responding to her immediately as a guide and not to the intensity of her guiding. Some sentinels liked a strong guide taking control but obviously Jim was more into controlling than being led. Still, she worked at the PD and he worked at the PD, so there might still be opportunities for her to not only work with Jim but maybe develop some kind of relationship with him. She'd just have to take it a little slower, is all. She'd also make sure Jim's boss knew she was an available guide. Tuning back into the scene she watched the officer climbing the tree.

"There's a man's jacket," he called tossing it down.

H nodded, catching the jacket and looking in the pockets. "There's a passport and foreign money," he informed Jim.

"I think I might have a theory that actually fits the clues," Jim said, with a meaningful glance at Cassie, who looked away, her face red. "When I was in the military, we were doing parachute training and this poor kid's chute didn't open. His body ended up mangled. The fall broke every bone in his body."

"Like this body," H stated and Jim nodded. "I'll look into recent flights," H answered. "Let's head back to the PD."

Back at the PD, H and Jim went to speak with the Medical Examiner, Dan Wolfe, offering their theory and asking for information when available. Their next stop was Simon's office. As they walked into bullpen they saw Rafe, and H waved to his partner before going to Simon's door and knocking. Hearing, "Come in," the detectives entered and saw Cassie Welles standing before Simon's desk. Thinking déjà vu, Jim glanced at H and groaned quietly.

"Ms. Welles," H inclined his head and Cassie turned.

"I'd rather you called me Cassie." Jim didn't answer but kept his eyes on Simon as H filled the captain in on what they had found and what they theorized.

"Actually, Cassie gave me some of this information already," Simon answered when H finished. "You'll follow up on the airplane theory?"

"Yes, Sir," H answered.

"Good. You should fill in your partner," Simon told H, who nodded and, giving Jim a salute, headed out of the office. Simon watched him head over to Rafe and then glanced at Cassie. "I'd like to speak with Jim in private," he informed her and, realizing she was being dismissed, she nodded and left.

“Jim,” Simon held up a hand to forestall the complaint he knew was coming. “I can already tell she rubs you the wrong way, and I know she’s a bit eager-”

“She’s pushy, Sir, and impulsive, not a good combination,” Jim cut Simon off.

“She’s supposed to be very good at her job,” Simon countered.

“I’m sure she is, but I wish she would do her job, instead of trying to do mine and leave me alone.”

“She’s a guide,” Simon offered.

“Not one I’ll work with,” Jim answered succinctly, thinking over her condescending attitude when she tried to get him to anchor his senses to her.

“There aren’t that many guides in the PD,” Simon answered. “And as of tomorrow you’ll be on desk duty until you find one.”

“Then I’ll find one outside of the PD,” Jim countered. “There’s no way I’m working with that patronizing guide,” Jim spit out, making the word guide sound like a curse.

“Well, then you can let her know you won’t use her,” Simon answered with a nasty smile. “And good luck.”

Jim nodded and walked out into the bullpen. Cassie was there, listening to H and adding her own comments as H brought Rafe up to speed.

“Cassie,” Jim called and she turned. “I think we need to have a little talk.” Jim indicated they should move near his desk. “Cassie,” he began, but she cut him off.

“Do you mind if I call you Jim?”

Jim gave an uncomfortable smile. “No, not at all,” he answered trying to get back on track.

“Do I make you nervous, Jim? Because I’m definitely getting the feeling I’m making you nervous,” she continued. “And if we’re going to work together as sentinel and guide, we need to get over any discomfort.”

“Look, Cassie, I’m sure you’re good at your job but-“

“You know, I’m glad you say that because you are really good at your job, too. I know we’re going to do some great work together. A forensics guide and a sentinel detective, why I’m sure we’ll be the standard for future pairs.”

“You know, I really enjoy your enthusiasm. I want you to know that,” Jim cut in on her visions of the future and Cassie, hearing something in his voice, turned and looked at him, noting he seemed uncomfortable.

“But?” she asked.

“But you're not a detective. You're not even a cop.”

“And you feel like I'm stepping on your toes here, right?”

“A little, yeah.”

“And you don't want me as your guide,” she added. “You know, it's funny, because I thought this job was about solving crimes, but it's really about ego and turf. Did it ever occur to you that I might have something valuable to offer here as a guide and fellow member of the PD? You know, you don't have to carry a gun and a badge to solve a crime and I do know how to support a sentinel.”

“All I'm trying to say is-“

“I know what you're trying to say. I had hoped things would be different here in Cascade. You don't want my help, fine. Go find yourself a guide and while you're at it, oh high and mighty sentinel detective, GO TO HELL.” With that, Cassie stormed from the room.

H and Rafe, both of whom had watched the encounter looked up at Jim. “Man, you make an impression on women,” Rafe shook his head

“Hey, at least she'll leave me alone,” Jim answered and glanced at H. “I'm not going to say a word to her but you might want to let her know Detective Glover will be looking for a guide,” Jim suggested.

H nodded. “Smart, my man. That will ensure that she doesn't come back looking to be your guide.” Jim agreed and headed to his desk.

Guide Number 3

Sitting down and looking at the flickering screen was giving Jim a headache and he closed his eyes, rubbing the bridge of his nose. There was no way Cassie Welles would work out as his guide. He was not some dog that she could caress and make roll over and do tricks. “Damn,” he said out loud and then looked around, glad no one had heard him. “*Why did this have to*

happen?" he asked silently. *"And what am I going to do about it?"* His senses were already online a lot more than he had admitted to Dr. McCay. If the doctor had known he had already zoned, the man would be insisting that Jim have a guide immediately. Okay, he needed a guide he could work with. Someone he could trust to watch his back without making him feel like some trained seal.

Rubbing his chin, he considered the problem. Maybe, if he got someone he trusted to take some guiding classes. He looked around. Rafe or H? He trusted both men. They both had childish senses of humor, but they would treat him like an equal and he was pretty sure he could whip either into shape. But, no, it wouldn't be fair to break up their partnership because he needed help. Who else?

Carolyn!

Aside from some casual dinner dates that usually ended in some satisfying, if somewhat impersonal, sex, they lived separate but respectful lives. And a guiding course or two would be easy for her. Maybe he could ask her.

Lifting the phone, Jim dialed her office number. "Technical Support," came the immediate answer.

"Hi Caro."

"Jim, have I heard right, you're a sentinel?"

"Yeah."

"And you've already stirred up trouble dumping a guide in a pool?"

"He had it coming," Jim answered, amazed at how fast words spread in the PD. "Listen, I was hoping we could meet for dinner. I have a few things I'd like to talk over with you."

"Sure, as a matter of fact there was something I wanted to tell you too."

"Are you busy or can we go out for an early dinner?"

"Why don't I meet you on the first floor and we can go to Santini's? I'm not going to Wonderburger."

"Fine," Jim answered. Santini's was nice little restaurant on the next block. It was better than casual dining but not quite up to elegant. It would be the perfect place to discuss the possibility of Carolyn becoming a guide.

Jim was waiting by the entrance when he heard the tapping of Carolyn's heels as she made her way to the restaurant. "Hi, Jimmy," she greeted with a smile. Carolyn was tall, just a couple of inches shorter than Jim, so it wasn't much of a stretch when she reached up to give him a quick peck on the lips before he opened the door and ushered her in.

Inside the waiter lead them to a corner near the back and handed them their menus and the wine list. The pair looked over the menu, each deciding on their food before Carolyn put down her menu and glanced at Jim. "So," she leaned back and looked at her on-again, off-again, date. "When did you come online?"

"Camping. Supposedly the isolation triggered my senses."

"I see. I guess it was a good thing I didn't go with you." Jim figured it was the worst thing but refrained from saying as much. "I heard about Guide Dean taking a bath," she continued. "And I understand you sent Cassie Welles from Major Crimes in tears."

Not sure how to answer, Jim was saved by the return of the waiter. He took their orders and disappeared.

"I wanted..." they both said at the same time and Jim lifted a hand indicating she should proceed.

"I wanted to tell you, my sister is divorcing that jerk she was married to. And she's not going to be able to cope with the kids alone. So, while in San Francisco, I accepted a job. I'll be leaving in a couple of weeks."

Jim nodded, his own plans going down the drain but he smiled. "I wish you good luck."

"So, what did you want to tell me?"

Jim fished around. It wasn't like he could tell her he wanted her to be his guide, not now. "I...I wanted to know about Cassie Welles. I mean she is a guide."

Carolyn nodded. "Well, the gossip is she wanted to be a cop but she couldn't pass the physical. I think she's got asthma. So, she got into forensics. The real gossip is the cops in San Francisco couldn't stand her because she kept interfering with their cases."

"A shame for her," Jim said, deciding he could probably commiserate with the cops in San Francisco.

"So you're thinking of having her as a guide?" Carolyn asked, slowly, looking down at the table and playing with her fork.

"Truthfully, no, but I did want some background."

Carolyn nodded. "So, I guess we'll be saying good-bye, unless you'd like to transfer to San Francisco."

Jim could hear the hopeful note in her voice so he smiled and reached out a hand to cover Carolyn's. "I'm not one to change locations easily," he admitted.

"That's because sentinels are territorial," she answered with a smile. "But hey, I haven't left yet and I hear sentinels and guides are the best in bed. You know because of the senses and the empathy." As she said this, her smile widened. "This might be my one and only chance to find out."

"Keep in mind I'm new to the sentinel thing, but far be it from me to stand in the way of scientific inquiry," Jim answered. Even as he answered, in the back of his head Jim wondered *"Where am I going to find a guide?"*

Guide Number 4

The next morning, waking with sharp pains between his eyes, Jim slowly made his way down into the kitchen and started up a pot of coffee before dropping in a seat and covering his eyes with his hands. He groaned as the smell of wine and devil's food cake assailed his nose and opened his eyes to glare at the table. For some reason, where perps would be afraid and back down at the stare, the dishes wouldn't. Jim considered just throwing them away but knew he was being ridiculous. Last night, he and Carolyn had picked up some wine and cake on the way to the loft. They had left the dishes on the table when they went up to Jim's bed, Jim saying he would deal with them later. So, lesson one, sentinels shouldn't leave dirty dishes around, ever.

He had meant to do them when Carolyn left – she hadn't stayed the night, she didn't have a change of clothes and they both had work the next day -- but by the time she did leave, he had a massive headache. He knew part of it was because two of his senses had spiked while they were in bed. Touch had gone off the scale and, if Carolyn's screams were anything to go by, the theory about sentinels in bed was proven. When Jim had touched Carolyn, he could feel her muscles respond and he had discovered erogenous zones she hadn't even known she had. Yes, the sex had been really good -- for Carolyn. But while his sense of touch went through the roof, so did his sense of smell. Between Carolyn's natural scent and her perfume, Jim had developed a headache.

Knowing it was probably going to be the last time they were together, Jim hadn't wanted to spoil things for Carolyn and despite the headache had seen to her pleasure. But now the headache was so bad, he felt nauseous.

Hearing the coffee pouring into the pot, Jim rose and grabbed a cup, standing impatiently near the pot until it filled. Pouring some into his cup, he checked the fridge: no milk, actually there wasn't much of anything in there, nothing edible anyway. Unconcerned, he raised the cup to his

lips and at the first taste spit into the sink and then dumped the liquid down the drain. “What the hell,” he yelled and then stopped. He knew what was happening, his sense of taste was spiking. “This sentinel thing is getting real old, real fast,” he informed the loft before stomping into the bathroom to grab some aspirin.

Coming back, he eyed the sink. He’d usually kept bottled water for stakeouts but at home he considered tap water good enough. In his covert days he had upon occasion lived on water sipped through a straw to filter out impurities. Holding the aspirin he considered the tap and then, thinking over the coffee fiasco, opened the fridge and pulled out a bottle. Even it had something of a weird taste, but he could live with it and he swallowed the aspirin before heading into the shower.

There was nothing else to say but the shower hurt. His skin was overly sensitive and the water felt like little pebbles hitting his skin. Grabbing his soap, the smell made him reel backwards and he made a point of breathing through his mouth as he quickly soaped up and rinsed. Jim knew there were special products a sentinel used but he hadn’t gotten around to buying them yet. He’d have to deal with that.

Gritting his teeth, he went back into the kitchen, washed the dishes from the previous evening, and walked out the door, giving up on any kind of breakfast.

He parked in his usual space and made his way up to the bullpen, ignoring the strange looks he got from some of the women. He had just gotten off the elevator and was near the break room when he heard Angela, a secretary in the tech department, tell Rhonda, Simon’s secretary, that it was true, sentinels really could satisfy a woman.

“How do you know?” Rhonda asked, quietly as she washed out Simon’s coffeepot. Both women had their backs to the door and couldn’t see Jim standing there.

“Carolyn Plumber has been in to update about her move to San Fran. And today she was practically boneless as she walked in. She was so relaxed and mellow this morning that we had to ask what was going on. She told us she’d met up with Ellison and everything they say about sentinels is true.”

“Wow, it makes me wish I wasn’t married,” Rhonda answered.

Jim, red-faced with embarrassment, hurried into the bullpen before the women saw him. He had just made it to his desk when Simon called him. Putting his jacket on the chair, he walked into Simon’s office. “Sir?” he asked.

“Did you find a guide?”

“Not yet, Sir. The person I selected couldn’t commit.” Jim was actually considering using Officer Dean. If the man became really overbearing, Jim would respond in kind.

“You are on desk duty until you have a guide.” Simon indicated Jim should sit down. “Officer Dean is no longer available. He’s back on foot patrol and his guide standing is under review. After I spoke with Captain Stephens, I spoke with IA. It seems Dean was giving the CSU’s sentinel a very hard time. Stephens was more than happy to add to my complaint.” Simon eyed Jim a moment before adding, “Someone told Cassie Welles that Sentinel Detective Glover in CSU needed a guide, so she is no longer available. It seems the pair hit it off as a sentinel guide team. You wouldn’t know anything about that, would you?”

“I never said a word to her, Sir,” Jim answered innocently.

Simon gave a sigh, “In any case, she’s working with him, so she’s not available.”

Jim nodded and then wished he hadn’t. He still had a bit of a headache. “Maybe I could call McCay or the Guide Institute and see if there are any guides available.”

“Instead of calling, why don’t you go over there? Who knows you might meet a nice guide.”

Jim considered the suggestion. He wasn’t feeling well and the bullpen would only make him feel worse. “Yes, Sir,” he stood. “I’ll take a ride over there.”

“Good, let me know how you do.”

Rainier University was a huge school located on the western side of Cascade. It wasn’t far from the water and sometimes students would sit out on the commons and listen to fog horns in the distance.

It was made up of eight large buildings that housed the different central disciplines. Additionally, there were two buildings that were devoted exclusively to sentinels and guides. The Sentinel Institute and Guide Institute were situated next to each other. Sentinels would come there for evaluation and support and guides for training and support.

Both buildings were impressive and world-renowned, Rainier having been one of the first universities to set up training sites for guides.

Jim parked in the lot behind the Institute and walked around to the front, looking up at the six-story building covered in ivy. He had decided he would go see Dr. McCay and find out if there was a way to suppress these “pain in the ass” senses. If there wasn’t, well then he would move to step two and see if he could find an unobtrusive guide.

Walking into the Sentinel Institute, he noticed that his senses relaxed a bit. The air which had been filled with various scents outside, in here was odorless; the noise from outside was muffled and the lighting was low. Taking in a deep breath, Jim smiled and walked up to the receptionist.

“Good morning,” he said and watched the girl look up. There was something nice about her as she smiled. Jim realized it had nothing to do with her looks even though she was pretty with short brown hair and green eyes. And after a moment he realized she must be some sentinel’s true guide.

“May I help you?” she said in a soft voice.

Pulling back from what he realized was rude scrutiny, Jim cleared his throat and said, “I’d like to see Dr. McCay.”

“Do you have an appointment?”

“No. I-”

“You’re a newly online sentinel.” She nodded and indicated a seat. “I’ll see if he can speak with you, Mr.” she waited.

“Ellison, Detective Jim Ellison.”

“Right.” She turned and walked over to a door, knocking once before entering.

Jim couldn’t hear her speaking with anyone but he knew the Sentinel Institute had strong white noise generators in use. Dr. McCay had told him when he was being tested that he might need to get one for his bedroom.

A few minutes later the receptionist returned, Dr. McCay walking beside her.

“Detective Ellison,” he said. “How are you feeling?” he asked. He could see the sentinel was looking pale, not uncommon when a late bloomer came online. It usually took a little time for the sentinel to acclimate to the changes.

Jim, who had been drifting in the low stimulus environment looked up and blinked. Realizing the doctor was looking over at him with some concern, he stood. “Dr. McCay,” he inclined his head. “I was,” he paused and took a breath, “I was hoping you could give me information about getting a guide for work.”

Dr. McCay nodded, hiding a smile. “Of course, Sentinel...um...Detective Ellison.” The doctor could still remember Jim vociferously insisting that he be called Detective, not Sentinel, Ellison. “Why don’t you come into my office,” the doctor suggested and Jim followed him.

Taking a seat in front of the doctor’s desk, Jim waited as Dr. McCay gathered some folders before sitting across from him. “How have you been feeling?” the doctor asked, as he opened a folder marked "Ellison, James Joseph".

“I’m fine,” the answer was automatic.

“Are you?” The doctor glanced up. Jim didn’t bother answering and the doctor glanced at his folder. “So, you need a guide at work?”

“Yeah, the first two I met didn’t work out.”

“You’ve already met two at work.” Dr. McCay put down his pen and watched the detective. “Exactly what was the problem with them?”

“The first guide thought he was my boss and could order me about. The second thought I was some kind of pet, patting me and talking to me as if I were a five-year-old.”

“I see. Most guides do worry about their sentinels and it can sometimes seem like they are bossy-”

“The man was screaming at me and trying to manhandle me before he even spoke with me.”

“If that is the case than the Guide Institute should be informed. They will follow up on inappropriate guide behavior.”

“Officer Mark Dean,” Jim informed him and watched the doctor write down the information.

“As to the second guide, some are very-”

“Patronizing,” Jim suggested.

“Yes, well, some guides believe sentinels should be coddled and some sentinels like to be coddled. You are not one of those sentinels,” he added hastily before Jim could complain, “so obviously that guide would not be a good match.”

“Isn’t there some way to just suppress these damn senses?” Jim asked.

“No, Detective, there is not,” McCay answered emphatically, crushing Jim’s hope. Opening a folder, McCay looked over the guides available who would work with military or police institutions. “The Guide Institute just sent paperwork on a guide candidate who seems extremely intelligent and may have the kind of background you would need. He was a Yale graduate and a CIA operative. He’s recently returned from South America.”

“A CIA operative?” Jim repeated, thinking over the implications. He had been in covert ops as a soldier and he had worked with some CIA operatives. Most were cagey and dangerous. Some were decent enough, but some had a very skewed sense of right and wrong. “Could I meet this guide?”

“I’ll see if I can arrange something. He might still be in the Guide Institute,” McCay answered, picking up his phone.

The phone call was quick and Jim was sent to the Guide Institute building next door. He walked in and noted that again the receptionist gave off some calming vibes. “*Damn*,” he muttered to himself. He was definitely losing it if he was thinking about vibes. Walking over he smiled at the woman. “I was sent over by Dr. McCay.”

The girl nodded. “Yes, I was asked to send you straight through to office 213. Take the elevator on the left one flight.”

“Thank you,” Jim moved past the woman and up to the second floor. There was an older gentleman waiting there and he smiled at Jim. “Sentinel Ellison?” he asked.

“Yes.”

“I’m Dr. Madison, Director of the Guide Institute. Dr. McCay asked that I introduce you to a recent guide candidate. If you’ll follow me, I’ll take you to an office where the two of you can get acquainted.”

“Thank you.” Jim followed the older man down the hall to an office, Dr. Madison opening the door and indicating that Jim should enter first.

A young man was standing by the window. “Guide Lee Brackett this is Sentinel James Ellison,” Dr. Madison glanced between the two noting that they were looking over each other. Somehow he didn’t think this match was going to work, but he smiled, “I’ll leave you two to talk.”

Jim walked further in the room as the door closed and considered the guide. About the same age as Jim, the man was obviously in good shape.

“Well,” Brackett smiled looking Jim up and down with interest. “You’re well put together Sentinel; ex-military, I’d guess.”

“Army Rangers,” Jim answered. “I’m a cop now.”

“A cop?” Brackett repeated and shook his head. “I’m looking for someone who would be interested in some work in South America.”

“South America?”

“There are a lot of organizations and governments down there that would be interested in a sentinel guide team and I’ve taken all the guiding courses so I would know how to help you,” Brackett purred, seductively. “It would be fun and very profitable, especially with a well-built partner.” Brackett again eyed Jim. “Down there we could live like kings. Riches, women, maybe even a threesome,” he added softly, his eyes resting on Jim’s groin.

Jim could feel a blush rising and gritted his teeth as he realized he was being mentally undressed. It was obvious Brackett was trying to seduce him and he was definitely not interested. “I’m a detective; I’m looking for a partner to help me do my job. I’m not looking to relocate or work

for some other government and I'm not looking for sexual partners," he answered. He knew the answer sounded like a snarl, but Brackett seemed to push all his buttons.

"A shame," Brackett sighed. "It's what I hate about sentinels. They're all so territorial; they never want to leave their cities. Too bad; we could have had a lot of fun." Brackett came over, invading Jim's personal space and running a finger down Jim's chest before Jim took a step backwards. "You do know 50% of pairs have sex, intermittent or not, and gender is irrelevant."

"Like I said," Jim growled, his hackles rising at the guide's forward behavior. "I'm not interested in leaving Cascade." He started for the door but then turned and looked Brackett over, deciding the man was dangerous; too dangerous to stay in Cascade. "Brackett," he warned. "Stay out of Cascade."

The guide laughed mockingly, and as Jim walked out the door, he heard Brackett mutter, "Too bad, I'd have liked to nail that sentinel's ass."

Growling, Jim left, trying to walk off some anger. Stepping out of the building he took a deep breath and then decided to walk a bit before going back to the Sentinel Institute. "Damn guides," Jim growled as he paced around the building. "One is worse than the next. This sentinel business is for the birds and I'm not having any sexual relations with a damn guide," he stated aloud as he walked around the campus. Two circuits later, Jim entered the Sentinel Institute and asked to see Dr. McCay.

The doctor walked out and, lifting a hand, waved Jim back to his office. "From the look on your face, I'd say the guide didn't work out," the doctor suggested.

"You could say that," Jim agreed, taking a seat. "He wants to work for some organization in South America. Are you sure there isn't some way to just suppress these senses?"

"There is no way," the doctor answered. "You'll have to find a guide and, to do that, you'll have to do what most sentinels have to do. Attend gatherings until you find a guide who you can work with and who can work with you."

Jim closed his eyes and took a deep breath. "I go to bed with a headache, I wake up with a headache, and now you're telling me I should invest in some aspirin company."

"You're going to bed and waking with headaches?" Dr. McCay frowned. "I knew you were coming online but I didn't expect you to have reached the point of headaches yet." He glanced at the calendar on his desk and then deliberately addressed Jim as a sentinel. "Sentinel Ellison," he said in a stern voice, "I know you didn't want a cleaning team to come into your house but I am going to insist on it. The headaches have to have an environmental component. Tomorrow a team will show up at your door and you will let them in. AND NOT AT GUNPOINT." The doctor glared at Jim. "Are we clear on this, sentinel?"

"Yeah," Jim's voice sounded sour. "In the meantime, I'm going back to work." Jim turned and stormed out the door.

Dr. McCay watched his retreating back and then picked up the phone, dialing the Guide Institute. “Hello, Daniel,” he greeted the director. “I’m going to need a guide team tomorrow to do a clean sweep of a newly online sentinel...”

PART TWO – THE SEARCH FOR A SENTINEL

Looking Back at the Last Two Years

“Hi Blair,” Susie Willard called as Blair Sandburg walked into the Guide Institute and put his backpack down on the floor.

“Hi Susie, did you miss me while I was away?”

“Sure, did. I got stuck with double the paperwork for the month. Fortunately, no late bloomers came online while you were away so I didn’t have to head up a sweep. How was the expedition?”

Blair smiled at Susie’s reference to a sweep. As a guide working for the Guide Institute, Blair’s job was to organize and help late blooming sentinels adapt. When a late bloomer came online, they usually had a lot of problems adjusting and sometimes they could be hostile and angry about it. Part of Blair’s job was to go in and make sure the sentinel’s environment was hazard- free and livable. As an unbonded guide, the other part of what he did was calm the sentinel. For two years, Blair had been dividing his time between the Guide Institute and the Anthropology Department at Rainier. As an anthropologist, he studied and specialized on the impact of the modern environment on sentinels. As a registered guide, he was a perfect choice to be a Cleaning Team Sweeper. “It was great. I got to see the Chopec village and meet their shaman. I’ve got a ton of notes and I might get an article or two out of the trip. Even Dr. Stoddard said I was an asset. Incacha, the shaman of the tribe, was willing to talk to me about sentinels and guides and their roles in the tribe. Dr. Stoddard said this was the first time the shaman was willing to speak to an outsider.” Blair frowned as he added, “Incacha said he owed it to Enquiri to teach me.”

“Who was Enquiri?” Susie asked

“I don’t know, he wouldn’t say and when I asked other members of the tribe, they would shake their heads and say Enquiri is gone.”

“Maybe a sentinel who died?” Susie suggested.

“Maybe,” Blair agreed.

“I take it you didn’t find your sentinel?” she asked quietly.

Blair shook his head and looked at the paperwork. He didn’t want Susie to see his disappointment but he was beginning to doubt he would ever find his sentinel.

“You will find your sentinel. I know you will,” Susie offered with an encouraging smile.

“Will I?” he asked, silently adding, *“It’s been so long that I’ve been looking.”* As he took a seat at his desk he couldn’t help but think back to when he first came online as a guide...

Sierra Verde – Two Years Ago

Dr. Eli Stoddard, Chair of the Anthropology Department at Rainier University, stood beside his hand-picked team. A fellow professor, Dr. Buckner, and four teaching assistants stood with him, as they looked at the recently-discovered Temple of the Sentinels. There was an archway with an eye and, just beyond that, the temple.

It had been discovered a month before, set deep in the jungle, and the Mexican government had allowed Rainier to send a team to gather information about it.

At the foot of the temple, a snarling stone feline stood as warning to would-be intruders. From there, rough stone steps, some broken, some stained and covered in moss, led up to a door. In the center of the door was a giant eye. “Legends say that the sentinels came here to see the Eye of God,” Dr. Stoddard said, his voice low, reverent, even. “Legend has it the Mayans built this temple to enhance their sentinels’ senses.”

“A myth,” Professor Buckner scoffed.

“There was a time when people believed sentinels were a myth,” Stoddard countered. “Supposedly, sentinels would come here, drink something the priests gave them, and rest in pools of water. When they came out of the pools their senses would be more enhanced.”

After a moment, they climbed the stairs to stand before the door. “If the legends are correct only a sentinel or guide can open the door,” Stoddard said, running his hand over the eye. “I’ve requested the aid of a sentinel guide team from Sierra Verde. They should be here tomorrow.”

Professor Buckner scoffed and tried to push open the door but the stone didn't budge. "Maybe there's some special lever or something," he suggested, feeling around the stone, two of the TAs joining him.

Blair, standing beside Eli Stoddard, watched as they ran hands over the structure, pushing at various points. When they finally gave up some minutes later, he walked up to the door of the stone structure. He could feel a connection to it; it thrummed inside him in time with his heartbeat and, closing his eyes, he let his hand rest against the eye as he leaned his head against the stone. An image came into his mind of two large pools of water and stone cups and he could see himself and the shadowy figure of a tall man standing beside him. The man wasn't a South American Native; he was dressed in army camouflage clothes, his arms crossed over his muscular chest and his intense light blue eyes and stern face turned to gaze down at Blair.

The vision was shadowy but Blair felt an immediate bond with the soldier in the vision. Slowly, his hand came up to touch the soldier's chest, just where his heart would be. As his vision hand touched the soldier, the hand on the stone pressed against the eye. All could hear the sound of stone moving and the doorway opened. Stoddard and others watched in shock as Blair looked at the entrance.

"Blair," Professor Buckner said, "How did you do that?"

"I...I'm not sure," he said, his voice sounding dazed as he blinked and looked around.

Stoddard ascended the stairs, looked inside and then at Blair, putting a hand on his shoulder, "Blair, are you a guide?"

"I," he paused, about to say no. "I've never been tested."

Professor Stoddard looked him up and down thoughtfully. "You've always been a people person, so I think it more likely you're a guide than a sentinel. When we get back to Rainier, I think you should be tested." Blair nodded but still seemed a bit dazed as he followed the party into the temple.

Inside there were stairs that led down. Despite the hot, moist air outside, it was cool and damp inside. The team turned on their flashlights as they carefully made their way past stone statue guardians and down the roughly hewn stairs. Pulling out cameras, the team took pictures and then stepped over to two large water pools.

"How could there be water in these baths?" one of the TAs asked.

"Maybe a rain trap in the roof," Blair suggested, pointing his flashlight at the ceiling and then along the walls. Blair frowned, turning from the pools of water to look more closely at the walls. "There's writing on the walls," he whispered.

"We'll need to get pictures of it," Stoddard answered, following Blair's movements as Blair flashed his light across the wall.

“It’s a recipe,” Blair continued, moving closer.

“You can’t know that, Blair,” Professor Buckner answered.

“I can read it,” Blair replied as his hand ran over the wall.

“My boy, what does it say?” Stoddard asked.

“It says these chamber pools enhanced sentinel senses, especially when accompanied by a drink made from local plants and herbs. The instructions for making the drink are carved on the wall. There’s a reference to seeing the Eye of God and a warning about the need for a guide.”

“How can you read that?” Buckner challenged. “It’s a language that hasn’t been spoken in over two thousand years.”

“I don’t know, but I can.”

Buckner glanced over at Stoddard. “Racial memory?” he questioned, quietly.

“Guide memory, perhaps,” Stoddard replied. “All right,” he called to the other TAs, though his eyes stayed on Blair, who had a hand on the wall, staring at the stone. “Let’s start cataloging and photographing everything. Blair, can you start writing a translation? You can tell us what you translated tonight.”

Blair nodded, pulling out a pad of paper, as he walked around the wall.

Four hours later, the team had written descriptions of the temple and photos of all the walls within the bathing chamber. The sun was going down, the temple getting dark, and so Stoddard decided it was time to set up camp. Calling the group together, they went outside the building and Blair and a fellow TA, Bill Dropper, began to put up tents as Stoddard and Buckner unpacked food and the others found wood and started up a fire.

“You know,” Bill said as he and Blair pitched the tents. “Maybe, we should get a sentinel here and try the formula, that’s assuming we can find the plants and they’re safe.”

“**NO**,” Blair answered sharply, and Stoddard and Buckner looked up, focusing on the conversation. “No sentinels can go in there without their guides at their sides.”

“Why not?” Bill asked.

“It could destroy them,” Blair answered, sounding very sure. “They call it the Eye of God because the sentinel can see the workings of the world, but it could short circuit the sentinel. His guide needs to be there to make sure he doesn’t overdose or overload. A sentinel could go into a permanent zone on pain. It’s too dangerous.”

“You read that on the wall?” Buckner asked, and Blair nodded. “Were there any other writings?”

“No, just the warnings and the formula.”

“Interesting,” Stoddard answered as the group gathered around the fire. “Then why would they use the temple?”

“I think it was used to bring their potential sentinels online,” Blair answered. “But I don’t think it should be used by a sentinel who is already online.”

“That seems logical enough,” Buckner added. “There have always been a limited number of sentinels and guides. Tribes would look for ways to bring out sentinels’ abilities. But, of course if Blair is correct, the downside is sentinels could be destroyed in this place.”

“It does make sense that the guide would be part of the process,” Stoddard agreed. “Blair, was there anything dangerous in the formula?”

“No, nothing dangerous or illegal,” Blair glanced up at the temple. “There’s supposed to be a mystical component to sentinels; I think that has something to do with the process. I don’t think the temple or the formula is the complete answer.”

Stoddard nodded his understanding. Though not a sentinel or a guide, he had seen enough in his travels to know there was a mystical element to the pairings. “Tomorrow morning we’ll start cataloging the outside of the building and any additional chambers,” he told the team. “We have six more days here to get our research done.”

“You know there’s something odd about this temple,” one of the TAs, Eddie Greene, said as he stuck some sticks into the fire. “I spent last summer at a dig in Teotihuacan, Mexico. The architecture, images and writing on the walls in Teotihuacan are similar to the ones in this temple.” Eddie paused a moment but then shrugged, continuing, “I mean I know the natives are from the same region and all. Still, the stuff is similar. In any case, in Nahuatl, the language of Nahua people, Teotihuacan means the birthplace of gods.”

“You don’t think of sentinels as gods?” Buckner asked.

“No,” Eddie admitted. “We know they are not but any tribe that had a sentinel would consider itself blessed by the gods. And you can’t deny sentinels have what might seem godlike abilities.”

“Interesting,” Stoddard considered. “If that’s the case, then Teotihuacan would represent one of the original birth places of sentinels and the sentinels would be brought here to bring their senses online. I wonder,” he added, his eyes on Blair, “if guides were brought here to bring them online.”

It came as no surprise to Dr. Stoddard that Blair was identified as a guide upon their return from Sierra Verde. Blair had gone for the testing and, after getting the results, had walked over to Stoddard's office in a complete daze.

"Come in, Blair." Stoddard came to the door and smiled when his secretary had announced the young man's arrival. "How did the testing go?"

Blair stared at Stoddard. "I'm a guide," he announced.

"I had no doubts, especially after you opened the temple door." Stoddard leaned back in his seat and watched Blair. "I imagine your abilities were latent, but strong?" he asked.

Blair nodded. "I'm going to have to go through the program at the Guide Institute. I'll have to divide my time between that and my anthro responsibilities."

"That won't be a problem," Stoddard answered. "Rainier recognizes the specific responsibilities of both guides and sentinels. They'll adjust your schedule. You probably will lose some of your teaching assignments but you'll pick up a stipend from the Guide Institute to offset the loss. They may ask you to help sentinels in some capacity until you find one of your own."

Blair nodded again and then shook his head ruefully. "When I was five I first saw a sentinel. I remember looking up at him. He was huge. He seemed as tall as the trees and I remember him standing by a door, his arms crossed over a wall a muscle. I don't know where I was or why, but I asked my mother who the man was and she said a sentinel. I looked up and...and he looked down at me and smiled. I remember I felt safe beside him. It didn't matter that he was a stranger. I just knew he would keep me safe. I've been interested in sentinels ever since."

"It's because you are a guide. I think somehow proximity to the temple kicked your abilities into gear."

"I guess that means I'll have to find a sentinel."

"Blair," Stoddard chuckled, "in all likelihood you and your sentinel will find each other."

It ended up being remarkably easy to change his schedule so he could attend the Guide Institute. Ana Juarez, a fellow TA, took over two of his classes and he began to learn about guiding.

Blair realized rather quickly that guiding came naturally. He seemed to understand what to do and how to do it. Of course, he had yet to try actual guiding, but it seemed to be part instinct and part common sense.

Blair knew he tended to talk a lot, especially when nervous. All his life he had been called a chatterbox, but he laughed when he found out that talking in a low, deep voice could soothe a sentinel's overstressed nerves. "I guess I was cut out to be a guide," he decided. "I can talk to anyone about anything."

There were no grades for guiding classes, just certifications, and he ended up certified pretty fast. He knew, if only in theory, how to help a sentinel who was zoned. He knew how to ease spikes, and how to create a sentinel-safe environment. What he needed was to connect with a sentinel. He had learned there were two kinds of guides, the first was an intermittent guide, kind of like a pinch hitter, Blair decided. He or she was a guide who helped a sentinel but couldn't connect on the deeper bonding level. The second type of guide was a true guide. Any unbonded guide could act as an intermittent, but a sentinel only had one true guide and the bond was a commitment for life. All guides wanted to be true guides, it was hard-wired into their genes. They all wanted to find their one true sentinel, but it didn't always happen.

Blair dismissed the idea that he wouldn't find his sentinel. Instead, he focused on the day-to-day issues. As a certified guide, he wanted to see what job opportunities he could find. Passing the bulletin board near the cafeteria, he glanced over the various requests and searches, noting a sign that said, "Clean Team Members Needed. See Dr. Turner in the Guide Placement Office"

Curious, Blair went to the office. Knocking on the door, he smiled at the fortyish woman standing by a file cabinet in the neat room. "Hi," he began. "I read a notice on the board that Dr. Turner is looking for Clean Team Members."

The woman nodded. "I'm Dr. Turner." She put the file she was holding on top of the file cabinet and came over.

"I'm Blair Sandburg." Blair held out his hand.

"Sandburg," Dr. Turner repeated, as she shook his hand. "Yes, I've heard about you."

"Good things, I hope."

"I heard you came online at the Sentinel Temple and that you tested very high as a guide."

A little embarrassed over his sudden fame, Blair nodded, glancing around. "I've just finished getting guide certification and was hoping to get some part-time work. I'm still a student working on my PhD and I was working as a TA at Rainier until I started the Guide Program. Rainier arranged for someone else to take over my classes, so I'm looking for work."

"Being a member of a Cleaning Team isn't the most prestigious guide work, but it is important," Dr. Turner answered.

"What exactly does a Cleaning Team do?"

“When a latent sentinel comes online, he or she doesn’t have the necessary training to deal with a high-input environment. A safe home environment becomes more than a necessity; it becomes the sentinel’s haven. A Cleaning Team is called in to screen the environment, remove toxins, actually do some of the cleaning if necessary.” The doctor stopped and gave Blair a rueful smile. “Most of the time there’s not much by way of cleaning; sentinels are usually too good about keeping things clean. They have a tendency to be extremely well-organized.

“The team prepares the home for a sentinel’s use, brings in any needed equipment and supplies, like white noise generators, water filters for the shower, etc. And, if the sentinel has family, the team must educate the family so they don’t bring in toxins.” Dr. Turner paused a moment and looked over at Blair, seeing him nod his understanding and agreement.

“When a sentinel has a bonded guide, the guide usually lives with the sentinel and takes care of the sentinel’s environment. So, bonded sentinels don’t need a Cleaning Team and sentinels identified at a young age grow up learning how to deal with enhanced senses and the environment. So, it is usually latent sentinels who need a Cleaning Team and they need to be trained about how to maintain their environment. I can tell you, they are usually not too happy about having to change their routines and environment.”

Blair nodded. “I can see how that would be important. I’m surprised you need to post signs to get guides.”

“Sometimes a Cleaning Team guide clicks with the sentinel and bonds. Once bonded the guide and sentinel find a way to work together and that results in vacancies. Also, a lot of sentinels and their families are resentful about changing their ways and become hostile, so guides on a Cleaning Team sometimes face a bit of negativity. And truthfully, most guides want to work in a field with sentinels. Though the Cleaning Team will work with the sentinel to educate him, it is not the same as working with a sentinel as a guide.”

“I’m pretty sure I can handle the negativity,” Blair answered. “I’ve been teaching for a few years and in the classroom you do face negativity, at times.”

“You’ll need to do a workshop to become certified as a Cleaning Team Sweeper but you can shadow other Sweepers while you’re in training.”

“I’d like to try,” Blair answered.

Two years later, Blair was still a Sweeper and sentinel-less.

“Hey,” Susie Willard cut in on his reminiscences, “You want to go and get some coffee?”

“Sure,” Blair answered, with a smile, standing. Together the pair made their way to the breakroom. There was a coffee machine on the counter and Blair rinsed out and filled the pot while Susie pulled out a can of coffee.

“It’s just regular coffee,” she informed Blair, holding up the can. “We don’t need the special stuff. There are no sentinels scheduled to be in today.”

“You know that special stuff tastes a lot better,” Blair answered.

“And it costs twice as much. We do have limits to petty cash,” Susie warned. Susie, a very low level guide, worked for the Guide Institute as an office manager. She also filled in when a second set of hands was needed.

“Yeah, yeah.” Blair turned and surveyed the room. It was clean; everything in the Guide Institute had to be kept sentinel-clean. “This is where I met Bobby J Monroe,” Blair stated. “I was studying here when he walked in.”

Susie giggled in response. “He was the sentinel that...uhm...that-”

“That’s the one,” Blair nodded.

“I’ve never heard the full tale, care to enlighten me?”

Blair chuckled as he poured the water from the carafe into the pot. “He came online just after I was certified,” he answered. “And...”

Sentinel Number 1

Blair was sitting in the break room having a much-needed cup of coffee. Open in front of him was a sentinel case file. The Guide Institute created these fake scenarios that listed detrimental environments and situations and asked guides to evaluate what actions should be taken.

This particular scenario was a bit tricky. While the environment was definitely unhealthy, a building with a chemical fire releasing toxins into the air, the sentinel had family within and refused to leave the area. Additionally, the sentinel had been in contact with some of the chemicals and was having a reaction; lesions appearing on his hands and arms. And his breathing was not totally labored but the sentinel was wheezing.

There were no right or wrong answers with the scenario. It was designed as a discussion tool to consider how best to help a sentinel. In this particular situation, a guide could legally order the

sentinel out of the area for his own safety, but would that be the best response if the sentinel's family was trapped in the building? Certainly, even from the outside, the sentinel might be able to help fire fighters locate trapped people. And though the guide's first responsibility was the care of the sentinel, the guide needed to consider the sentinel's mental health as well as physical well-being.

The debate had been heated. A cop, Mark Dean, a recent enrollee at the Institute, had insisted he would drag the sentinel away. Several other new admits had agreed with him. Blair had been on the other side of the argument, insisting that the sentinel needed to be near his family. Blair had stated he would get a medical team to give the sentinel oxygen, clean the lesions, and supply medication to treat the systems but would not force the sentinel to leave the area at that time. He would continue to monitor the sentinel and hope the fire fighters could save the family.

The debate had gone on for some time before Blair pointed out that the sentinel would in all likelihood zone listening for his family if pulled from the site. Of course, the counter argument had been that the sentinel might hear his family die. Blair responded that there were some things a guide couldn't protect his sentinel from, and death of family members was one of those things.

At the end of the class, the instructor had admitted that there were no right or wrong answers and that a guide would need his good judgement based on the sentinel's ongoing condition.

Blair was reading through the scenario for a second time, a few as of yet uncertified students working at the next table, when three men walked into the break room.

The first man was young. He was tall and lean with large brown eyes and dark brown hair framing a nicely-tanned face. The two men with him were equally tall but they were stockier and sported heavy beards. Seeing a resemblance among them, Blair guessed the three were related. He looked up and smiled before returning to the scenario.

Four minutes later, aware that he was being scrutinized, and that the men were whispering behind him, Blair looked up again. "Can I help you?" he asked.

The younger man smiled. "I'm visiting the Guide Institute today," he said, and Blair could hear a southern twang, deciding the man was from the Deep South and probably somewhere rural.

Blair nodded, closing the file and standing. "Can I help you with something?"

"I'm looking for a guide."

"Most sentinels are," Blair agreed, holding out his hand. "Blair Sandburg."

"Robert James Monroe. People call me Bobby J. These are my brothers, Brother Beau and Billy Bob." The two men standing behind Bobby J nodded, crossing their arms over their chests and watching Blair.

“When did you come online?” Blair asked, noting he had absolutely no reaction to the sentinel when he touched him.

“Last week. It came as a sort of surprise. I mean no one in my family expected it.”

“It happens that way sometimes,” Blair agreed.

“Anyway,” Bobby J continued. “I’m looking for a guide before I go home.”

“Where’s home?”

“The Bayou.”

“You came a long way,” Blair answered. “I mean the Sentinel Institute is famous but I’m sure there are good sentinel and guide programs throughout the country.”

“I was here doing some business for my uncle when I came online. Momma says I can skip the learnin’ and just bring me back a guide when I come home.”

“Bring back a guide?” Blair questioned and Bobby J nodded. “What do you do in the Bayou?” Blair asked, wondering exactly where the Bayou was.

“I’m a chicken farmer.”

“I see,” Blair answered, images of chickens clucking and roosters strutting around flashing through his head. “I’m surprised you’d need a guide, living on a farm there’s not a lot of adverse stimuli.”

“Poppa says if I bring back a guide we can teach him to feed the chickens and chop the firewood.”

“You know Bobby J, most guides work with sentinels in emergency services: police, fire, search and rescue.”

“Yeah, but Momma says I should get one.”

“And what do you think?” Blair asked.

“Well, I don’t know. I mean Momma and Poppa are the heads of the family. They do the thinkin’ and make the decisions for the whole family and they said I couldn’t be a deputy. They did say I could help when someone gets lost in the bayou.”

“I see,” Blair nodded, sagely. “How many people are in your family?”

“I got eight sisters and brothers.”

“And you all work the farm?”

“Nah, my older brothers, Jake and Rick, they’re gator hunters. As a matter o fact, they said maybe as I’m a sentinel I could go out with them and help them find gators. Hear them or something. That’s really why I need a guide.” Bobby J paused and looked Blair up and down. “You’re kind of small but I guess I could take you as a guide. So, when can you leave?”

Blair ran a hand through his hair, trying to think of a nice way to turn the sentinel down. “Bobby J, I’m afraid I can’t help you. I can’t relocate. I’m going to school here.”

“You won’t need much schoolin’ on a chicken farm or out in the Bayou.”

Blair gave a strained smile. “I’m committed to school here and I don’t think we’re a good match, Bobby J.”

“Momma says if I bring back a boy guide, we’ll marry him to my sister, Daisy. It ain’t right for two men to be together in a biblical way, even sentinel and guide, but my sister, she’s real pretty. She’ll make you some nice babies.”

“I’m sure she would,” Blair agreed, hearing some chuckles from the table behind him. “But-”

“You know he’s pretty enough to be a girl; maybe Poppa and Momma might let you co-habitat with him,” Billy Bob piped in.

“Nah,” Brother Beau answered. “Momma will put a bowl over his head and cut off the hair. Then he’ll look more man-like.”

Blair gritted his teeth as he heard two of the students behind him cough to cover a laugh. “Look guys, I appreciate the offer but, as I said, I’m not available.”

“You’re the third guide to turn me down,” Bobby J whined.

Blair didn’t find that particularly surprising.

“You know,” Brother Beau said to his brothers, “I don’t want to go back and tell Momma we couldn’t get a guide for Bobby J.”

“Maybe we could hogtie this one and carry ‘im back. I mean he don’t look too big. Heck, Daisy could take him in a fight.”

Blair, watching the three brothers, took a step back. “Guys,” he said, pasting on a smile. “Let me give you a suggestion. Why don’t you try and find a Bayou guide? Someone who knows the area and would be an asset.” Blair held up his hands. “You know someone who knows how to live...with chickens.” Blair stopped and turned, glaring at the laughing students behind him before turning back to Bobby J, Billy Bob and Brother Beau. “I’m sure your Momma and Poppa would be much happier with someone who knows Bayou life.”

“Well he does have a point,” Brother Beau said as Dr. Madison, Director of the Guide Institute, walked in.

“Gentlemen,” the Director addressed the brothers. “I understand you’ve been asking about a guide?”

“Well, we were,” Billy Bob answered. “But now we’ve decided to leave that be and go home and apply for a Bayou guide. I can’t understand but half of what these people say anyway.”

With that, the three brothers walked out.

“I wonder if Bobby J ever found a guide,” Susie said with a chuckle.

Blair shook his head, “I have no idea.”

“But didn’t you have another incident with a sentinel?” Susie asked.

Blair nodded. “Yeah, I did, actually, and not just with the sentinel but with the sentinel’s father.”

“What happened there?”

Blair looked down into his coffee cup. “The sentinel was 16 years old,” Blair began.

“But sentinels and guides don’t bond at that young an age,” Susie cut in.

“I know,” Blair answered. “And I had been certified for about two months and had just begun as a Sweeper when…”

Sentinel Number 2

Blair was filing a folder on a Cleaning done a week before when there was a knock on the office door. Turning, Blair looked at a tall man standing by the door.

The man glanced around, his frown clearly stating he was less than impressed with the office, and then looked Blair up and down, his scowl growing. “Can I help you?” Blair asked.

Schooling his face, the man stepped closer. “My name is Richard A. Fritz.” He paused and Blair guessed he was waiting for Blair to be impressed. “The financial backer,” he prompted.

“Yes, of course,” Blair smiled. “You financed the building of the Cascade Harbor Towers.” The man nodded and Blair guessed he felt better now that he was recognized. “Is there something you need help with, Mr. Fritz?”

“My son is a sentinel in need of a guide.”

“Your son?” Blair looked around wondering where his son was.

“Yes, and I would like you to come to my house this evening and meet him.”

A lot of questions went through Blair’s mind, starting and ending with why wasn’t the son involved in this? “Is your son incapacitated or in need of a Sweeper?”

“No, of course not,” Fritz answered, sounding annoyed.

“Then why isn’t he here?”

“My son, Rick, had a commitment today, so I am here in his place.”

“But, wouldn’t he have a better chance of finding a compatible guide if he came here?”

“I told Rick I would arrange for you to visit him. Naturally, I would compensate you for your time. Would that work for you?” Not quite understanding what this was about, Blair nodded.

“7:30,” Fritz continued, not even looking to see if Blair had agreed. “I’ll have one of my drivers pick you up in front of this building, if that is convenient.”

“That will be fine,” Blair answered the man’s back as he turned and strode out.

After Richard Fritz left, Blair logged into the computer and looked up the man. A major political and financial player in Cascade, the entrepreneur had a string of connections with Rainier but, in not one of the bios, was there any information about his family or a son who was a sentinel. Finally giving up, Blair left the Institute a little early and went home to shower and change before driving back and parking near the entrance.

Promptly, at 7:30, just as the Rainier clock tower chimed, a limo pulled up and a driver stepped out. “Mr. Sandburg?” he asked and Blair nodded. “Mr. Fritz asked that I bring you to his Cascade apartment.” He walked around and opened the door.

“Where is his Cascade apartment?”

“It’s the penthouse apartment in the Cascade Harbor Towers.”

“Wow, that’s cool.” Blair sat down in the backseat and noted the various bottles of liquor in the small wet bar.

“Mr. Fritz said he hopes the wine and spirits selections suit your tastes,” the driver said before closing the door and getting in the driver’s seat.

Glancing over the various bottles of champagne, wine and scotch, Blair instead, picked out a bottle of water, deciding he would need a clear head this evening.

Mostly because of traffic in downtown Cascade, the drive took forty minutes. Entering the parking garage, the driver pulled into a reserved spot near the door before opening Blair’s door. Indicating the private elevator, the driver used a key to open the door and pushed the button for the penthouse. “I’ll be waiting down here to take you home while you do business with Mr. Fritz,” he told Blair as the door closed and the elevator started up.

When the elevator door opened, a servant dressed in a perfectly ironed suit and white gloves was waiting. “Mr. Fritz is waiting for you, Sir,” he said in a clipped voice. “If you will follow me.”

Nodding, Blair followed the servant down the hall to a large door. Opening it, the servant started to the right and Blair, glancing around, got a quick look at the living room. There were floor-to-ceiling windows that looked out on Cascade. The floor had a deep-piled soft, gray carpet and large leather sofas situated around a white and gray marble fireplace. On the wall above the fireplace, sealed in a glass case with a light above it, was what looked like a Rembrandt. As he passed through the living room, he noticed on the wall above a bar, what he suspected was a Titian.

Letting out a quick breath to avoid whistling in appreciation, he followed the servant to a large mahogany door where the servant knocked lightly. “Come,” was heard from the inside and the servant opened the door, stepping back so Blair could enter and closing the door behind him.

Blair stepped inside what was obviously a study. There was a bookcase along one wall. Another wall had shelves with glass doors and various items on display. Blair guessed the vase on display in the glass case was Ming or Qing Dynasty. As in the living room, there were floor-to-ceiling windows with a breath-taking view of the city. In front of the windows were large leather chairs. A large ornate desk dominated the fourth wall. The room was paneled with coiffured ceilings and recessed lighting and screamed money.

Mr. Fritz was sitting by the window. Beside him a boy of about 16 was draped across a leather wingback chair, his Nike Air Force 1 shoes dangling over the side.

Mr. Fritz rose as Blair entered. “Mr. Sandburg,” he indicated a seat across from him. “I hope the trip here was adequate.”

“It was fine,” Blair came over and sat down, aware that Fritz and the boy were both looking at him with less than impressed expressions. And Blair was wearing his best pants and shirt. He’d even taken the time to iron them.

“Very good. This is my son, Rick,” Fritz indicated the boy and Blair smiled at the young man, getting a barely disguised look of disgust, before looking back over at Mr. Fritz. In the back of his mind, Blair wondered if they would fumigate or just throw away the chair he was sitting in after he was gone.

“Mr. Fritz, sentinels and guide can’t bond before the age of 18. It’s against the law and done to protect everyone since bonding is a lifelong choice,” Blair pointed out.

Fritz waved a hand, dismissively. “I am aware of that. I am simply securing a guide for future use. I will, of course, put you on payroll until Rick decides to bond and needs your services.”

“It doesn’t work quite that way,” Blair began when Rick cut in.

“He looks like a girl,” he said with disdain, speaking as if Blair wasn’t there. “He’ll need a haircut if he’s going to be seen with me. I don’t want anyone thinking I’m with a fag.”

“I can arrange that,” Fritz answered, not even glancing at Blair for permission or reaction.

“What?” Blair started to say, wondering why sentinels that wanted him as a guide always picked on his hair.

“And he’ll need better clothing,” Rick added, ignoring Blair.

Fritz nodded his agreement, not attempting to hide his disdain as he looked at Blair.

Deciding this was not the right place for him, Blair pressed his lips together in annoyance. “Gentlemen, I am afraid-”

“Are you sure he’s the one that opened the temple door?” Rick cut in. “I mean he doesn’t look like much.”

“I checked twice,” Fritz answered as if Blair weren’t there hearing their conversation.

“Gentlemen,” Blair began again a bit louder, intending to tell them he was not interested, but he was again cut off by Rick.

“I suppose we could keep him out of sight at the country house and train him until I need him,” Rick said with a shrug.

“Train me!” Blair sputtered indignantly and the pair looked over him. “I think not.”

“You can’t be expected to be seen with my son the way you are.”

Looking over Rick, slouched in a chair that cost more than Blair made in a year, the young man's face twisted into a nasty sneer, Blair decided he wouldn't want to be seen with the kid either, even if he was wearing 50-thousand-dollar shoes. "Mr. Fritz, Rick, I am not interested in being your son's guide." Blair stood. "I wish you good luck finding a guide but I would suggest the two of you rethink your roles if you ever want a guide." He started across the room for the door.

"I will pay you two hundred thousand a year as a retainer," Fritz called out.

Blair turned. He could see a look of triumph on Fritz' face and a look of amusement on Rick's and guessed the man thought he would jump at the salary. "There are some things that are more important than money. A sentinel guide relationship is one of those things," Blair told them before continuing toward the door.

"You don't get to turn me down," Rick snarled.

"Watch me," Blair opened the door and turned to look at the two men. "I'm not for sale."

With that Blair stormed out. Leaving the apartment and going to the elevator, Blair realized he didn't have a key to open the door and turned back to the apartment. Rick was standing in the doorway dangling the key, a smirk marring his features. "Let me out," Blair demanded, angrily.

"Please," Rick answered in a snide voice.

"Please," Blair mimicked Rick's voice, twisting his face to match Rick's look of disdain.

"Not a very convincing request, Guide."

"Look we are obviously not a good match," Blair stated. "So let's go our separate ways and forget we ever met."

"That's my decision to make, not yours," Rick answered. "My father says you're supposed to be some super strong guide. I don't see it."

Blair didn't answer but he knew the reason Rick didn't see him as a strong guide. Rick was a very weak sentinel. Blair suspected he probably wouldn't even need a guide. "I guess it's a good think we're not compatible," he answered and Rick looked him up and down again, before tossing Blair the key.

Grabbing it, he used it to call the elevator and tossed the key back as Fritz Senior walked to the door, holding out an envelope.

"I did say I would compensate you for your time," he handed Blair an envelope as the door opened. "My driver will return you to the Institute. I'm sure my son will find a more appreciative guide." Fritz dismissed Blair and led Rick back inside.

“What was in the envelope?” Susie asked.

“Five thousand dollars,” Blair answered.

“Wow, for ten minutes?”

“Yeah, but no bond would have worked between me and that brat.”

“He must be 18 now, does he have a guide?”

“I don’t know. But if he does, it would have been brokered privately and not through the Institute.”

“You could have been rich,” Susie shook her head.

“I couldn’t put up with Rick or his father and Rick really wasn’t a match, not that he would actually have needed me.”

Susie nodded. “You’ll find your sentinel, Blair. I know it.”

As she said this, she looked up. Dr. Turner stood in the doorway. “Blair, Susie, I’ve had a call from Dr. McCay. You are going to need to do a sweep tomorrow morning. If you come into my office I’ll give you the information.”

The two Sweepers followed Dr. Turner into her office where she indicated they should sit. “Detective James Ellison came online two days ago. He is a late bloomer in his thirties. He tested very high as a sentinel and is already experiencing problems with his environment. And I can tell you, he is not too happy about being online or needing a Cleaning Team.” She paused and watched Blair and Susie nod their understanding. “You will have a slightly higher than usual budget. This sentinel tested at the top end of the sentinel spectrum across all of his senses so he might need two white noise generators. You can decide that when you are there. He’s also going to need help understanding how to cope with his senses. Blair, I might ask you to shadow him for a day or two and review how he copes with his environment and what adjustments will have to be made to it. I’m sure the PD would be happy to make those adjustments if it means they get a sentinel.”

“No problem,” Blair answered.

“There might be a problem,” Dr. Turner answered, honestly. “He has been described as not very receptive to help and has had problems with two guides at the PD, not that I’m saying it’s his fault,” Dr. Turner paused and held up a hand. “But he seems to be very independent and the guides were a clear mismatch with this sentinel.” She paused, shaking her head, remembering what Dr. McCay had said about the guides at the PD. It was unfortunate, but most of the more gifted guides invariably ended up with other security agencies. “Susie, I will ask you to

inventory and supply the various household items he will need. You will probably have to sit him down and go over what he needs to buy and why. I'll send Ethan with you, so he can prepare the apartment. Jim Ellison will meet you at his loft tomorrow morning at nine."

PART THREE – SENTINEL MEETS GUIDE – GUIDE MEETS SENTINEL

The Loft

Jim Ellison growled as he paced around his living room. Dr. McCay had told him that a team would be at his apartment this morning to meet with him and make sure his condo met the requirements of a sentinel. Jim wasn't sure what "requirements" meant, but the place was clean and he didn't appreciate the idea of anyone coming in and looking over his things. It was 8:55. The team, headed by one Blair Sandburg, was to arrive at 9:00. Thinking it over, Jim decided he would leave if they were late. "Let's see," he told himself, "if they arrive at the building exactly at 9:00 and push for the elevator, they would be at the apartment door at most, by 9:03. That means at 9:03:01 I can walk out the door and say I couldn't wait." Not that Jim had anywhere to go. Simon had gotten a call from Dr. McCay about the appointment and had insisted Jim stay home and deal with the team and his heightened senses.

With a snort of disgust, Jim decided he would go to the market. That way he could honestly say he had gone somewhere. Eyeing the clock again, which read 8:58, he heard some noise outside the door and someone saying, "Apartment 307, you can relax, Blair, we're on time."

"Damn," Jim muttered. Obviously, the team was prompt. He'd be stuck with this group of invaders.

Striding over to the door, he yanked it open and stood in the doorway, arms crossed, trying to appear his most intimidating, as a man with long, curly, brown hair said, "Sentinels like people who are punctual."

The man at the door stopped talking, turned and, looking up, smiled at the sentinel. "Hi, we're the Cleaning Team," he said, and frowned. "Have we met before?" he asked, hesitantly, a hand starting to reach out, as a sudden need made him want to place a hand on Jim's chest.

Jim had a good memory for faces and shook his head, stepping back, out of reach of the Sweeper. Deciding he couldn't be totally rude (mostly because he didn't have a choice), he stepped aside and indicated the team should enter. There were three people: one man carrying a bucket, mop, broom, and supplies, a woman holding a check list, and the curly-haired man.

The team walked in and the curly-haired man turned and made introductions. “This is Susie Willard and Ethan Grill from the Guide Institute.” Jim nodded, keeping his face totally devoid of emotion. “And I’m Blair Sandburg,” he said as he reached out his hand. Jim automatically took the proffered hand and, as his hand closed around Blair’s, the world tilted.

Blair didn’t fare much better. For a moment, Blair saw sparks before his eyes, and Jim appeared to be bathed in a glowing halo. Blair quickly shook his head to clear it and, seeing Jim go very still and then start to sway, called out, “Susie, grab a chair, quick,” and as a chair was put behind Jim, Blair eased him down into the seat. “Come back, Jim,” he said, softly, holding and rubbing Jim’s hands, his own hands tingling at the touch. “Come back, sentinel.”

Jim blinked and looked into Blair’s concerned face. “What happened?” he asked.

“You reacted to me,” Blair answered in a soothing voice, reluctantly letting go of Jim’s hands. “It happens sometimes between sentinels and guides,” he stated, not saying but thinking, *“when they are highly compatible.”*

“Another down side to being a sentinel,” Jim answered with annoyance, his cheeks coloring as he ran a hand over his chin. “Let’s get this cleaning thing over with,” he continued in a harsh voice, trying to hide his embarrassment.

Blair gave Jim a dazzling smile. “Okay, Susie will check out the supplies you are using in the bathroom and kitchen. If you are using supplies that are unsafe, Susie will replace them with sentinel-safe cleaners and make a list of supplies you should use in the future and where you can get them. If you are using unsafe supplies, Ethan will clean the rooms.”

“The rooms are clean,” Jim protested, standing.

“What did you use to clean them?” Ethan asked.

“Bleach.”

Ethan nodded, knowingly and turned to Blair. “I’ll start cleaning,” he turned to the bathroom as Susie moved to the kitchen and began looking under the sink, pulling out cleaners and putting them on the counter. Jim, watching her, started to protest but Blair held up a hand.

“Jim - may I call you Jim?” he received a nod. “Why don’t we sit down and I’ll explain what’s going on before we look upstairs.”

“**LOOK UPSTAIRS!**” Jim challenged loudly and Blair, ignoring the bellow, decided Jim needed a few minutes to get used to what was happening, and pointed to the sofa.

“Please,” Blair asked softly and Jim, after suspiciously eyeing the growing number of supplies on the counter, walked into the living room and took a seat.

Blair followed and took a seat near Jim, trying not to show he was looking the sentinel over, even as he was admiring the strong muscles and trim waist. “So, this is my sentinel, and he is gorgeous,” he mentally noted. All Blair wanted to do was touch him, maybe even snuggle against him, and then bond, preferably sexually as well as spiritually. But two years of training had given him some measure of control and he pushed the desire back as he looked at Jim.

In the original profile he had been handed yesterday, it listed Jim as a Major Crimes detective living alone. No family was mentioned. With no significant other in the picture, Blair figured he could move in with Jim and handle any problems with Jim’s senses.

But that particular scenario was still a bit in the future. Blair was fairly certain Jim wasn’t ready for bonding - not yet. This was a bit new for Jim and Jim didn’t seem the kind of guy to embrace new experiences. And Blair didn’t know if there was any love interest involved. If Jim had a steady girlfriend, or boyfriend for that matter, and, looking Jim up and down Blair couldn’t see any reason why Jim wouldn’t, it would suck, big time. Deciding he would stay close until Jim was ready, Blair indicated Susie in the kitchen. “Most sentinels come online during puberty and they and their families learn how to interact with their environment: what products to buy, what fabrics to wear, how to arrange their environment for dealing with heightened senses. But sentinels who come online later need help redefining their environment.”

“Redefining?” Jim questioned.

“Yeah,” Blair nodded. “There are certain products sentinels don’t use. Things like bleach. It’s too strong for most people but especially bad for a sentinel.”

“Then how the hell do I keep this place clean?”

“There are products that will work. And Jim,” he added with a knowing smile. “Since you have extraordinary sight, I guarantee you will not miss a single bit of dirt.” Jim grunted in reply and Blair nodded to Ethan. “Ethan is going to wipe down the bathroom and get rid of the smell of bleach and any bleach residue. Susie,” he waved at the girl in the kitchen, “is going to get you a white noise generator for your bedroom.”

“White noise generator?” Jim asked, remembering that Dr. McKay had mentioned something about white noise generators.

“It helps keep out ambient noises so you can relax in bed. Once bonded, your guide will help you take care of these details and people who live with you will be trained to support you.”

“No one lives with me,” Jim stated, succinctly, and Blair, making sure he didn’t smile at the news, nodded, deciding Jim would need a guide sooner rather than later. Good.

“What about family? Maybe a girlfriend, or,” Blair paused fractionally, “a boyfriend?”

Jim didn’t seem to react negatively to that suggestion, much to Blair’s relief, but shook his head, stating, “No one.”

“Well than, your guide could move in with you.”

“The guide has to live with me?” Jim asked, his voice rising.

“Other arrangements can be made,” Blair admitted. “But usually it’s easier for the pair to live together or near each other. A sentinel doesn’t really do well living alone.”

“And if I don’t want anyone living with me?” This time the voice sounded like a growl. Jim had been on his own since he was eighteen and suddenly he needed a babysitter.

“It can be arranged, but you will have to deal with check-ins by the Guide Institute on a daily basis.”

“Why?”

“To make sure you’re not zoned out in your house. And you will need a guide in the field.” As Jim frowned, Blair held up a hand, “That’s the law.”

“Yeah, that one I’ve already run into,” Jim admitted.

“Problems with guides in the field?” Blair asked, trying to keep his voice sympathetic, but something must have sounded off. Jim turned and eyed him suspiciously, hearing something that sounded false and deciding Sandburg came in knowing Jim had had problems with the PD guides.

“Yeah, the first one thought he was my boss, the second that I was her pet.”

“That is a problem with intermittent guides,” Blair nodded, sagely. “It’s like the story of the three bears, one too hot, one too cold, one just right. The guide you bond with, you respond to, will be just right.”

“And if I don’t find a guide?”

“Oh, you will,” Blair assured him, patting his arm. “So, should we go upstairs and check out your bedroom? I mean we need to look at your clothes,” Blair asked rising.

“Why?”

“Until you’re bonded and a guide can help level your senses you’re going to need to wear natural fibers.” Blair eyed Jim. “I’m guessing that shirt is cotton, so it won’t bother you, but some fabrics and some detergents can give you nasty rashes. Your choice of underwear becomes extremely important. Think silks and cotton.” He paused, looking over Jim. “Do you have any rashes right now?”

“Nothing I can’t handle.”

If they were bonded, Blair would demand to see the rash, but he reminded himself they weren't yet. Instead, he nodded and turned to the stairs and, reluctantly, Jim led him up.

Looking around, Blair noted that the bedroom had neutral colors; that was good, easy on tired sentinel eyes. Susie would be changing the bedding, so that wasn't an issue and the room was open and airy. There was a skylight over the bed and that could be problematic. Blair would have to get Jim a sleep mask. And he would definitely need a white noise generator. Walking over to the closet, he opened it and looked in.

There were several suits hanging up and the material, wool and cotton, were fine. He had a couple of nice wool sweaters and cotton shirts, they would all be okay but a couple of the polyester blends could be a problem, especially with a highly sensitive sentinel – and Blair knew Jim was at the top of the spectrum. While the jeans and Dockers might not be a problem, there was a chance they could be. “These,” he took a few items and placed them at one end of the closet, “could be a problem. I recommend not wearing them until you have bonded. The pants need to be washed in sentinel safe detergent but generally your legs are a bit less sensitive than, say, your chest and back. So, unless you start getting rashes on your legs, give them a try. But,” Blair turned to look Jim in the eye, “if you do start getting rashes, you need to let a guide know. They can turn nasty very fast and a guide is trained to deal with them.”

Jim nodded, saying nothing, and Blair moved to the dresser, ignoring Jim's glare. “I need to see your clothes, Jim, all your clothes. Underwear, tee shirts and socks are considered clothing. Anyway,” he added with a smile. “You can take it from me, I've seen a lot of underwear in my time. Hell, I even wear some, sometimes.” Not waiting for a reply, Blair opened the drawers. As expected, he found white cotton briefs, socks and tee shirts, all folded neatly. There were also pairs of boxers in various plaid prints and two pairs of black silk boxers. Resisting the urge to lift them and thinking he'd like to see Jim model them, he closed the drawers.

“For the most part, you have the right clothes,” he admitted, still thinking about the underwear and imagining Jim in something skimpy or, more accurately, just getting out of something skimpy. Maybe, even a G String.

“So, we are done?”

“Not hardly, man. Susie and Ethan will clean up and get you what you need to function but, since you don't have a guide, I'm going to have to see your work place and places you frequent.”

“Look, Sandburg. Nobody told me this would turn into more than a one-morning visit.”

“Jim,” Blair sighed, “you're a high-level sentinel. You have to know it will take more than one day to get you settled.”

“I don't need a babysitter and I don't need to be settled. Just tell me what to do and I'll take care of it.”

With an exasperated sigh, Blair turned to Jim. “This is what guides do, Ellison. They take care of sentinels and I am a guide. I have to make sure that you are not in a toxic environment at home or at work. Your PD recognizes that departments with a sentinel need to be tweaked to accommodate the sentinel’s senses, so you should as well. And it’s my job to do the tweaking.”

Jim glared down at Blair, trying to appear intimidating, but Blair stared back defiantly, until he broke into a smile. “Come on, man. This isn’t torture,” and, despite everything, Jim found himself with an answering smile.

“Alright, I’ll take you to the PD when your team is done here,” Jim agreed.

“Okay,” Blair sat down on the edge of the bed, deciding this would be a very nice bed for sleeping in and looked up at Jim, wondering how the sentinel would react to him sitting down. When Jim seemed indifferent, Blair pointed up. “That skylight could be problematic.”

“Why?”

“Light could be a problem when you are tired. You’ll need a sleeping mask.” Blair looked around. “Actually, this room is a good space for a sentinel. It’s open and looks out over your territory.”

“My territory?”

“Yeah,” Blair confirmed with a grin. “Sentinels by nature are territorial. Instinctively, you see Cascade as your tribe, but, more specifically, this is your territory.” Blair waved a hand around, indicating the loft. “Right now, I know you are thinking of us as invaders; it’s natural and, honestly, we *are* invaders, examining and changing your territory. But when we are done, you’ll be a lot more comfortable.”

Jim couldn’t help but agree with Sandburg’s assessment. He felt like the place had been invaded by the two people downstairs. Oddly enough, Sandburg didn’t seem to bother him as much. Not that he planned on telling Blair that.

“So, we go to the PD and you look around and I get a bunch of new supplies and we’re done?”

“Not exactly,” Blair admitted. “Usually, when a new sentinel comes online, if the agency the sentinel works for has available guides, they make sure a guide works with the sentinel. But from what you’ve said, and I’ve heard, you and the guides there didn’t really work out.” Jim nodded his agreement and Blair worked to hide his approval of the fact. “So, I’ve been asked to help out for a few days, just to help you stabilize your senses.”

“You, you’re not a cop,” Jim protested.

“Guides that don’t have specific law enforcement training are given consultant status and, if necessary, training to support the sentinel in the field.”

Jim shook his head. He had always known there were sentinels, but he had never been part of that world and it seemed there was a whole subset of rules for sentinels and guides.

“Blair,” Susie came to the bottom of the stairs and called. With a reassuring smile for Jim, Blair stood and went to the top of the stairs. “I’ve catalogued the supplies and I’m ready to go over them with Detective Ellison and go shopping.”

Blair gave her a nod and turned to Jim, indicating they should go down. In the kitchen, Susie had most of Jim’s cleaners on the counter and looked up with a smile. “Sentinel, these products are abrasive. Ammonia, bleach, oven cleaners and drain cleaners are bad for anyone. Anything that contains those types of chemicals should be avoided. Think instead of lemon juice, vinegar, and baking soda.” She pointed to some supplies from the bathroom. “Natural hypo allergic and scent free cleaners for you. I’m going to go and replace these with sentinel-safe products and I’m going to leave a list of where you can get these products in the future.”

Jim nodded his understanding as Ethan came out of the bathroom and looked over at Jim and Blair. “I’ve rewashed the bathroom with sentinel-safe products,” he said, “and took down the shower curtain.”

“The shower curtain,” Jim started to protest.

“Jim, Susie will get you another while Ethan wipes down the kitchen. There’s probably bleach residue on the curtain. Now, can we talk about your work while Ethan cleans the kitchen?”

With a wary look at Ethan, Jim turned and followed Blair into the living room, deliberately sitting in the armchair so that he defined his own space.

“You’re a detective,” Blair began and Jim nodded.

“With Major Crimes,” Jim added.

“What was the catalyst for your coming online?”

“Camping,” Jim answered with annoyance. “I was supposed to go with a girlfriend, but she canceled so I went alone.” Blair’s heart sank, hearing a girlfriend was in the picture. “I see,” Blair kept his voice professional. “And this girlfriend, will we need to train her?”

“No, she’s moving to San Francisco.”

Blair nodded, silently thanking whatever gods watched over guides that the woman would be out of the picture. “I see. How many sentinel guide pairs work at Cascade PD?”

“As far as I know there are two sets: CSU and SWAT,” Jim answered.

“You’ll be one-half of the third set,” Blair smiled, thinking Major Crimes sounded better to him than the other departments, which was a plus since he intended to be the other half of that team.

His anthropology background could prove useful there. SWAT and CSU would not be departments he could bring much to. “I’m sure that the PD will do whatever is necessary to accommodate you as a sentinel.”

Jim shrugged and then turned and picked up his phone. “I’ll call my Captain and let him know I’m bringing you in to look around. The sooner we get this over with,” Jim waved a hand at Ethan, “the sooner I can get back to normal.”

“Keep in mind, it’s sentinel normal,” Blair warned.

Jim dismissed the warning as he dialed the phone and was connected through to the captain, Blair obviously listening in. “Hi Simon...No, I didn’t shoot the Sweepers...They’re working on my environment and one of them wants to come and look at Major Crimes...Yeah, I’m going to bring him in... Okay, I’ll meet you there when you get back from your meeting... I’ll be there as soon as they finish here.” Hanging up, Jim turned to Blair. “Fine, we can meet my captain there right after his meeting. So we can leave as soon as your team finishes.”

“Great,” Blair smiled. “In the meantime, why don’t you tell me a little about your cases at Major Crimes.”

“Why?”

“Curiosity?” When Jim didn’t answer Blair added, “It’ll give me insight into your needs as a sentinel at work.”

“This sentinel thing is getting real old, real fast,” Jim complained.

Siege

Two hours later, Jim came down the road and signaled the turn into the garage and stopped. “What the hell?” he mumbled. The entrance gate was down. “This shouldn’t be down,” he said to Sandburg, sitting beside him in Jim’s truck. “It doesn’t make sense.” He was about to pick up his radio and call in to find out what was going on when he noticed movement at the back of the garage. Frowning, he looked at the back of the garage. There was a man at the back, with a rifle, and he was pointing it at the truck. “Get down,” he shouted, pulling Blair as he ducked down. A second later, the windshield exploded, glass falling on the seat.

Reaching up, Jim put the truck in reverse and rolled back onto the street before turning the truck’s wheel and backing down the street, out of sight of the garage entrance and shooter.

Turning off the truck, he brushed away some glass that had fallen on him and looked over at Blair.

“You okay?”

Blair nodded and Jim glanced over at the building. He didn’t know what was going on in the PD, but he did know they were too exposed sitting in the truck. Jim looked over the glass on the seat and then said, “You’re going to get out of the truck and keep low. But move fast around the back to the driver’s side. I want you to put the truck between you and the building.”

“Okay,” Blair answered nervously and opening the door a little slid out and around as Jim slipped out the driver’s side and crouched near the door.

“What’s going on?” Blair asked quietly and Jim looked up at the building.

“There’s voices up there but it’s all a jumble of sounds.”

Blair nodded his understanding and placed a hand on Jim’s arm. “Let me help you focus,” he said softly. “I want you to separate out the street sounds. Don’t worry about going deep with your senses, I’ll keep you from zoning.”

“How do I do that?”

“Note each sound, identify what the sound is, and concentrate on the next sound. That will dismiss the sound from your focus. There are always sounds around but some you’ve automatically learned to dismiss, like your watch. You don’t hear it tick but if you tried you could. Do it with the street sounds. Filter out cars and engines and listen for other sounds.”

Jim did, recognizing various sounds and dismissing them and then frowned looking at Blair. “I hear a beating noise,” Jim hesitated. “It’s coming from you,” he turned to look at Blair.

“That’s my heartbeat,” Blair answered, realizing Jim was moving toward bonding. “It’s good you can hear it. It will help ground you as you listen, just feel the beat as you concentrate on hearing. The beat will help keep you from zoning as you focus on hearing.”

Jim nodded and looked up at the building, listening.

“The hostages are together in Major Crimes,” Jim heard a man say. “The stairway entrances have been welded shut except the north entrance, but it’s well guarded, and the elevators are disabled.”

“Good,” a voice answered, a voice Jim recognized as belonging to Garrett Kincaid. Kincaid headed a paramilitary group called The Sunrise Patriots. Just the previous month, Major Crimes had arrested two members of the group and they were awaiting trial at Starkville. “How many casualties in the takeover?”

“None of ours,” came the answer, “but six of the enemy. We took out the three in communications and three more in the garage. And our people who took over communications have sent patrols out of the area and jammed transmissions, so we’ve got a clear field.”

Hearing the radios were down, Jim reached in his truck and picked up his cell phone, trying to dial 911. There was no surprise when the call didn’t go through. Tossing the phone back into the truck, he leaned against the door, considering the situation. “Garrett Kincaid’s in there with hostages. He’s jammed communications from Central’s Hub and sent patrols out of the area.”

As Jim said this, a car pulled up and Simon started out. “What’s going--” he didn’t get to finish as Jim yelled at him to get down. Hearing the warning, Simon instinctively responded and dropped behind his car before moving slowly, keeping low, his gun drawn. “What’s going on?” he demanded as he neared Jim’s truck.

“Kincaid’s taken over central booking. He’s got hostages and he’s taken out communications.”

“What about officers in the building?” Simon glanced up.

“He’s used communications to get most of them out of the building. There weren’t many cars in the garage that I could see when I pulled up. One of Kincaid’s men said there are six dead.”

“Damn,” Simon glanced up at the building. He knew if Kincaid was up there with hostages, there was potential for a lot of bloodshed. “How do you know this?”

Jim nodded at Blair. “Captain Simon Banks meet Guide Blair Sandburg. With his help I was able to hear what was going on.”

“Sandburg,” Banks nodded just as his cell phone rang.

“Simon Banks,” he answered.

“Captain Banks,” Kincaid answered in a too-friendly voice.

“Kincaid,” Simon answered between clenched teeth. “What do you want?”

“Captain, it’s good to hear you too. We have hostages up here and we’re willing to trade. You can get the hostages once my two men at Starkville are released.”

“We can’t negotiate until you release the civilians up there.”

“Captain, if I release them, it will be out the window. Are you sure you want that?”

“Kincaid-” Simon shouted but was cut off.

“You better arrange what I want. I have a copter ready to land on the roof of Starkville. Release the prisoners and no one else gets hurt but I suggest you hurry. Captain Taggart tried to be a

hero and he's bleeding. Oh, and Captain, I've sent the patrol cars on a wild goose chase. If they come back, I might have to do something drastic and I have some very heavy fire power with me. I suggest you keep them all away."

"I can't just order the release of prisoners. I need to talk with the commissioner and the governor," Simon answered, knowing they would need some time to analyze the situation and decide on a course of action.

"Then do it. I'll call back in a half hour."

"Kincaid," Simon started but no one answered. "Damn," he cursed, closing his phone before glancing around. All three knew they were in exposed positions with the building looming up just behind them, and Simon indicated they should move across the street. Keeping low and moving fast, the three slipped into a deli across the street as Simon dialed the commissioner.

"We need to get all the buildings around the PD emptied," Jim muttered as Simon connected to the commissioner filing him in on the situation. "We don't know what kind of fire power they have."

Simon, closing his phone, walked over. "The commissioner is on his way."

"Simon, we have to evacuate the area."

"Yeah, but we need to do that without causing a panic," Simon agreed. "We have to find a way that keeps this quiet."

"How about saying there's a gas leak," Blair suggested.

Simon looked over, nodding in approval. "Good idea, Sandburg. I'll get the fire department on it," he agreed and opened his phone again as Jim went to stand near the door, looking over at the building. Blair came to stand beside him.

"They've locked down the building," Jim said thoughtfully, visualizing the various entrances and trying to think of a way to get in.

"Jim," Simon said, joining them, "even if the governor agrees to release Kincaid's men..." he didn't finish.

"I know," Jim answered. "Kincaid is psychotic. He might not leave anyone alive up there. We need to find a way to get in there and stop them and fast."

"We don't have much of a force available and Kincaid's got to have a lot of firepower if he took out the building. You're sure everything is shut down and guarded?"

Jim nodded. "I doubt Kincaid's men would lie to him and that's what they said." Jim let his eyes sweep the building and the street. He knew he needed a way in or there would be a bunch

of dead people up in Major Crimes. Still trying to think of a way, his eyes swept down the street and noted a manhole cover in the distance. “Simon can we get a map of the sewer system around the PD faxed over here?”

Fifteen minutes later, Simon having conferred with and handed over his phone to the commissioner, donned a bulletproof vest and went to a sewer entrance a block away from the PD.

Jim was already there, Blair beside him, both wearing vests, Jim working to slide a crowbar under the manhole cover.

The three had already argued about Blair’s presence before heading out. Simon and Jim had not wanted a civilian in what was going to be a very dangerous possibly even suicidal situation, but Blair had insisted. “Look,” he told them, holding up a finger. “I’m a guide. In a dangerous situation, it’s my place to be beside a sentinel. The sentinel protects the tribe, the guide protects the sentinel. It’s not a job, it’s a calling. I can no more turn off my caring about a sentinel and stop being a guide than Jim can stop being a sentinel.” He held up a second finger, looking at Simon. “If Jim’s going to use his senses - and you’re going to need them in this situation - then he’s going to need a guide with him.” Before either man could answer, Blair held up a third finger and looked at Jim. “And you’re going into a sewer. There’s no way you will function in that environment without a guide.” Without another word, Blair grabbed one of the vests the commissioner’s staff had brought and followed Jim out of the deli, keeping low and moving away from the PD.

Standing before the manhole cover as Simon joined them, Jim considered Blair. “Sandburg, I need you to understand that this is probably a suicide mission.”

“That doesn’t change where I should be,” Blair answered, hoping his nervousness didn’t show. “I’m a guide, I should be beside,” he was about to say “*my sentinel*,” but knowing Jim was not quite ready to hear that yet, finished, “a sentinel. Look, either I come with you or you give up the idea of going in to save the hostages. You’re a newly-online sentinel. You don’t have the control to take on these conditions without a guide. They’re already affecting you and you’re not in the sewer yet.”

Jim looked to Simon, knowing Blair was right but it was Simon’s call. The smell of the sewer was already messing him up and the manhole cover was barely moved. “If we want to use my senses...” he didn’t finish.

Finally, deciding he didn’t like his options but had no choice, Simon nodded his agreement.

“But you listen,” Jim turned back to Blair. “You do as I tell you and you stay behind me.”

“No problem, man,” Blair agreed, holding up his hands as Jim and Simon turned back and finished opening the cover.

As soon as it opened, Jim took a step back, a hand going to his nose. Blair was at his side immediately. “Easy,” he soothed, “you have to push past the smell, catalog it and dismiss it the way you did sound. I know it’s going to be harder but you’re going to have to ignore the smell.” As Blair said this, he pulled a hair tie from his hair and handed it to Jim. “Whenever the smell gets to be too much, hold this to your nose so you smell a guide.” Jim nodded, accepting the tie, and steeling himself. Knowing he had a job to do, he went down the manhole and into the sewer.

The smell was more intense once they were actually in the sewer, and for a moment Jim stopped, his eyes watering, his breathing coming in short gasps. Following Blair’s directions, he put the hair tie to his nose and the smell faded a bit, as Simon, with a map, started down the tunnel. “Thanks,” Jim said as Blair climbed down beside him and rested a hand on his arm, monitoring Jim’s breathing.

“Try not to touch the walls,” Blair whispered. “It’s bad enough you are smelling this stuff, I don’t want you to come in physical contact with it any more than necessary. One sense overloaded is already too much.”

Jim nodded and then the three were moving down the tunnel, Blair keeping a worried eye on Jim. This was no place for any sentinel, never mind a newly-online, unbonded sentinel, but Blair knew he would never be able to talk Jim out of doing this.

After a while Simon stopped, looking around. “We must have gone more than a block,” he said, worry clearly heard in his voice. “There should be something over here by now.”

Jim, glanced around and then up at the ceiling. Lifting the hair tie, he used it to clear his sense of smell. Blair, knowing the sentinel was using his senses, rested a hand on his wrist so Jim could feel his heartbeat. “I smell gasoline,” Jim announced after a moment.

“Gasoline,” Simon repeated and then added with some relief, “the gas pumps in the garage.”

He moved purposefully forward and, just off to the side of the tunnel, found a ladder. “This has to be the entrance to the garage,” Simon said quietly. Knowing Jim should avoid as much contact with the sewer as possible, Simon climbed the ladder and, bracing his back against the manhole cover, shifted it to the side so he could peek out. Inside the garage he didn’t see any of Kincaid’s men, but there was a security camera aimed in their direction and Simon had no doubt it was being monitored. Turning, he looked down at Jim and Blair. “There’s a security camera, they’ll be watching and will see us enter the garage, so we have to move fast. Climbing out we’re clear targets.”

Jim and Blair both nodded and Simon slipped through. “Wait for me to tell you to come out,” Jim said before following Simon into the garage. Blair nodded and climbed to the top rung, looking into the garage, ready to duck if necessary. He could see Jim turn as Jim heard someone

approaching from the north stairwell and heard Jim shout, "Simon the door," just as it burst open, a gunman coming out.

The gunman was ready as he opened the door and, sighting Jim, pressed the trigger, the shot going into Jim's chest and knocking him backwards. But Jim was at the ready too, shooting at the same time, his shot aimed straight at the man's heart with deadly accuracy, the force of the shot making the gunman spin. At the same time, Simon also fired, putting another bullet in the gunman, making his body jump like a puppet, and then Simon took out the security camera so Kincaid couldn't see what was happening.

Jumping out of the sewer, all thoughts of following Jim's orders forgotten, Blair moved forward to check on Jim just as Kincaid's voice called out over the radio, asking what was going on and an officer answered, "That was our old buddy Ellison trying to be a hero, but I sent Jennings down and he took him out. We lost our video in the firefight."

Kincaid answered, "That's alright and good work Jennings."

Blair, thinking Kincaid would want a response or he would send more men to see what was going on, picked up the radio and answered, "Thank you, Sir," before turning to Simon and handing him the radio as Jim got up and came over. "You okay?" Blair asked and Jim nodded, looking around.

"Yeah, I took one right in the vest," he said, rubbing his chest. He knew he would be sore and have a nasty bruise. Dismissing the soreness with the discipline of a long-time soldier, he indicated the elevators. "Kincaid disabled the elevators and welded shut most of the stairway doors. We're going to have to find a way to get one of them open."

"Yeah, I'm sure he's got a lot of men guarding the north stairway, we'd be perfect targets if we tried to use it," Simon muttered, glancing around and hoping for inspiration.

Knowing time was critical, the three men looked around, trying to find something that could get them through the sealed stairway door. In one corner, Blair noticed the discarded welding equipment that had been used to seal the door. Walking over and grabbing it, Blair held it up. "I spent a summer vacation working in a sheet metal plant. I was the fastest crew member with a blowtorch. I bet I can cut a hole right through that door."

"Go for it," Jim approved and Blair, turning on the torch, began cutting a hole right in the center of the door while Simon and Jim watched.

Minutes later, the three men moved carefully through a large hole and into the stairway and looked up at the landing above. Blair, knowing reconnaissance was needed, moved close to Jim, a hand resting on his arm. "Can you hear anyone in the stairway on any of the floors?" he whispered.

Jim looked up tilting his head, pushing his senses out. After a moment, he shook his head no and they started up the stairs, Jim taking the lead, Simon right behind him, gun in hand. Jim was

moving quickly but quietly, stopping every once in a while to listen, Blair keeping close and resting a hand on Jim's wrist to help him focus whenever he stopped to use his senses. They had gone through two floors this way, Jim stopping at each landing and listening before moving on, and were just about at the third landing when Jim stopped them and indicated the door. Simon automatically moved to the side of the door, gun ready, as Jim slowly reached for the door handle. Hoping a surprise attack would work best, Jim quietly turned the knob and then forcefully yanked the door open; a guard who had been leaning against the door, stumbled back in surprise. Simon, slammed the guard's head with his gun and, grabbing the guard's weapon, handed Blair the gun. Pulling out his handcuffs, Jim tossed them to Simon as he looked up and down the hall.

"How did you know that guy was there?" Simon asked as he handcuffed the dazed guard to the stair railing and ripped off the man's communication equipment while Jim pulled tape out of his vest to gag the man.

"I could smell his aftershave."

"You know this sentinel stuff is really useful," Simon noted and Blair almost rolled his eyes, thinking the captain didn't have a clue how useful a sentinel detective could be.

"There's a reason why the government actively recruits sentinel guide teams," Blair answered.

Securing the prisoner, they started up again, bypassing two floors where Jim could hear several of Kincaid's men on guard and talking. Finally, they were outside Major Crimes' floor. Stopping, Jim listened and whispered, "Kincaid is ordering the others to move out. The commissioner ordered the release of the prisoners. They think this staircase is sealed so they're moving north and down to the garage."

"When I get in the communications room, I'll work on stopping Kincaid, getting the patrols back and having the helicopter detained. You concentrate on the hostages."

Jim nodded his agreement.

They waited, tense, Jim listening to the chatter and movement as Kincaid's men moved out. Hearing things quiet down Jim cautiously opened the door and the three crawled forward until they reached the communications room where Simon opened the door and peeked in before they slipped in. Once there, Blair and Jim stood guard on either side of the door, Jim monitoring the floor while Simon moved to put in passwords and override the system so he could order units to return.

Jim, monitoring the hall, heard Kincaid whisper, "Daniels and Stewart, when we leave, shoot the hostages and then head down to the truck."

"Sir?" one of the men asked. "All the hostages?"

“This is a war, soldier. They are casualties of war. We take no prisoners. Once done, follow us down. It shouldn’t take you more than thirty or forty seconds. We’re moving out.”

“Yes, Sir,” one of the men answered as Jim heard Kincaid walk away.

Grimacing, knowing they were out of time, he turned to Blair. “Kincaid ordered the guards to kill the hostages. We need to move out now,” he said quietly and Blair, understanding that he was going into an armed situation, nodded. Opening the door, Jim checked the hall, before the pair moved to Major Crimes’ doors.

Outside the door, both Blair and Jim could hear one of the guards order everyone to stand up and told them to face the windows. They could hear a few of the hostages crying and two starting to pray. With a grim nod of understanding, Blair watched Jim hold up three fingers and count down. Taking a deep breath to steady himself, Blair waited until Jim finished the count down and then Jim kicked open the door to Major Crimes and shouted, “Freeze, Cascade PD!” gun pointing at the two men.

The guards spun in surprise, their weapons turning to point at Jim and Blair, momentarily forgetting the prisoners behind them as they turned at the surprise attack. Hostages forgotten, the guards aimed for Jim and Blair. “Ellison, we thought you were dead,” one of the men snarled. “I’ll fix that right now.”

Even as the terrorist spoke, Joel Taggart, just behind one of the gunmen, seeing them focusing their guns on Jim and Blair, saw an opportunity and slammed his arm down on one of the guard’s arms, making him drop the weapon pointed at Blair. Using his weight, Joel tackled the guard, slamming the guard’s head into the floor with a thud that could be heard around the room. At the same moment, Blair, seeing a weapon pointed at his sentinel, reacted as a guide. Not even thinking about what he was doing, not thinking about the gun he was holding or the gun the guard was holding, Blair dove head first into the second guard’s stomach, throwing him backwards to the floor where Jim stomped on the man’s arm, making him release his weapon before kicking it away and pointing his gun straight at the guard’s head. “Don’t move,” Jim snarled and glanced at Joel. He could see blood on Joel’s leg but Joel was holding the second guard’s gun. “You okay, Joel?”

“I will be. A bullet grazed my leg,” Joel answered, pointing the captured gun at the two men as several others came over to secure the two gunmen.

Getting up from the floor, Blair glanced at Jim, relieved that both of them were still whole. Jim, glancing over, gave him a thumbs up.

“Kincaid headed out,” Taggart said with concern, and Jim nodded.

“Simon’s ready for him. He’s got the exits covered and firepower at the ready, but I better check if there are any other Patriots hiding in the building and head down to help. We’ll have emergency personnel up here as soon as we have the place secured, so sit tight,” he told Joel. He glanced at Blair. “You okay, Sandburg?”

“Yeah, man,” he answered in a breathless voice, his heart pumping in double time. “It’s just not often that I take out a terrorist.”

“You did good Sandburg. I’m going to head down to Simon. You can stay here.”

“No way! I’m your guide and I’m going with you,” he announced, proudly.

Looking Blair over and deciding the man had been smart, brave and fast thinking, he nodded. “Okay, but you stay behind me.”

Simon was in the garage, hidden behind one of the police cars, watching for Kincaid when the terrorist and his men came cautiously out of the north stairwell, scanning the area before making a beeline for a large, white truck. Simon could see they were armed to the teeth and realized he couldn’t match Kincaid’s firepower.

He knew he couldn’t let Kincaid get away or the bloodshed would continue and he needed something more than a rifle to use against the well-armed militia. Glancing around, he spotted a police car with the keys still in the ignition. Slipping in the police car, he watched as Kincaid got in the passenger’s seat of the truck and his men jumped in the back before pulling down the truck door.

Simon had ordered cops to be ready at every entrance but he knew Kincaid’s firepower would be problematic. Trying to avoid a firefight and save lives if possible, he waited for the truck to pull out and then, after buckling his seatbelt and offering up a quick prayer that what he was doing would work, he hit the accelerator and rammed the police car right into the driver’s door, sending the truck spinning headlong into a garage pillar. Grabbing his gun, as police officers, hearing the crash, came running into the garage, he opened the passenger door and grabbed a dazed Kincaid, throwing him to the ground. As the truck back door opened, Kincaid’s men faced an army of armed police men, all with guns pointing at them.

Garrett Kincaid and his men were all belly-down on the floor and handcuffed, a plethora of men guarding them, when Jim and Blair came out of the staircase. Waving to the pair as they stepped out of the stairway, Simon watched as they approached. “Everyone in Major Crimes okay?” he asked.

“Joel will need his leg looked at and a couple of people were bruised by Kincaid’s men, but yeah, everyone’s okay. We can activate the elevators and send up the medics.”

“Good, the helicopter was detained at Starkville and the pilot arrested. I’ve got to join the commissioner in a few minutes. He is getting ready to give a press conference to assure the public that the city is safe and wants me standing beside him. He’d like the two of you there as well,” Simon said, before sticking an unlit cigar in his mouth and glancing at Jim and Blair. He knew Jim would not want to be anywhere near a camera.

“Ah, Simon, can’t you tell him we’re still checking out the building for some of Kincaid’s men?”

“Are you?”

“No,” Jim admitted. “We didn’t find any of Kincaid’s men on any of the floors, but I really don’t want to stand next to the commissioner in front of TV cameras,” Jim groused, and Blair came to his aid.

“His senses are still on overdrive. Cameras and lights would not be the best thing for Jim right now. He is newly-online and should be heading to a low sensory environment.”

Simon gave a smile. “Then, I guess I’ll tell the commissioner that you are not available,” Simon answered. “I’m not going to argue with a guide about a sentinel’s health.”

He glanced around, thinking of the damage and six officers Kincaid’s men killed and the many others they might have killed. There could have been a lot more deaths but for Jim and Blair’s help, and Simon gave a silent prayer that Jim had come online when he had and that Sandburg had been with him at the PD. Turning, he glanced at the young man standing beside Jim, aware Blair was focused on Jim. “You did good, Mr. Sandburg. We couldn’t have done it without your help. You saved a lot of lives today.”

“Thank you,” Blair answered, quietly. “I’m glad I could help.”

“I would consider what you did a bit more than just help,” Simon noted, looking at Jim thoughtfully. “Could you excuse us a moment? I’d like to speak with Detective Ellison.”

“Sure, I’ll be right over there,” Blair pointed near the stairway and Jim turned to Simon.

“I don’t suppose you might consider him as your guide?” Simon suggested. Jim looked at Simon in surprise and Simon shrugged before continuing. “You had problems with Mark Dean and Cassie Wells but I didn’t see any problems with Sandburg. If anything, you two were in sync, like a team that’s worked together for a long time. And we can both account for the fact that he’s smart and brave.”

“I don’t know, Sir. I mean, I don’t know anything about him; I don’t even know if he’d want to be a police guide.”

“From where I was standing, he did seem to want to be your guide, and everyone in the PD knows he had a hand in taking down Kincaid. He’d be welcomed with open arms after the role he played today.”

“I’ll think about it,” Jim said cautiously, and turned to go back up. “I better go back up before the commissioner sees me.”

“Go,” Simon answered, and watched Jim walk over to Sandburg.

“So, have you gotten an idea what my environment is like at the PD?”

“There is no way you are going to tell me this is a normal day for you, right?”

Jim smiled, not answering, and turned to the elevator that was now back in operation. “Come on up, we’ve got to take your statement and write up mine.”

“Jim you didn’t answer my question,” Blair complained, as he followed Jim into the elevator.

It was seven hours later that Jim was able to finish his day off and head home. Blair, with what Jim considered an inexcusable amount of energy, was beside him as he made his way to the elevator. A lot of people had come forward to thank Jim and Blair for their actions that day. Many of the hostages were aware that when they were told to face the window, they were going to die, and Jim and Blair had saved their lives. However, as far as Jim was concerned, if one more person asked him if Blair was his guide, he would shoot the person. He had been approached by ten people who asked about Blair.

It didn’t help that once the PD was “officially” secured, Blair began acting very guide-like, insisting that Jim go home and shower and change. Of course, the discussion had been overheard by most of Major Crimes as Blair explained to the sentinel that he had been in contact with sewer contaminants and, as a sentinel, needed to get the toxins off him now that the emergency was over.

Rafe and H, who had been out in the field when the takeover happened but had already heard about the parts Simon, Jim, and Blair played in the takedown and rescue, could tell by Jim’s face that he was getting ready to explode as Blair pushed for him to go home and change. Thinking the PD owed the kid for walking into a dangerous situation and helping save the hostages, and that Jim as a newly-online sentinel needed support, decided to defuse the situation by suggesting Jim use the PD shower.

“Jim, you’re a new sentinel, you really should listen to the guide. He’s got a lot more experience with this than you do.”

“Yeah, well, I can’t just leave,” Jim growled, annoyed that he was being harassed over this whole sentinel business. He acknowledged his skin was itchy and in a few spots he felt like he had burned it, but he had work to consider and that came over personal comfort.

"I'm sure you have a change of clothes in your locker," Rafe suggested. "We all do," he told Blair. "You could grab a quick shower down in the locker room. That could help," he offered.

"He's a guide Jim, come on, man. He knows what he is talking about," H added.

Jim realizing they were ganging up on him, snarled "Fine," none too gracefully. "I'll shower downstairs. Will that make you happy, Sandburg?" he asked, annoyed.

Blair, unfazed by the snarl, nodded, hiding a smile at the twinkle in H and Rafe's eyes, and followed Jim down to the locker rooms, where Jim grabbed a towel from his locker and began undressing. Blair watched Jim start to undress and Jim turned. "I think I can handle showering," Jim said, seeing Blair looking him over as he pulled off his shirt and dropped his pants, stepping out of them so he stood in tee shirt and briefs.

"Jim, I'm checking you for reactions to the toxins."

Jim paused and gave a sigh, reminding himself that Blair really was trying to help. "I feel okay," he answered and Blair nodded at Jim's arms.

"You've got some kind of reaction going on where you came into contact with the sewer. But I suspect the rash on your legs is due to the soap you have been using," he indicated the bar on Jim's towel. "Can you try and shower with just some water?"

Jim looked at his legs, noting the small areas of red and nodded before pulling off his tee shirt and uncovering a huge, colorful bruise. "What the hell is that?" Blair gasped.

Jim looked down. "That's where the vest got hit with a bullet."

"Wow," Blair answered, his eyes wide with shock and concern.

Jim just laughed and shook his head. "It's a lot better than what my chest would have looked like without the vest."

Blair couldn't help but agree, taking a seat on the bench, as Jim finished undressing and, leaving the soap, went into the shower.

Twenty minutes later they were back up in Major Crimes. Jim felt a lot more comfortable, though he wasn't ready to admit it, as he took Blair into an interview room and sent H in to get Blair's statement.

After getting Blair's statement, Jim suggested he head home, but Blair refused to leave, saying he would leave when Jim did. "After all," Blair said, "I'm here ostensibly to study your environment and its impact on your senses."

"Ostensibly?" Jim asked, questioning the use of the word, and Blair gave him a quick smile.

“Ostensibly,” Blair repeated. “As in apparently or purportedly,” he explained, not adding the rest of the definition, *‘but perhaps not actually.’* He gave a quick smile, looking over Jim and mentally adding, *there’s no way I’m leaving you alone. Not within a hundred miles of any other guides, bonded or not.* “I mean,” Blair clarified, realizing he had been looking at Jim and smiling, “what I was originally coming to do got sidetracked.”

Jim nodded, pretty sure Blair had a separate agenda but not ready to challenge him on it. “Well, if you're going to stay, pull up a chair.”

So, Blair pulled up a chair beside Jim’s desk and watched Jim work at typing up the statement. It was painfully obvious that Jim was not what Blair would call a competent typist. After five minutes of watching Jim type, then backspace, then type again, Blair stopped him. “Jim let me take over. At the rate you’re typing, we’ll never get out of here.”

“You think you can do a better job?” Jim challenged, sitting back and looking at Blair.

“Definitely, man. The ability to type reports is an unwritten requirement of any doctoral program at Rainer.”

“Go ahead,” Jim invited and pushed his chair to the side so Blair could sit before the computer. Though he didn’t say anything, he was admittedly impressed with the way Blair’s fingers flew across the keyboard, typing what Jim dictated, once in a while questioning Jim’s choice of words or giving a suggestion how to phrase something. Jim watching as Blair focused on the police form smiled. Maybe, he decided, the guide thing might have a few perks, especially if he had someone to do his reports.

After finishing the report, Jim, Blair and Simon were interviewed eight or nine times by the DA and Internal Affairs, each time being asked for a blow-by-blow description. Finally, they met with the commissioner, deputy commissioner and, after her visit to the hospital to check on the fallen hero Joel Taggart, the mayor.

So, it was close on nine at night when Jim and Blair left the PD. Someone had handed them sandwiches around two but it was nine and way past dinnertime. Jim’s truck was still where he left it, but a fellow officer whose daughter had been among the hostages had called in a repair service to replace the glass and had made sure the broken glass was swept up, so Jim was able to climb in the truck and head out.

“Hungry, Chief?” he asked, as he pulled into traffic and Blair hid a smile at the term of friendship, deciding their connection was progressing nicely. “I’ll treat you to dinner.”

“That would be great. As a student, I’m always on a budget and never decline a free meal. Hey, I know this vegetarian...” Blair paused at Jim’s glare and started over. “That would be great, what would you recommend?”

“I don’t suppose you like Wonderburger?”

“Wonderburger!” Blair’s voice went up in shock. “Do you know how bad that food is? It is full of fat and salt and-”

“Alright, Thai,” Jim cut him off, too tired to argue. “We can order in and eat it at my place.”

“Sounds good, Jim. I love Thai.”

The ride home was mercifully quick and Jim pulled into a spot before his home and then headed upstairs, Blair in tow. Opening the door, Jim gave a sigh of relief as he entered and glanced around. The Sweepers had done their job before Jim left for the PD and the loft was clean with a very faint but pleasant smell of verbena.

Hanging his coat by the door and turning on some lights, he walked into the kitchen and pulled take-out menus from a drawer, handing one to Blair and indicating the phone. “I’ll have Shrimp Pad Thai, you order whatever you want.” Blair nodded and placed the order as Jim opened the fridge and pulled out two beers, offering Blair one, before taking a seat on the sofa and turning on the television.

Blair placed the order and then came over and joined Jim, sitting as close as he could without appearing like he was trying to sit *with* Jim. The news was on; a special report about the capture of Garrett Kincaid, recapping the events and the interview with the mayor. Jim gave a disgusted snort when the reporter stated, “The mayor and commissioner of police have reported that the public was kept safe by the fast responses of the Major Crimes unit and their sentinel/guide team.”

“You hear that, Sandburg? You’re part of a sentinel/guide team working for Major Crimes,” he said, shaking his head. “Where the hell do they get their ideas?”

“Ah, Jim, technically I am a guide working with a sentinel who is a member of the Major Crimes unit.”

“Yeah, but they’re making us sound like we’re a bonded pair assigned to Major Crimes.”

Blair glanced over at Jim, watching as he said softly, “We could be. I’m an unbonded guide,” he offered.

Jim considered what Blair was saying with a frown. “Are you offering your services?”

“Yes, I am,” Blair smiled, nervously. “I’m a guide and you’re a sentinel and we are definitely compatible. It’s just that easy.”

“Nothing’s ever that easy,” Jim answered. “And I don’t know that I want to bond.”

“Jim,” Blair sighed. “You’re a sentinel, get used to it, man. You are going to need a bond. Yeah,” Blair continued, turning to face Jim directly, “there are different levels of bonding. If you want to live alone and have a guide only at work, you can have a surface bond. But understand,

you'll be giving up more freedoms than you would with a guide. You'll have to be very careful about what and where you eat because there will be no guide there to support you if you spike. As long as you live alone, you'll need to do check-ins with the Institute every night so they know you're not zoned and if you miss a check in, the Institute will have the right to come into your home and run a complete check on you and your environment."

Jim was about to ask how that was different from having a guide monitoring him constantly, when there was a knock at the door and Jim pulled out his wallet as he opened the door. Blair, watching Jim get up to answer the door, silently cursed. He thought he might have been making some headway with Jim. It was not a good time to be interrupted.

Putting the food on the table, Jim went to get plates and cutlery and snagged another beer for each of them before taking a seat. Dishing some of the food onto his plate, Jim glanced at Blair. "I have to think about this guide thing for a while, Chief," he admitted, and Blair nodded his understanding. He was aware that Jim valued his independence, not a good thing for a newly-online sentinel. Jim would need to depend on a guide until he learned some measure of control over his senses.

"I do understand that this whole sentinel thing must be unsettling. Most sentinels come online over the course of several months when they are very young. You're speeding into this world at top speed with no time to adapt. It can't be easy or pleasant. But the sooner you accept that you are a sentinel and bond with a guide the better you'll deal with what's happening and get control.

Jim considered Blair's argument as he ate. "There's a lot of downsides to being a sentinel," he observed. "Until today I've had a headache."

"You didn't have one today?"

Jim shook his head. "Maybe because I was more focused on what was going on."

"Maybe because you were working with a guide," Blair challenged with a knowing smile.

Jim picked up his beer, taking a drink as he considered Blair's claim and then shrugged, not liking his options. "Like I said, I've got to think about this."

Blair nodded his understanding. Bonding was a big step and shouldn't be taken lightly. Still, Blair knew a great deal about the process. He had been searching for his sentinel for two years, and the fact that Jim responded to him so strongly spoke of a good bonding match. Giving in, he nodded. "You're right. It's not something to jump into without thought."

They ate for a while in silence and then Jim looked over at the guide. "Have you been a guide all your life?"

Blair smiled, glad Jim was showing an interest. "It's a genetic thing, so, yes, I've always been a guide just as you've always been a sentinel. But I actually came online two years ago. I was on an expedition in the jungle, at the Temple of the Sentinels, when, boom! I came online." He

paused, his mind thinking back to that time and the vision of the soldier; the soldier who looked suspiciously like Jim.

“But you’re able to function,” Jim interrupted Blair’s thoughts.

“Guides can most of the time,” Blair agreed. “We’re not being bombarded by stimuli the way sentinels are. Our problem is when we get near an unbonded sentinel, our psyches go nuts if the sentinel is compatible. Right now, all I want to do is grab you and bond. All guides have a need to bond and to protect sentinels, but it’s like a continuously bad itch you can’t reach.”

“But Welles and Dean didn’t go nuts.”

“They probably weren’t totally compatible,” Blair answered. “The more compatible, the harder it is to ignore the connection.”

“So, you’ve had problems because you want to connect to me?”

“I’m dealing,” Blair answered.

“But I haven’t responded to you.”

Blair gave a little laugh and shook his head, his curls falling about his face. “You’ve been responding to me since we met.”

“When?” Jim challenged.

“Do you remember when we shook hands, how you got dizzy and zoned?” Blair continued without waiting. “That was you acknowledging me. That didn’t happen with the other guides, did it?” Blair didn’t wait for answer. “More importantly, you tuning into my heartbeat is a big sign of compatibility.”

“So we’re compatible,” Jim mused, considering Blair charging into Major Crimes; in his mind seeing Blair dive into a terrorist who had a gun pointed at Jim. “And you’d be willing to work with the PD.”

“I’d be willing to work wherever you work, Jim,” Blair said, the smile disappearing. “I’m your guide. I could work with the PD while getting my doctorate.”

“You would give up being a Sweeper?”

“As a guide, I’d want to work with you and, as a bonded guide, you would not want me working with unbonded sentinels. When Sweepers find their sentinels, they invariably give up sweeping.” Blair pushed his plate aside and hesitantly reached out, placing a hand on Jim’s arm. When Jim didn’t pull his arm away, Blair continued, “I said earlier, ‘the sentinel protects the tribe, the guide protects the sentinel’ but the guide does that to protect the tribe. The guide and

sentinel have always been tribal protectors, it's just the guide recognizes the strengths in the sentinel's ability."

Jim looked at the hand resting on his arm and realized, not only didn't he mind it, but he found it comforting. He could feel Blair's pulse and it relaxed him. "Maybe we should get to know each other better," he suggested.

"Okay," Blair agreed, his face lighting up as he realized Jim was at least thinking about bonding. "I was a teaching assistant and an anthropology student at Rainer working on my doctorate when I came online. I'm still working on my doctorate and I sometimes fill in as a teaching assistant, but after I came online I took the necessary guide training and then got work part time as a Sweeper. I figured it was the best way to find my sentinel."

"In two years you never met a compatible sentinel?" Jim sounded surprised.

"If you haven't noticed, there are not a lot of sentinels or guides to go around. Less than one-twentieth of one percent of the population are sentinels or guides."

"I didn't realize it was such a small number."

"Most sentinels are predisposed to go into some form of emergency services. There is a higher chance of meeting sentinels and guides if you go into those fields, so it sort of skews your perception of how many are around. However, most of the general population, even in Cascade, has never spoken with a sentinel or guide. And with Rainier's Sentinel and Guide Institutes right here, Cascade often has more sentinels and guides around than other cities."

Jim considered the implications for a few moments and then sighed. "What happens when I bond?"

Blair paused, thinking carefully how to answer that question. "It depends on the type of bond. If it's just a surface bond, which sometimes happens when the sentinel has a spouse or significant other," he didn't say a jealous partner but he was thinking it, "then usually the sentinel and guide choose to live near each other so the guide can help if something comes up and the guide teaches the sentinel's partner how to deal with sentinel-type issues. If the bond is deeper, then the sentinel and guide live together, the guide taking care of the sentinel, the pair sharing space; kind of like roommates. And if the bond has a sexual component, invariably the pair become life partners."

Jim nodded, considering his options. "So the sentinel would have to move."

"Or the guide," Blair pointed out, helpfully. "It would depend on several factors, who rented versus owned, who had bigger or better space, how much the pair could afford to pay."

"Where do you live, Chief?"

"No place nice like this. I'm a student, I rent warehouse space that's drafty and...um...has rats."

“Rats!” Jim’s eyes widened in surprise, “than I guess, you wouldn’t mind moving somewhere to be with a sentinel?”

“I’d be amenable to moving,” Blair offered, hoping Jim would ask him to move in.

“How long does it take until a guide and sentinel should consider some kind of bond?”

Blair considered saying “*We should right now,*” but knew Jim still needed a little coaching so, instead, shrugged. “You do what feels right. There is no special time period. Some guides and sentinels bond the day they meet, others take a bit longer. If you feel better with a guide around and get along well that would answer your question.”

“Maybe, if you wouldn’t mind, we could try sharing my loft for a week,” Jim began hesitantly. “I have the spare room under the stairs you could use.” Blair’s smile at Jim’s suggestion was so bright, Jim thought it could light the room. “It’s not much of a room,” Jim warned seeing the reaction.

“It sounds good to me,” Blair answered, thinking of the big bed upstairs. “*One step at a time,*” he silently told himself. Thinking over the idea of moving in, Blair realized he was filthy from the day and it wouldn’t be a good start to have the sentinel’s nose assaulted by smells. “I can pack for a week and be here tomorrow morning in time for you to go into work. I was planning on going to work with you anyway. I still haven’t really seen your work environment,” he added quickly.

Jim nodded his agreement, thinking having the guide with him wasn’t so bad. Sandburg was good company and a fast typist. “I’ll just rearrange a few things in the room so it’s ready for use.”

“Great,” Blair stated enthusiastically and picked up his plate.

“Where’s your car?” Jim asked, closing the containers.

“I came with Susie, my car’s on the fritz. I’ll call a cab.”

“Let’s do the dishes and I’ll give you a lift home.”

“You sure, man? You must be tired.”

“You’ve got to be just as tired. Let’s clean up and go.”

Blair nodded and the two made fast work of putting away the food and dishes before they got in Jim’s truck and Blair guided them to his warehouse home. Pulling in front, Jim looked around and Blair could tell he disapproved of the building and the area.

“You live here?” Jim questioned, disbelief and disapproval evident in his voice.

“Well, yeah. I get ten thousand square feet for 850 a month.”

“And I bet you weren’t kidding when you said it has rats,” Jim mumbled, getting out of the car, his hand going to the gun in the holster at his back as he looked around. “You’d be safer in Starkville Prison than this neighborhood, Sandburg.” Deciding he didn’t like the idea of the guide living in this derelict and abandoned part of Cascade, he moved towards the door. “Get whatever you need for a week and you’ll stay at my place tonight.”

“Jim, I’ve been living here for a while. Nothing’s happened so far,” Blair pointed out, shaking his head as he led the way into the building.

“You must be real lucky,” Jim noted as he followed Blair into the building.

Blair had described the warehouse as drafty and Jim, looking around at the high ceilings, stacked wooden pallets, and brick walls, mentally added dark and dank to the description “drafty.” Blair had tried to fix the place up; there were tapestries in the area he had squared off to be his living room/kitchen and a couple of nice standing lamps that coordinated with his red sofa and chair, but the place was too big and too industrial to really look like an apartment.

“Chief, I wouldn’t leave anything of value here,” Jim suggested.

“That’s not a problem, I don’t have much of value,” Blair answered with a laugh as he grabbed a few books and stuffed them into his bag before walking over.

Automatically, Jim took one of the suitcases. “Got everything you need for a week?”

“Definitely, and I could always come back later in the week if I needed to.”

Jim agreed and they left, Blair locking up.

They drove back to the loft and carried Blair’s stuff upstairs, Blair and Jim quickly rearranging the room and stacking Blair’s belongs in a corner before Jim handed over some towels, sheets, pillowcases and blankets, and wished Blair good night.

Alone Blair looked at the room. It was small but a lot nicer than the warehouse. It would make a good office - once they were bonded - but he had to go one step at a time and, deciding his future looked bright, grabbed a shower and settled down to sleep.

The next morning, Blair was up and making breakfast when Jim came downstairs. “Good morning,” Blair smiled. “I’ve made coffee.”

Jim tentatively took a sip and then smiled. “This is good, it doesn’t taste like chemicals.”

“It’s made with sentinel-safe ingredients, though if you didn’t have sentinel-safe ingredients I could help you dial down your taste buds.”

“Dial down?”

Blair nodded. “Bring your senses down to normal so you can function.”

“Why can’t we do that with everything? Then I wouldn’t need a guide.”

Blair shook his head, an exasperated smile playing across his face as he considered how Jim was looking for any way to get rid of his sentinel abilities. “It doesn’t work that way. To use the dials effectively, you need a guide. It’s my...the guide’s heartbeat that helps the sentinel dial up and down and a sentinel cannot sustain a dial-down forever.”

Jim gave a disapproving grunt as Blair came over and placed some eggs and toast in front of him. “You know, most sentinels are thrilled that they are sentinels. They’re in demand with emergency services, they’re respected, they’re-”

“Unable to function without help,” Jim cut in with a growl. “Don’t tell me how great it is to be a sentinel; it’s a pain in the ass.”

Blair took a seat and looked across at the man. “Is it so bad to have to have a partner?”

“I’ve been on my own since I was 18 and all of a sudden I need someone to watch over me,” Jim said, disgust in his voice.

Blair looked across at Jim. “Not to watch over you; to support you and make you even better.” Jim didn’t answer and Blair shook his head. “As a cop, you will be amazing; a walking crime lab.”

“I’d rather be what I was, a good cop.”

“Give it and me a chance. Once you get control you’ll like having enhanced senses.” Blair paused, a wicked smile playing across his face. “Just think about enhanced senses when having sex.”

“I’ve tried,” Jim answered. “My...the lady was more than satisfied but truthfully, it was a bit much for me. I ended up with a migraine.”

“Again it’s a matter of controlling your senses but,” Blair continued, his eyes on his food, “if you had sex with your bonded guide, it would be amazing. You could dial up and experience sex on a grand scale.”

“What does the guide get out of that?”

Blair chuckled. “Because of the empathy and the connection, the guide experiences the same high. The relationship between sentinel and guide is profound and synergetic.”

“That means if we,” Jim waved his fork back and forth, and Blair nodded. Jim exhaled a breath, slowly, “I still need to give the bonding thing some thought.”

“Understandable,” Blair agreed, knowing they had just taken a big step forward.

Meetings

An hour later, Jim pulled into the PD parking lot and he and Blair got out of his truck. Glancing around and noting Cassie standing beside the Homicide detective, Anthony Glover, Jim walked over and offered Detective Glover a hand. “Congratulations on bonding,” he said to both Cassie and Glover as Blair came to stand beside Jim, a proprietary hand landing on Jim’s arm, Blair unconsciously invading Jim’s space as he glanced at the other guide. Blair knew until such time as they actually bonded, he’d be jealous and worried about any other guide that Jim was near, even a bonded one.

Cassie gave a forced smile, wincing as she remembered her last conversation with Jim Ellison, as Detective Glover smiled while shaking Jim’s hand. “Thanks. Cassie is a great help as a guide. She is a zillion times more helpful than Dean ever was.”

Jim nodded, relieved that the two had hit it off. He didn’t want Cassie circling anywhere near him. “I’m glad to hear it. I’m sure you two will make a great team.” Jim started to turn away, but Cassie called him back.

“Detective,” she said, uncomfortably. “I just wanted to say I’m sorry. I was a bit aggressive when we first met. It was a guide thing. I’d been looking for a sentinel for so long.”

Jim waved it off. “We all have bad days,” he said answered, reasonably. “I wish you both good luck.”

Cassie watched him turn away again and gave a sigh. Anthony Glover would be a good detective and they would work well together, but the homicide detective didn’t have the same tenacious drive as Ellison. She couldn’t help but wonder how far he and his cute little guide standing at his side would go.

No one else was on the elevator when they entered and Blair turned to Jim. “That guide was one of the ones you talked about?” It was a question but was offered more as a demand than a question and Blair told himself to calm down. The guide had bonded; she wasn’t after Jim.

Jim nodded. “She talked to me like I was a three-year-old and was petting me like some kind of favored dog.”

“A bit too overbearing,” Blair nodded.

“Yeah,” Jim sighed, as the elevator stopped on the second floor and two officers got on.

“Ellison,” one of the officers nodded his greeting while the other turned and watched the door, his body tense.

“Sanders,” Jim nodded back. “How are things doing?”

“I’m retiring in three months,” the officer answered. “I guess I’ve finally had enough.”

“I can imagine. It will be good to be off the streets,” Jim answered. Sanders, a long-time officer with more than enough time to retire already but wanting to get in 30 years, had transferred out of Patrol after a car accident had left him with a weakened knee. Wanting to walk to keep his legs working and wanting a less stressful position, he decided to finish his last nine months in Traffic Foot Patrol.

“You’re not kidding. Congratulations on catching Kincaid.”

“Thanks,” Jim answered and then glanced at the second officer who was staring at the passing floor numbers, pretending not to hear the conversation. The officer, wearing Traffic Foot Patrol insignia was Mark Dean.

Jim knew the man had gotten in trouble for interfering with the arrest of Martin Weiss and that his guide status had been revoked. Jim guessed Simon had a hand in his current placement.

At the fourth floor the two men got off and, as the elevator rose, Jim could hear Mark Dean say to Sanders, “Who was the hippie with Ellison.”

“I hear that’s his guide,” Sanders answered.

“What, he chose that hippie?” Dean sounded shocked. Jim didn’t listen anymore to the conversation, but a smirk crossed his features as the elevator moved on up to Major Crimes.

Up in Major Crimes, Jim and Blair entered the bullpen and looked around. Things had been put back to normal and Jim moved to his desk, grabbing a chair and pulling it over for Blair as several detectives greeted them. Logging into his computer, Jim checked to see if there was any change in Kincaid’s status before Simon opened his door and called, “Jim, Sandburg, my office.”

Blair looked over at Jim in surprise, but the sentinel merely shrugged and rose, leading the way into Simon’s office, where Simon moved to his conference table and indicated the two men should sit down. “Good morning,” he nodded to both. “I’ve been on the phone with the commissioner and you’re both getting commendations from the mayor.”

“Cool,” Blair smiled and Simon’s lips twitched in amusement.

“Anyway,” Simon continued, “have you two,” he waved his hands, “decided on anything?”

“Have we bonded, no, are we thinking about it, yes,” Jim admitted. “Sandburg is staying with me for a week and we’ll see if we’re compatible.”

“That sounds reasonable,” Simon agreed, glancing at Blair. Somehow, Simon got the feeling that Blair already felt bonding was a fait accompli and Simon realized he pretty much agreed with Sandburg’s assessment. “In that case take him down to Personnel and have him fill out the paperwork so he can go in the field with you.”

“Yes, Sir,” Jim answered, standing. “I’ll drop him off with Vera and then get to work.”

“Jim, you can’t go in the field without a guide,” Simon warned as Jim headed to the door.

“Yes, Sir,” Jim sighed. “Come on Sandburg. The sooner you get the paperwork done, the sooner I can get off desk duty,” Jim added, a hand landing on Blair’s back as he pushed the guide in front of him.

Simon, watching them, smiled. If he were to create a pool, it would be which day this week Jim would bond. Sandburg was definitely his guide.

Taking the elevator down to the fourth floor, Jim led Blair to Personnel. Vera was there at the front desk and she smiled as the two men entered. She, like the others in her office, had been up in Major Crimes when Jim and Blair crashed in. She had no doubt the pair had saved all their lives.

“Detective,” she nodded, offering Jim a smile. “Mr. Sandburg.”

“Hello Vera. Blair Sandburg will be riding with me for a week, as my guide, and has to fill out paperwork.”

“Of course,” she nodded approvingly. “I’ll get him started.”

“Thanks, Vera.” Jim turned back to Blair. “I’ll leave you in Vera’s capable hands. Come back up to Major Crimes when you’re done.”

“Right,” Blair watched Jim go and then turned back to Vera as she began to pull out lots of pages. Blair waited until he was sure Jim was gone and then whispered, “You’d better give me paperwork for a permanent guide. We will be bonding and I don’t want to make you file the paperwork twice.”

“Congratulations,” Vera answered, putting back a couple of pages and handing him others.

“Just don’t say anything until Jim knows,” Blair answered with a wink and Vera nodded with a smile of her own.

Handing him what looked like a forty-page document, Vera indicated a table in the corner. “You can fill out the paperwork there.”

“Thanks,” Blair took a seat and began to work through the pages. He was on page 21 of 47 when a shadow crossed in front of him and he looked up.

“So, you’re going to be Ellison’s guide,” the person said with a sneer and Blair frowned at the man standing over him.

“I know you,” Blair answered thoughtfully, thinking back. “Yes, Mark Dean, we shared a class at the Guide Institute. I think the class was Sentinel Response and Support,” Blair added, remembering how Dean hadn’t seemed to care one bit about a sentinel’s emotional state. Dean had given every impression of wanting to bully sentinels.

“That’s right,” Dean agreed. “Want to explain to me why Ellison would pick you for a guide, a hippy wannabe, instead of a fellow officer?”

Blair considered Dean, remembering Jim’s words about the first guide he had met at the PD wanting to be his boss. It must have been Dean. “We clicked,” he shrugged. “Sometimes it happens that way.”

“Ellison didn’t like the way I treated him when I was getting him out of an environmental hazard and so, because Ellison is their hot-shot detective, they demoted me to foot patrol and revoked my guide certification.”

Having heard Dean at the Guide Institute, Blair was sure there was more to the story but he raised his hands, trying to calm the man.

“Ellison must have realized that if we ever had a full bond, he’d be the bottom,” Dean snarled. “I guess that’s not the case with you. He must want a boy toy,” he added with a leer.

“Not all bonds are sexual, and what goes on between a sentinel and guide is private,” Blair answered, trying to rein in the situation. He could feel the anger coming in waves off of Dean.

“If you weren’t here, Ellison would need me as a guide and I’d be up in Major Crimes with the elite detectives,” Dean growled. “You got in the way of that.”

Blair considered the man. Jim hadn’t wanted him before, so why Dean would think he’d choose him now, Blair couldn’t guess. And, truth be told, based on what Blair knew of Jim, Dean would never become his bonded guide. Blair seriously doubted he could ever become anyone’s bonded guide. Blair could tell his empathy was low. “Look, I’m sorry your plans didn’t work out the way you wanted but-”

Before Blair could finish, Dean grabbed him by his shirt, pulling him up, the papers on the small table before him falling. “Maybe you should just leave and not come back.”

Looking into Dean’s eyes, Blair grabbed his wrists. “Being a guide doesn’t work the way you think it does,” he whispered. “Sentinels and guides connect and you didn’t. Give it up, man.” Blair pushed the man, his grip on Blair loosening.

“And maybe you should let go of my guide before I break both of your arms,” a voice threatened from behind Dean. Dean let go of Blair’s shirt and turned. Jim stood in the doorway, glaring, Vera beside him with a nasty scowl on her face.

“Ellison, I...” Dean faltered. “Look you’d be better off with a cop as a guide,” he offered by way of explanation.

“That’s for me to decide,” Jim answered in a soft voice and Dean shuddered at the sound. “And Sandburg’s got the instincts of a cop. He stayed beside me and grounded me going against Kincaid. Now, get out of here and don’t make the mistake of threatening my guide again. Sentinels don’t like people who threaten their guides.”

Vera, Jim and Blair watched Dean turn and stride out of the room, his face red. Turning back to Blair, Jim walked over and reached down running his hand over Blair’s arms. “Are you okay?” he asked, and Blair was sure Jim was scanning him.

“Yeah, that guy was an ass at the Guide Institute and I can see he hasn’t changed.”

Jim nodded his agreement and turned to Vera. “Thanks for calling me.” He leaned down to give her a kiss on the cheek as Blair scooped up the fallen pages.

“No problem, Detective,” Vera smiled and turned to Blair. “Don’t worry about Mark Dean. I think he’s going to be transferred out of Central and the paperwork for that transfer,” she smiled, “will appear in record time.”

She turned and headed back to her desk as Jim looked over at Blair. “Never piss off the HR people,” Blair whispered sentinel-soft and Jim nodded.

“Why don’t you come on up and fill out the paperwork at my desk,” Jim suggested. “That’s okay, isn’t it, Vera?”

“Yes,” she answered, and watched the pair leave before picking up the phone. Jim, heading down the hall, could hear her. “Hi Danielle,” she said into the phone. “Can you talk to the head of Traffic? Traffic Foot Patrol officers are not supposed to work out of Central and though I wouldn’t transfer Sanders, he’s about to retire, I think Mark Dean’s records should be transferred out today?”

Chuckling, he turned to Blair. “Vera’s already working on getting him transferred out of Central.”

“Doesn’t that have to go through some office?”

“Yeah, but he was due for a transfer. Traffic works out of precincts, not Central.”

Blair nodded his understanding and then smiled. “Thanks for intervening with Dean. And thanks for telling him, I’m your guide.”

“You are,” Jim agreed and then, realizing what he was saying, hurried to add, “at least for the next week.”

Blair hid a smile, saying nothing as they went up to Major Crimes where Jim spent the day showing Blair his files and discussing the cases he was working on.

By the time Jim and Blair were preparing to leave for the evening, Blair had a fairly good idea what Jim’s caseload was like and what the coming days’ investigations would look like. He would be out in the field with Jim, having received an expedited badge (an almost unheard of accomplishment) that identified him as a PD field guide. He’d even started receiving greetings from some of the cops. Everyone in the building had heard about and was discussing Dean’s run-in with Sandburg and his subsequent transfer. Officer Sanders, Dean’s temporary partner in Traffic, had even come up to Major Crimes to thank Blair for getting rid of “the asshole.” Sanders went on to tell Blair that Dean harassed the street vendors in downtown Cascade if they didn’t give him free stuff.

“Will it be a problem for you, not having a partner?” Blair asked and Sanders shook his head.

“No, I’ve been a cop a long time. I know how to handle situations. But thanks, I’m glad to be rid of him.” He turned to Jim. “Congratulations on finding your guide, Ellison.”

“Thanks,” Jim answered handing Blair his jacket. “Come on, I think we need to stop at a supermarket and get some food on the way home.”

“Organic food,” Blair warned, as they headed out.

To Bond or Not to Bond, That is the Question

After a trip to the supermarket, Jim started his “special spaghetti sauce” while Blair cut up vegetables for a salad and prepped garlic bread. Though the loft kitchen was small, the pair

worked as if they had been sharing space forever. They were in perfect sync, neither getting in the other's way as they moved about making preparations.

Once the food was ready, the pair sat down and discussed Major Crimes and Jim's cases as they ate. After finishing, they cleaned up, caught the last half of a baseball game (not the Jags), and then Jim wished Blair goodnight and went up to bed.

As he lay in bed, Jim listened to the sounds of the loft. He could hear Blair in the small room downstairs, the sounds of rustling fabric and the turning of pages telling Jim that Blair was reading in bed. In the background, he could hear Blair's heartbeat, finding it soothing.

Turning over and punching his pillow to fluff it, Jim considered his houseguest/temporary guide. Blair Sandburg, with his large dark blue eyes, lush mouth and silken curls was gorgeous. He was smart, too, and certainly no coward. He was bright, he was funny, and he didn't treat Jim like a pet or a minion. And Jim knew he was responding to Blair in a way he had never responded to anyone else. But Jim wasn't sure he wanted a guide. Having a guide meant admitting he couldn't handle his own body.

Turning again so he stared up at the loft's skylight, Jim gave a sigh. Truthfully, yesterday and today had been good days; nothing had bothered his senses. But the days before he had been plagued by headaches and spikes; even his food had been unappetizing until Blair arrived. So, whether he liked it or not, Jim had to admit he couldn't handle his body alone. But did that mean he wanted Blair as a life partner? Or that Blair should be saddled with him for life?

When he had considered asking Carolyn to be his guide, he hadn't realized how immersed the guide got in the sentinel's life. In a way, he was glad Carolyn told him she was leaving before he could ask her about becoming a guide. He liked Carolyn; she was funny and soft and beautiful, but she was more a convenience than anything else. Someone to share some fun with but he didn't think they would work as a permanent pair.

But would Blair?

He did feel far more comfortable with Blair than he normally would with someone who was, for all intents, a stranger. Hell, he had invited the guide to come and stay with him. No one had ever been invited to stay more than one night. Okay, so he was responding to Blair as a sentinel and he was comfortable with Blair, but was that enough?

"Damn," he muttered softly, sitting up and rubbing his forehead. This was too big a decision to make based on some physical need.

"Jim?" a soft voice broke in on his reverie as the object of his questioning came to the loft stairs and then, hesitantly, started up. "You okay? I'm getting some funny vibes from you, like you're upset about something."

“You can feel what I feel?” Jim wasn’t sure he liked the sound of that.

“Sure, as your guide, I’m fine-tuned to your needs.”

With a sigh, Jim reached for the light beside the bed and turned it on. “I’m thinking over this whole guide sentinel thing,” he admitted and Blair, taking that as an invitation, finished coming up the stairs and sat on the edge of Jim’s bed.

“What are you worried about?”

“This whole bonding thing. What if we bond and then find out we shouldn’t have?”

Blair smiled and shook his head. “It doesn’t work that way. If you are responding to me as a sentinel and I am responding to you as a guide, then we are meant to be together,” Blair answered, inching closer to Jim. “We met two days ago. Does it feel that way to you or does it feel like we’ve known each other forever?”

“It does feel like I’ve known you a lot longer,” Jim admitted.

“I’ve been looking for you for two years Jim. Ever since I came online at that temple. I had...” he paused remembering the vision of a soldier. “I had a vision of you when I came online.”

“But what-” Jim began, but Blair stopped him by putting a finger on his lips.

“Jim, kiss me.”

“What?”

“Kiss me,” Blair said, again. “If we are meant to be, you’ll know it if you initiate bonding. And if it’s meant to be a physical as well as emotional bond, you will be able to tell immediately.”

Jim considered Blair’s words and then leaned over, his lips lightly running over Blair’s. But Blair meant a real kiss and he reached out, pulling Jim close and deepening the kiss, his tongue moving over Jim’s lips, pushing for entry into Jim’s mouth.

Obligingly opening his mouth, his tongue dueling with Blair’s, Jim gave a moan as he suddenly felt dizzy, his body hot, cold, tingly and hard. Breaking the kiss and pulling back, Jim gave a gasp as his senses seemed to bloom, focusing completely on Blair. “You feel it,” Blair said softly, a hand reaching out to take Jim’s hand as Jim nodded.

Everything was suddenly so intense. Blair filled all his senses, his scent and taste intoxicating.

Blair gave him a minute to come down from the flush of his senses soaring and then whispered, “You are my sentinel, Jim. Bond with me?”

“Is it as intense for you?” Jim asked, his voice hoarse with need though he could already see that Blair was equally hard.

“It’s not as intense, yet. I feel your emotions but I’m not a sentinel. I won’t feel your senses until we complete the bond. Then it will be just as intense.”

Nodding, somehow knowing this was right, Jim reached out to pull Blair on top of him as he fell back onto the pillows, his hands moving over Blair’s body as he stripped off Blair’s boxers to touch the hard flesh pushing against him. Rolling again, so he was on top, Jim ground out, “I need...need to taste you.”

Blair nodded, his fingers running over Jim’s chest, tweaking at his nipples. “Take what you need,” he answered, and Jim ran his tongue down Blair’s body, enjoying the fluttering and gasping his actions caused until he reached Blair’s cock. He slid his tongue up the hard length and over the slit, moaning as the intense flavor burst over his senses as Blair cried out before reaching for Jim, and pulling him back, not wanting Jim to zone.

It was time to link, to finish the bond. He pulled Jim on top of him and then began to rub their cocks together, their breathing and heartbeats completely in sync as they moved faster, the sensations building. And then they were coming, together, both crying out and shaking with the intensity, their semen mingling. Reaching out, Blair blindly pulled Jim down for a kiss as Jim’s emotions filled his mind. He could feel Jim’s orgasm, feel his joy and felt the bond lock in, knowing Jim was feeling the same thing and welcoming it. “My sentinel,” he whispered. “I will protect you and will be with you always; we are one.”

“My guide,” Jim answered. “I will protect you and will be with you always; we are one.”

Blair smiled, hearing the age-old ritual complete, and closed his eyes. When he opened them, he was in a blue jungle, running on four legs. He realized he was a wolf and that he wasn’t just running around, he was heading for something; a place and goal in mind. In the distance, he could see the temple he had visited as a human two years before and that he was running for it. As he reached the steps of the temple, still at breakneck speed, a sleek, black jaguar raced up and the two jumped at each other, into each other, a blinding light flowing over them.

A moment later, both Jim and Blair gasped, their eyes opening. They were back in the bed, their legs tangled together, their hands joined, their foreheads touching. “What was that?” Jim asked, panting from the exertion. He felt as if he had just run a marathon. In his mind he knew he hadn’t been running, but for some reason his body didn’t seem to agree.

“Our spirits bonding,” Blair answered, with deep breaths to ease down after his own run. Slowly, reluctantly, Blair extricated himself and rolled over so he was next to Jim, leaning against him.

“Now what happens?” Jim asked.

“I take the courses for guides working with the PD, we work out a schedule so I can work with you and work with Rainier to finish my doctorate and...” he paused and smiled. “We have a party to celebrate our bond.”

“A party?”

Blair nodded. “A big party. Think of it as a wedding, just without the religious part. We just did that part.”

“And you want a big party?”

“To show off my sentinel, I do.”

“I guess to show off my guide, I do, too.”