Bought

by Joan963z, neichan

Summary

Guides are not free, but they can be bought any day.

Notes

I don't use a lot of tags. Suffice to say I just write about things that upset me, and others. I always warn sensitive persons not to read my works.

This is an older work, started in around 2006 and finished a few years later. Joan Z is working on an epilogue, as it is very difficult for me to read much now, and even more difficult to write.

This is not well beta'd. Please be kind.
"That one?" Rafe asked pointing to a lightly draped figure on a nearby platform. Next to him Jim Ellison turned, looked for less than thirty seconds and sniffed dismissively, his pale blue eyes disinterested. For the two hundredth time that day, if Rafe was any judge. The sniff barely audible, Jim's opinion of the effort the particular item deserved.

Brian Rafe gritted his teeth, doing his best to keep the activity as quiet as possible. His face showed none of his frustration. It remained handsome and placid. No need to irritate his dominant partner. That would only mean there would be two irritated Sentinels on the hunt rather than one. And as much as he hated to be annoyed alone...it was far, far better than Ellison being moody, with or without him.

Rafe shuddered just thinking about that. He had to get a grip on himself, now. Or he'd be out here tomorrow, in the sun and the humidity, hunting for Guides again. And the next day...and the next...

"No, huh?" Rafe sighed when he managed to relax his jaw, make his tone neutral enough to pass by Jim's radar-like senses. The big man was damnably easy to offend. And once offended hard to appease. Ellison was, Rafe admitted, both the best thing and the worst thing that had ever happened to him.

Being selected, out of the blue, as the big man's Companion from the ranks of the police recruits was a huge shock. Sure those kinds of things happened from time to time but not so often it didn't have a fairytale quality to it when it did. And it never happened to poor men from poor families like Brian Rafe. Usually pairings between Sentinels were arranged by their families. Especially so if the families were wealthy. Impoverished Sentinels never had the time or money to worry about such arrangements. They went where beckoned.

Rafe had not even been aware of the Senior Sentinels touring the floor while the recruits trained. He been half zoned on his hand to hand combat drill, determined to knock his much larger opponent to the ground this time...instead of being picked up and slammed to the mat again, like the last half dozen bouts.

Dimly he became aware of the silence dropping like a curtain all around them as they circled each other. But he was looking for his opening. Looking....looking....and suddenly his opponent Brown stood upright, then dropped like a stone. Brian almost leapt at him, before some sixth sense told him all was not as it should be. He blinked out of his near zone. To find a tall, hard jawed man standing in front of him.

Jim Ellison. He'd almost fainted when he realized who it was, the familiar handsome face from news casts and newsprint. Then he dropped to his knees and pushed his face into the floor, like literally everyone around him had already done. He was the last to kneel. Oh, shit.

Brian Rafe had been petrified. He'd been standing in the Sentinel's way, the only recruit standing. He shivered. He would be thrown out of the academy. Ostracized. Fined. He could be flogged if the Senior Sentinel wanted to demand it. Wanted to be a hard case. And he was, Rafe had heard the stories....

Rafe's family had very little to go around. They had saved for years to buy him a spot in the academy class. Now through his own inattention he might have lost his chance to rise up out of the ghettos.
He shuddered. Oh, gods. Please...

The unique sound of muscles flexing hit his awareness. Then the feel of fingers brushing over his hair. Exploring his hair, his face, his ears. The touch ~seeing~ as much as the sharpest gaze. He heard a sniff. Another. Felt the breath feather across his neck as the larger man bent over him. Licked the back of his neck, tasted him, his sweat. A growl as the taster rolled the flavor around in his mouth, considering. A big hand fitted itself around his skull, pushing, turning him, spinning him like a top, so that Ellison was behind him. Rafe still hunched as low as he could go over the matting. Panting with fear.

He felt it happen, not understanding at first. Felt the hard body, the honed muscles move close, closer, closer, until Ellison was plastered across his back. Brian whimpered, barely a sound. He felt his sweat tugged down, his ass exposed, his genitals freed, touched, rolled by an assessing hand, tugged, and yet he didn't dare move. He froze, absolutely rigid as the man behind him mounted him.

He felt the harsh rub of cloth against his bare buttocks. The distinct ridge of a hard column pressed to the crevice between his buttocks. Not fucking, mounting. His relief was huge. Then his mind rebelled. Mounted? But that would mean.... Confusion filled his head, disbelief. He hunched low, hardly daring to breathe, feeling that long, hard flesh pressing harder, harder against him.

The man behind him rose to standing and Brian remained where he was, his ass hanging out for ten pulse deafening seconds before it hit him. He'd been Claimed. He had to go with the Sentinel, he had to get up. Then he leaped to his feet, grabbed at his sweats, dragging them up his thighs, and hurried after the tall man and the men trailing behind him.

That was how Jim Ellison Claimed Brian Rafe as his Companion. Suddenly Brian and his family had no more money worries. His parent's house was not constantly on the verge of being repossessed. Both his grandmothers could stop taking in their neighbor's washing to make ends meet. He could buy new clothes before he wore holes right through them. New shoes before he had to line them with cardboard to protect his socks and his feet. No one belittled him anymore. He was not among the lowest ranks of citizens. He belonged to James Joseph Ellison, heir to the Family Ellison who ruled Cascade.

Behind them Rafe felt the air currents shift as someone walked close by. He tilted his head, seeing two huge Sentinels watching for trouble as they carried a docile Guide between them, swathed in filmy cloth, barely discernible as female dominant even to Rafe's sharp eye.

As well they should watch for trouble around me, Rafe thought grimly, I'm going to be the one in serious trouble if I don't get a handle on my temper and fast. One of us needs to pay attention to where we are going. He drew in a long slow breath. Peace. Tranquility. Acceptance. Surrender. He trailed along after Ellison.

They'd been at it all day, wandering through the Guide and Slave markets of downtown Cascade. The legal-slave markets, where debtors were sold off to make reparations, were bad enough, being able to sense all that despair, to smell it in the air, despair did have an odor all its own...but, the Guide market...

The Guides projected their empathic terror of the unknown, their anxiety, their desperate hope for a kind Sentinel. A loving Sentinel. All the while knowing they were governed by the ancient and rigid rules of Guide-Law, which would deny them nearly every right not bestowed by the Sentinel who owned them. Most Guides raised in Houses where it had been the only thing they ever knew. A thing they didn't question. A reality that just...was.

Human rights activism had not come close to touching on or changing Guide's lives. The restless
men and women here were slaves even if they were called Guides. They were on edge, needy, aching for a bond, some driven almost to the edge of sanity, so long without a bond. Unable to control their reactions to the Sentinels walking by. Unable not to reach out with slender arms from beneath their concealing robes. The flickering flashes of Guide skin made Brian gasp, but James Ellison walked past as if he didn't even notice.

Being Ellison's Companion was not an easy job. Finding himself and Ellison a compatible Guide was even harder. The first one they'd had, Megan, was the best, but even she had been sold away after a time. The last one, Caro, had been adequate, Jim had insisted on her purchase, even when Rafe had viscerally know she wouldn't be right. Then a week ago Jim sold her to a female Sentinel in Italy, Lady Alexandra Barnes, an acquaintance of his father's.

So here they were, on the hunt for a new Guide. On the prowl for some hidden quality only Ellison knew of. Could sense. Again. Ellison wasn't interested in any Guide they'd seen in the last few days. Not even the ones that were specially vetted by the Guide Brokers who charged a literal fortune for the task.

Ellison rejected them all, some after trying them out, some just after looking at them. Rafe learned all over again it wasn't beauty or good looks that his Sentinel favored. It was something else the Senior Sentinel of Cascade wanted. Rafe appreciated beauty, he really did, good grooming, too. A Guide that smelled good. Had the right kind of rearing, in the right kind of House. Ellison didn't care for those things as much.

The two recent Guides he'd taken to his couch, to their couch (Rafe shuddered in recall), hadn't been attractive at all as far as Brian could see. One had been old enough to be his own mother. A second was covered in sweat, having been pulled in from whatever work or exercise his owner had put him to. Jim didn't even tell him to wash. Rafe had really wished he had. There was something else that attracted Jim. Brian was damned if he could figure out what it was. Jim had rejected each of the candidates after bedding them, paying the high assessment fee to their current owners without blinking an eye.

Brian knew he had high standards, no mistaking it. He recognized quality and he hadn't pointed out a single Guide who wasn't of the finest quality, trained to perfection. But Ellison, the Senior Sentinel in their partnership, as well as Cascade's Senior Sentinel, and thus the one who had the final word...had not thought even one worth examining more closely today.

Now they were pretty close to the edge of the main district, where the more marginal sellers lurked. Where the air stank with the rancid, sharp stench of fear rolling off terrified, stressed men and women. Not a place where they would find any Guide worth having. Brian felt a curl of unease. Oh, no. This was not going to be pretty.

Rafe shook his head. Every month it was the same thing. Close down the sellers who were breaking the law, who were mistreating and abusing the Guides kept in squalid conditions, and by the time the next market day rolled around, most were back open, fines paid. It was an on going scandal. One he and Jim were concerned with. One they fought to crush into non-existence.

Rafe took Jim's elbow and tried to steer the taller, more powerful man back to the next row of stalls on the good side of the lots. Not wise to go in there without more back up than they had.

Ellison though, refused to be moved. He was gazing out into the ramshackle stalls beyond the last row, into the area that lacked even a simple sidewalk, boasting only planks over the rank, muddy ground. An invitation to criminal activity if Brian ever saw one. You could put the picture on a brochure and label it.
"Crime Zone". Get your felonies here, cheap.

Rafe wrinkled his nose. They weren't even clean, those creatures, his twitching nose was telling him. The stalls over there reeked of human suffering, fear, and worse things. Blood, sex and sweat. Even excrement. There were the brothels, illegal everywhere else but in the slave mart, peopled by slaves or by down and out Guides, so desperate for the touch of a Sentinel they were willing to do anything, driven to prostitute themselves. There were higher class businesses on the far side of the bazaar if that was what his Senior wanted. Where the Guides were clean. Properly draped. Where their cages were clean and of the mandated sizes. Where they were fed and watered at set intervals for their health. Where they had veterinarians on call day and night. Blessed by the Sentinel Authority. Rafe tried to re-direct Jim again.

Instead he was dragged along behind Ellison, as the muscular man plowed into the derelict stalls, down the dark, despairing streets, thronged by just about any kind of low life you'd care to name. Jim's blue eyes intent on something. His nose lifted his, ear cocked. Oblivious to the dangers around him. Which left Rafe to protect him, while he searched. Crap.

Rafe prayed that Ellison didn't have his eye on some Guide down here. Let it be a robbery, a mugging, a crime in progress, anything but a Guide.

Then they were no longer so alone. Sellers and stall owners crept out of the shadows, peering at the fine clothing, the blemish free skin, the healthy glow of their faces....and whispered impossible promises about their wares. Rafe hissed at them, baring fangs. Anxious, but taking care to show none of his nervousness only the threat. The vendors cautiously crept closer, more and more of them as the oblivious Jim plunged ever further into the squalid market.

Rafe strained to see or hear what had captured the big Sentinel's attention. All the while keeping a hand on his gun butt, and his teeth bared. His extended claws clicked on the metal. Rafe let his eyes glow, let the followers see the feral light. Some backed off, others...still came after them, a bit further back, but not giving up. Silently Rafe cursed his partner. This might end badly indeed.

A wisp of sound...a man moaning. Rafe lifted his chin, turned his head away and tried to see....

"Oh, gods, no. No." A rich toned voice, a young man, but broken. Sobbing. Shit. He stole a look up at Jim. That was Jim's implacable face. There would be no turning him aside. Rafe did the only thing he could, he sent out a piercing whistle, pitched to be above common human hearing. He hated doing it. Calling for help. But...what choice did he have?

Jim was about to do something foolish. Brian could sense it. And he, they, needed back up. There wasn't a Sentinel in hearing distance who wouldn't answer his call. He was the reigning Senior Sentinel's mate. He just hated looking like a pussy. He would probably be teased for weeks, months....

They came from all directions. Men, tall and strong. Like ghosts, quick footed, limber, lithe, no matter their ages. None fat. Though they were of all ethnicities, they shared the same bone structure, strong men. They said nothing, only came close, stood shoulder to shoulder, intimidating, ruthless, prepared to defend their Senior Sentinel and his Companion.

Rafe looked neither right nor left, keeping behind his Senior, close in case one of these denizens were crazy enough to assault Jim. Jim, who no doubt many recognized, his family being the long time rulers of Cascade. Jim who without the surrounding Sentinels, would be a juicy target worth much to any of the lowlifes here.

Jim came to a halt outside a particularly unhealthy looking place of business. Rafe cringed at the
odor. Jim never faltered, stepping inside, thrusting aside a filthy, threadbare curtain. He disappeared and Rafe had no choice but to follow him in.

His eyes adjusted in mere fractions of a second. He raised his weapon, pointing it at the men standing around another two who were on top of a disgusting, malodorous mattress. The man or boy underneath was a Guide. He glowed with the gift, waves of terror rolling off of him, his terror sickening every Sentinel who was near.

The man on top was not a Guide nor was he a Sentinel. The man on top was a mundane, touching a Guide. A naked Guide. Dirty hands scrabbling down the sensitive, double row of extra-mammary nipples that only Guides had. Rafe felt rage fill him. Instant, hot, scorching rage.

The man on top of the Guide was not a Sentinel. Jim grabbed him by the greasy mop of hair on top of his head and jerked him back, off of the weeping Guide on the floor. The naked boy.

Rafe looked around for anything, a blanket, a sheet, anything to cover the Guide. There was nothing, the youth curled in on himself, trying to hide behind his hands and bent up knees. Guides were naturally modest, being exposed like this...intolerable. The nearest of the surrounding Sentinels swooped in, shielding him from the mundane men with their bodies. The mundanes, now cowering, no longer the predators in the room, but the prey.

Rafe didn't blink as Jim snapped the first man's neck with a twist of his wrists. A mundane man sexually assaulting a Guide deserved no less than execution. The Sentinels who had pushed into the building behind them growled approval. Reaching with clawed hands for the men who had been enjoying the assault on the defenseless Guide.

Rafe ripped the dusty curtains down, their ivory-grey color the result of aging, not design. Jim wrapped the Guide in the folds. Wrapping them around and around the struggling, weeping figure covering him head to foot.

Jim carried him out into the street and away. Cradled in the strong arms of the Senior Sentinel of Cascade as he wept. Rafe followed, not bothering to put away his gun. He only hoped one of the criminals around them would try something. His grip tightened, his fangs flashed.

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Rafe lifted his head watching the door to the bathroom. Had he heard something, his name being called...? Minutes ticked by, but when no second summoning call came and the door didn't open, he slowly lowered his head again until his chin rested on his crossed arms on the back of the couch. His imagination taking flight again.

Another false alarm. He eased back more comfortably onto the tan leather couch, a hand drifting down to sit on the folds of the robes he had acquired for the Guide. The folds of pure cream silk were satiny smooth under his palm, light as a feather, relying on myriad layers for concealment, each layer by itself, caressingly sheer. He ached to see the Guide in them, draped head to foot in the copious, fine woven cloth, the fabric floating with the slightest movement or hint of breeze.

Brian sighed, feeling his skin contract with his envisioning of the Guide so dressed. The Guide would be beautiful, so beautiful, his faint scent drifting out from beneath the many layers in tiny puffs of tantalizing musk. A male dominated yet female tempered scent, rich, beckoning, alluring. Brian licked his lips and fixed his eyes on the door to the bathroom.

Ellison was in that closed room with the injured Guide. He'd gone straight in, shut the door, and Rafe didn't dare enter unless his Senior called him. At the very least Ellison would box his ears if he tried. Rafe's skin literally itched to be in there, the draw close to impossible to ignore. How bad could or would Ellison hurt him for the affront, for not waiting? Rafe tried to reason his way off the couch. Reluctantly he admitted that, for taking liberties with a Guide Ellison would beat the shit out of him. So. He had to wait. And wait.

So, he waited. Ears cocked and straining for the smallest cue. And he watched. And listened to the low rhythm of murmurs. Of speech. Of Jim talking to the Guide. The tones of that voice, the young and battered man, heard only once before when the Guide had called out in terror and denial. So sweet to Rafe's ear, the tone, not the fear. He shivered. The fear had been.... He had felt murderous, resentful that he hadn't been one of those to take revenge on the ones who had defiled the Guide. He'd no trouble smelling them on his skin.

The splash of water, almost silent, came through the door, telling him how careful Ellison was being while he washed the Guide, lifting handfuls to suds with, more to rinse. Sluicing away the things that should never touch a Guide's skin. Things worse than profanity in any church, blasphemy of a different, physical kind.

Brian listened and wanted. His fingers curling into fists, so great was the demand from his body he be in there, that he be caring for the Guide in need. Pain cut into his palms as his nails penetrated, drawing faint half-circles of welling blood. Red, scarlet. He had no other way to resist the compulsion that damned him for not going to the Guide; if he eased his control for an instant he would be up and on his way. The pain kept him focused, just able to resist. He blotted the blood on his pants, staunching the flow, avoiding the silk nearby.

No need to save any evidence of the rape. Sentinel justice was swift and brutal. Ellison had killed the one man who had been within his reach, snapping his neck with vicious ease. The avenging Sentinels who had followed Rafe and Ellison into the hovel had taken care of the rest. Any man whose scent had been on the small body was now dead. News articles had splashed lurid color
photos of the scene across the evening papers within hours of the crime being reported. And the Sentinel vengeance which had followed. A cautionary message to any mundane who thought about harming a Guide.

Little light leaked out from under the door. They were in there, Ellison and the Guide, in the near dark. The un-draped Guide reassured by the low light of a single candle. Safe from unwelcome eyes. Or unwelcome hands baring him in the bright glare. How anyone, any man of any race, could do what they had done to such a gentle creature was beyond Rafe's comprehension. Even at a distance, the soothing sounds washed over his skin. His fingers curled into fists.

Brian almost missed it. The opening of the door to the bathroom a crack, the curl of steam wafting out, nearly invisible, this time real. When his eyes caught it he was up on his feet and moving before he realized what he was doing, the bundled robes in his arms, filling them to overflowing. His footfalls were silent, noiseless as he came across the floor his heart pounding. The Guide knew he was coming, didn't need sight nor sound to tell him that, the Guide just...knew-. Brian felt him knowing. Felt the pounding of his heart, his and the Guide's.

Rafe slipped into the room, it was fogged and warm with moisture hanging in the air, filling his lungs, clingling to his skin. Ellison was on his knees in front of the commode, powerful thighs bunched, his attention focused on the figure in front of him. Rafe's eyes were caught, not for the first time by the leashed power of his Senior, by the overwhelming masculinity, dominance of his partner. His neck arched instinctively, throwing his gaze to the tiles as he crept forward, low to the ground, not daring to stand when Jim was on his knees.

The Guide sat on the closed lid wrapped in towels from his head to his toes. Loops of long, dark, damp curls peaking out from the terry cloth around his head. Rafe had the impression of large eyes, blue maybe, staring down at him. Not afraid, no, the Blessed Protector was at the Guide's side; Jim had managed to reassure him. A fearful Guide would not have dared to look at him.

Slim fingers, just the tips, rested on top of his covered thigh, the moonglow of his nails revealed. His skin olive toned, his fingertips tinged pink, warmed by the heat of his recently completed bath. There was no scent of the men on him, none lingered in the air. They had been washed away down the drain, all sluiced away by the bare, patient hands of the Senior Sentinel.

Rafe felt his body tremble at the closeness of the scent of this Guide. He wanted to stare, to reach out, to touch the Guide, to creep closer and closer. He went onto his hands and knees, the stark reality of the situation making itself known to him like the impact of a fist to the chest. He kept one hand on the floor, fingers clenched into a fist.

This man, this one Guide was his Guide. Their Guide. His Match. Their Match. There could be no other reason Brian Rafe's entire body was singing, his every sense tuned to perfect pitch, all of him focused on the rightness of being here, next to his Guide. And the wrongness of not touching him. His heart beat synced, his breath one with the breath of the man sitting wrapped in pristine white towels.

He placed the robes in Ellison's outstretched hands. He knelt, not moving from where he was, absorbing all he could. He looked up at Ellison who was showing the Guide the voluminous robes. Brian's eyes were drawn to the small movement, a foot peeked out from under the many towels. Sturdy, somewhat smaller than his own. Beaded with drops of moisture. Brian inched forward. And when there was no protest, another inch closer. His arms trembled with the urge to reach out to wipe away those few droplets. To care for the Guide.

"Senior." He said, his eyes unable to leave the fingers on the Guide's towel-blanketed thigh, the foot
peeking out below. Not even to look at Ellison.

"Companion." It was a growl, on the verge of a warning, but not there, not yet. Rafe knew he had to move carefully, cautiously. He reached out, hand extending, fingers un-curling, flattening, relaxed in profile, no grabbing, just gentleness. His dry, lightly calloused fingers wiped the water away. Oh yes, gently. The cry of alarm from the Guide caught him by surprise.

He half expected the hand that rose to his throat and the body that bore him back on the bathroom floor. Not slamming him down, but hard and authoritative. Bending him, forcing him just a little faster than he could bend gracefully, taking his control of the movement away, until he was flat, until he was looking up into the ice blue eyes of his Senior. Who was watching him with interest more than censure, even while he was shaking his head.

Even so, Rafe knew what was expected. He exhaled, willing his body to ease. Not to follow Sentinel instinct and fight back. All Sentinels wanted to be alpha, not all got to be. Rafe knew he would never see the time he would top Ellison. He knew it, and he accepted it.

Or he thought he had. Then...he had inhaled the rich, real scent of this Guide. A scent that called to him to be dominant, to be top, to be alpha. He squeezed his eyes shut, tightened every muscle and fought not to fight back, to keep his claws sheathed. Now he understood what Ellison had been looking for. Why he had not been willing or interested in settling for less. Why so few Guides regardless of training, breeding, or pedigree made his very short list.

Now Rafe wanted to go to his Guide. Now he didn't want Ellison to be first. But he lay still, not resisting as Ellison knelt over him. The tension taking forever to leach out of him, cell by cell.

Minutes later he felt the grip on his throat ease. A small caress of fingers, scratch of claws as they withdrew from his neck. But the larger Sentinel didn't move off of him, he sat on Rafe's legs, pinning him where he was, on the bathroom floor.

Brian saw movement behind Jim, the Guide rising, getting to his feet, moving forward, pressing up behind the much larger Ellison, his body surrounded by towels, completely hidden by the big detective. His eyes, huge and brilliant in the dark of the restroom, a stunning, vibrant blue.
Fed, watered and otherwise taken care of Blair was drowsy by the time he was led up the stairs and to the large bed that dominated the upper loft bedroom. But the presence of the wide, white quilted bed shocked him alert as fear washed through his veins. Here it was, again. He wanted to cry out and beg to be left alone. He hung his head and shuffled forward where he was led.

Rafe was downstairs, checking all of the locks and windows on the usual night rounds. If Blair hadn't been new to the two of them, he might have noticed how restless the younger Sentinel seemed as he went on his prowling rounds, sniffing and growling under his breath. But Blair was new and so he didn't notice anything more than the nearness of the larger of the Sentinels, the man looming over him in a manner both protective and possessive, one quality appealing to the desperate Guide, the other unnerving.

Jim had an arm around Blair and was half carrying him up the steps. Blair turned his face into the big man's shoulder, pressing his cheek into the thick muscle there as his need for protection won out over his desire to flee. He remembered the lesson punctuated by kicks and blows covering him with sparkling pain. A Guide who fled was free game. A Guide who fled was unprotected. A Guide who fled was punished. He inhaled, a ragged sound. Jim clucked to him, his tongue making the sounds soft, offering quiet comfort that almost melted the block of ice sitting in Blair's chest.

Blair didn't even hear the knock that came on the downstairs door. Or Rafe's murmured greeting, the visitor was expected by the Sentinels, not a surprise even at the late hour. The Guide did notice the quiet tread on the stairs leading up to the loft. He shook, afraid of what was coming next. Blair moved nearer to the big one, Ellison. Moved in behind him, putting his head between the big man's shoulder blades, and gripped the tight tshirt with hands shielded by his own robes.

He tried to see through the veils he was wearing, to peer around the man. He didn't have his glasses and the cloth was difficult to see through even in good light, heavily draped at night he was all but blind.

Jim rose, detatching Blair's grasping hands. The fact Jim didn't turn on the lights in the bedroom as the visitor approached let Blair know the visitor was also a Sentinel, and could see him quite clearly. Only Blair was left without clear vision, his eyes all but useless, he knelt very, very still, listening as hard as he was able. The whispers, though, were Sentinel quiet, he heard only the sibilance of speech, not the words coming from the silhouetted men at the railing of the loft.

The shorter of the two standing men approached slowly, head cocked to one side as if he was listening to Blair's thundering heartbeat. Blair tried to become part of the bed itself, willing himself not to be here, not to be in this position. The man sat on the edge of the bed and gently lay a hand on Blair's shoulder. Blair froze, even his breathing hitched to a stop, petrified as he was. Another man, another hand, touching him. Touching him. His lungs screamed at him to breathe, he gasped, shuddered, whimpered. The man patted him soothingly, absently.

"I am Dr. Graves." He said, voice kindly, non-threatening, as if he was talking a jumper down from the edge of a great precipice. "I am your new physician."

Blair's eyes flew to the breast of the man's jacket, squinting hard, desperately trying to see, making out the emblem affixed to the man's pocket, he almost snorted his disappointment. A Vet. Not a doctor of human medicine. He'd had that reality drummed into him. He was a Guide, not a Sentinel,
not a human. The same men and women you'd call to see to your cats, dogs, your lizards and your rodents as they raced on their spinning wheel, was the man or woman who would see to Blair's own medical care. Of course those who specialized in Guide Care tended to be too busy to see furred pets.

At first Blair had protested loudly his treatment, his categorization as an animal, challenging any and all of them to test him, to prove he wasn't just as smart as capable as any of them...but they laughed and patted his head. He was a Guide and Guides were not really humans. He tried the very rational argument that a Guide had to be human if a Guide could interbreed with humans, by scientific definition it had to be true. More laughter was the result and more head patting. And hands stroking under his clothing, voices murmuring their admiration of his spirit, his fire, as he lay in stiff outrage, or struggled to force the hands away.

He was a Guide, they said again, with utmost patience. Over and over. Until he stopped protesting. Until he realized they'd never listen to him. He'd fumed and waited for another chance. He thought he'd been rescued when the raid on the warehouse took place. Masked men, faces hidden so he could see nothing but adrenaline bright eyes in their hooded faces. Running, yelling, shooting. He'd crouched, head down, arms wrapped tightly around himself and the two other Guides near to himself, both younger than himself, both terrified, trembling.

He'd certainly heard of the groups who believed Guides were mistreated and abused. Groups who rescued men and women who had been taken by the authorities and stripped of their rights simply because they possessed one gene out of millions. A gene that expressed itself in sexual hermaphroditism and enhanced empathy. Blair looked male, but he had both sets of genitals. He was a male dominant hermaphrodite, more male in appearance than most of the others he saw in the warehouse.

But it wasn't a liberation front group that raided the warehouse. It was pirates, traffickers. Men who sold Guides on the black market. Blair was sent from the frying pan into the fire. Quite literally. The two young female dominant Guides were torn from the false shelter of his arms, dragged away. He was thrown over a burly shoulder and carried off, a big paw gripping his buttocks through his robes, laughing at his writhing efforts to get free.

While he'd attended classes at the House to teach him Guide behavior and expectations, he had only gotten to the theoretical parts of his expected service. That was bad enough. Now it was beyond the time for gentle teaching. The pirates wasted no time in introducing him to his duties. He was raped the first night he was taken and nearly every night since. He'd screamed the first time, and the second. Buy the end of the week he only cried out his fear, loathing, covering his head, his face so they couldn't put their tongues into his mouth, couldn't look into his eyes. He didn't scream when they fucked him. When he screamed, they strapped him. Otherwise, if he kept quiet they slapped him on the rump like a mule. He was fed and watered, used, and otherwise ignored in the back of his cage.

They'd also taught him the folly of opening his mouth and speaking. They didn't want to hear one word out of him. They didn't seem to mind his whimpers or when he begged them not to hurt him. But if he tried to converse, to ask questions, he was beaten until he saw the error of his ways. He was smart, he learned quickly. He was reduced to listening. Gathering information. Making no noise.

He was being held while more Guides were taken, until the raiders had enough to make a trip to the markets worthwhile. They had half the number they needed to make the risk profitable. Blair waited, guiltily prayed the time for his sale would come soon, even if that meant others were caught, abused as he was abused. But it was not fast. His captivity stretched on, weeks became a month, two...then four.
Then he discovered something both horrible and wonderful. He wasn't the only one to find it out. He was horrified and he was elated. Within a week he was on the road to be sold, all the way to Cascade he discovered from keeping an ear out for conversation as people passed by the filthy cage he was kept in. Far from the House he was stolen from in an attempt to minimize the possibility of detection.

The guard who prowled around with his whip kept Blair from calling out to the other travelers, but the guard couldn't keep him from listening harder than before for any news at all.

Blair kept his head down, careful not to give offense. But he listened with a sense of urgency he'd never experienced before. Maybe, just maybe he could find a way to escape now. Maybe he could learn something to help himself. He had hopes. Futile hopes.

He wasn't on display for more than half a day before a man came by and asked to sample his wares. The pirates conferred and saw no harm in it. Not for a fee, anyways. Blair made himself into the smallest lump of miserable flesh he could, fighting to keep his grip on the bars of the cage when they tried to drag him out. He had no prayer of winning the battle, he knew it, but he tried with every fiber of his being. Two of them tore him free of the cage, dragging him as he gave in for the first time in months and pleaded with them. They'd taken him inside and stripped him bare. The buyer had him first. He'd pleaded with them to stop.

Then other men had come in through the door, crashing into the space radiating menace. Tall men, strong and straight, and clean, teeth bared, jaws set like stone. Sentinels. He knew instantly, feeling his psyche strain towards them even as he tried to find something to hide his nudity.

The largest, unsmiling Sentinel had taken a step into the room and lifted Grady off of Blair, up from between Blair's spread legs, snapping his neck with negligent ease. Blair turned onto his side, curling into a fetal position, sobbing.

Another of the men, one only slightly smaller, had pulled down the ratty curtains and wrapped Blair in them so tightly he feared he'd smother. But it was good to be covered. He heard but didn't see the slaughter begin around him. He closed his mind to the sounds and didn't fight as he was carried away. He was a prize again. Claimed by a new man, not free, not saved.

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Now he was here, in an apartment with the two men he remembered from his rescue. Sentinels. One had bathed him in the dark, sparing him the humiliation of nakedness. Sensitive fingers finding all the new and most of the old hurts that dotted his skin. He was given robes, clean ones, like he hadn't had in the entire time of his capture. He was covered head to foot. He took refuge in it. Clung to the big Sentinel's belt as he was taken out of the bathroom around the loft. He kept his hand covered with the insulating folds of his robe. Blair knew better than to presume to touch anyone with his bare skin. Whether accidentally or on purpose.

And here was a third one come to examine him. Blair lay stiff and apprehensive as the man patted him. He didn't care how kind the man was, he didn't want anyone touching him. No one. But he knew better than to protest. He had bruises that had taught him to be still, to obey, not to question aloud what was done to him. he had been trained to be docile. He didn't move as his robes were parted. He closed his tighter and concentrated on his breath, in and out. In and out. He drifted away until it was done.

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The veterinarian withdrew his fingers from the Guide's body, stripped off the gloves, washed his hands and spoke to Jim. He twitched the Guide's robes into place as he spoke.
"There is no serious problem with his health. And he is breeding." The Vet said. "About three to four months along, hard to tell. With the indiscriminate intercourse he's been subject to there is no telling when he was impregnated, or by whom of course. And there is no way of knowing the pedigree of the stud either. All we can be sure of is that at some point someone with the right genetics had relations with him." The doctor turned and began replacing his instruments. 'Of course there are signs of overuse, but nothing serious. He is quite durable and healthy."

Blair lay on the bed on his side, concentrating on breathing in and out. The robe had been repositioned, so he was covered head to foot once again. But he felt completely and utterly exposed. Sticky lubricant that had fostered the insertion of fingers into his body remained, a gummy film. He hated the feel of it. Wishing he could run to the bathroom downstairs and wash. The man's hands had touched him everywhere. Even inside of his body. Without once asking if he could, or if Blair minded. He did mind, very much. But he knew better than to risk a whipping by saying that in anyone's hearing.

"I thought he was pregnant." Ellison agreed, his voice low and even. Blair saw him looking over his shoulder to where the other Sentinel stood partway up the stairs as if uncertain of his welcome, the one named Rafe. Rafe, unlike the other two men, looked angry. Blair watched him, eyes at last adjusting to the dim light. Wondering why this one felt differently, why his expressions were so readable.

"He's been strapped a few times, but there won't be any scarring, they used a soft strap on him." The Vet continued while Blair thought, astounded, that the blows had not felt like a soft anything. They had burned across his back and thighs. "Strapping is unnecessarily cruel treatment for a Guide, I always recommend a gentler hand in their training. Training them to the hand, to sweets, or stroking, to pleasant stimulus works far better. Keeps them healthier and happier to be treated and rewarded for good behavior." His disapproval was clear, and Blair was surprised to hear it, and unwilling to trust it. He cringed when the man patted his hip, caressed it as if he was ruffling fur along a dog's flank.

"I can put the word out if you are interested in selling him. A Guide in his condition will bring top dollar." The Vet continued speaking, drying his hands on a wad of paper towels. "A Guide with proven fertility, capable of future breeding, certainly worth a few hundred thousand to the right farm. He's young enough they can have ten or more good litters out of him. Not much more than late teens or early twenties."

There was a pause, long and draw out. Blair noticed the younger Sentinel had stopped breathing, holding his last lungful in, fists gripping the edge of the railing, waiting on the pronouncement from his Senior. The dark brown gaze was fixed, intense, hot. Blair waited, not daring to hope that he wouldn't be passed on yet again, into even greater uncertainty.

"I'll let you know." The Senior Sentinel said at last. And Rafe exhaled, a harsh, crowing bark of sound that the Vet and the Senior appeared not to notice. Or chose not to acknowledge. Blair remained as he was, on his side, his body too numb to react.

He felt a touch, tentative, on his foot. Warm hands, dry palmed. His eyes traveled down to see the brown head of the younger Sentinel at the foot of the bed. He felt the whispering press of lips against his toes. He closed his eyes. Waited. For the touch that would come higher, crawling up like a great spider. The touch that would turn him onto his back and spread his legs, sweaty palms holding him down, fingers clawing deep into his lush buttocks, opening him.

Blair waited. And waited. He felt the brush of lashes against the sole of his foot. Breath exhaled, curling in an eddied stream across his arch, over the ball of his foot. Still he waited, sure that it was
only a matter of time before a groping hand wormed its way up to his already lubricated recesses. That touch that made him cold would come. It would come, he was certain.

Blair waited. It always came.
Blair gulped.

He was petrified that the dour, always serious, older Sentinel who owned him, James Joseph Ellison, would ultimately decide to sell him to one of the breeding farms the Vet had mentioned on his first visit. Not that Ellison had been anything but gentle with him. It was just that the financial benefits seemed like they'd appeal to him.

Blair shivered. He was equally terrified his child would be taken from him immediately after he was born, and would disappear from his life in an instant. Becoming eventually yet another anonymous Guide, draped head to foot kept for the use of a Sentinel, and Blair would never have a chance to know him.

The Vet certainly had not given up his endless campaigning to convince Ellison and to a lesser extent Rafe, that selling Blair was the best course of action they could chose. Blair hated the man with a passion. He dreaded each and every knock on the loft door, in case it was the Vet returning. If it had any chance of doing any good, he would hide. But how do you hide from a Sentinel? He hated the dry, assertive hands as they moved over and into him. He hated the eyes that looked at him like a farmer examining a prize bit of livestock.

Three times more after that night when Blair was first examined, the man had returned, and each time the price of a breeding Guide made it into the conversation. Often as Blair lay on his back on the massive bed of the loft bedroom, his legs spread, robes bunched up around his waist, and fingers buried in his body, pressing down on the outside and up from inside, gauging the state of his gravid uterus. He trembled in revulsion and fear.

Money, along with the societal benefit that Blair would be providing as he carried litter after litter, bettering the lives of unbonded Sentinels as he did, always headed the conversation as the Vet conducted his exam. Bringing more Guides into the world. Guides who were needed, who would offer great service to Sentinels now suffering from the rarity of Guides.

The more the man spoke the more like an animal Blair felt. His fingers were clenched unseen in the folds of his voluminous robes. Given half a chance he'd like to wrap them around the man's neck. And squeeze. It didn't matter that the Sentinel was bigger and stronger than he was. He'd like a chance at him. A chance to show him that he was real, that he was Blair Sandburg, a person, not a thing. The fingers of the Vet slid out, leaving Blair feeling soupy, unclean.

The Vet grabbed Blair's male genitalia and flopped it side to side. He laughed, as if at some joke and said, "This is a waste on such a good breeder, superfluous. And best taken off to keep his energy where it should be. Carrying pups. Easy enough to do after he delivers this one. Less than a day in the clinic. Be as good as new and able to breed again in a month or two."

That was it for Blair, not even the fear of a beating could keep him still. He wrenched his robes down, jerking away from the man, who laughed heartily and slapped his rump, pronouncing Blair extremely healthy and fit.

"Really, Sentinel Ellison," the Vet used a tone of great respect when he addressed the heir to the Ellison fortune and to Cascade's Sentinel Clan. Yet he managed to convey a subtle condescension as
well. As if the obvious merit of his argument could not be disputed. As if he couldn't credit Jim's inability to instantly agree with him.

"It is a generous thing, to take an action that can do so much good. Selfless and generous." He was washing his hands once more as he said it, drying them on paper towels, his eyes sliding towards where Blair crouched on the stairs to the loft bedroom. Under his veil Blair peeled back his lips from his teeth and snarled at the man. Unseen, but he felt better for it. Defiant and a fraction stronger, though still sticky and defiled.

Jim Ellison seemed to be listening with only half his attention to the ongoing natter of the Vet's lecture. The lion's share of his focus was on Rafe, who was preparing something in the kitchen, Blair couldn't see what. Rafe, if Blair was any judge hated the Vet putting his hands on Blair as much as Blair did. Blair could see the tightly held shoulders, the stiff posture, movements jerky instead of the usual smooth and co-ordinated motion, as the younger Sentinel moved about his task.

Rafe was every bit as distressed as he was by the talk of breeding and selling Blair, Blair was sure. He clung to the hope that the younger of his Sentinel owners would speak up, would protest, would do something to stop the sale. Make a decision that was final, to keep Blair away from a life in breeding pens. A life that would mean he was not going to know his children. Forced breeding, Blair thought he would vomit. He drew in a breath, tried to quiet his heart.

Ellison turned towards the Doctor, regarding the man with an expression that was impossible to read. He nodded his head towards the two comfortable couches that were in the living room. Ellison and the Vet moved towards the couches to continue their conversation.

Blair stood up from the steps to the loft he'd been sitting on, and crept down them, inching towards the couches. He didn't care if it drew unwelcome attention to himself. He had to hear what was being said, he couldn't stand not knowing. Rafe carried in two cups of coffee. Milk, sugar, he placed them on the coffee table in front of the two older men, as Blair sidled up behind the tall back of the couch and crouched there inconspicuously.

Rafe went back into the kitchen and prepared a pitcher of tea, ice floating in it next to sliced lemons. Blair's mouth watered. He hadn't had anything caffeinated for months, not since he'd been taken to the House. Guides drank purified spring water, nothing else aside from a foul tasting electrolyte solution if the weather was hot and there was some risk of dehydration. His hand went to his chin involuntarily, fingertips resting on his lips, it would taste so good.

His eyes fixed on Rafe. To his shock the younger Sentinel looked at him over his shoulder, as if sensing Blair's eyes on him. Blair was aware of the regard, despite the veil preventing him from seeing the other's face clearly, he tried to be even more still, even less conspicuous, he lowered his gaze and listened as hard as he could, but there was nothing new being said. Only more of the same.

"..without taking the time to think of....." Ellison said, before Blair lost track, his eyes finding Rafe again, his attention commandeered. "...concerned for his health. How is he doing....." Again Blair tuned out as he watched the graceful, slim yet broad shouldered form of his youngest Sentinel.

Rafe made a U-turn back into the kitchen, filled a tall, plastic glass, no self-respecting Sentinel trusted a Guide with breakable things, things that might cause injury...and detoured from the kitchen to behind the couches as the two older Sentinels conversed.
"Giving up a compatible Guide is a serious step, it should not be done lightly, not even for societal benefit." Ellison was saying in his strong, unflinching tone, his voice held a hint of anger. His inflection made it clear he was not going to be influenced, he was not going to budge an inch or listen to an opposing opinion and have his own changed. He would make up his own mind, in his own time, and he didn't need, nor would he welcome help in deciding. Blair picked that up, but it seemed the Vet wasn't as astute. He nattered on. Talking about he excellent care breeding Guides received.

"Pshaw." The Vet waved a dismissive hand. "You haven't even bothered to use him. How compatible could he be?" Blair hated the laugh that rolled out of the big man one more time.

Blair could have screamed with the 'not knowing'. What was going to happen to him? He burned with the fear and frustration of not being able to influence the decisions being contemplated. He had virtually no say in his future. He hated that feeling. He may as well have been a French poodle carrying pedigreed puppies.

"Hmmm. Is he really the best match for you and your Companion? There are likely others, infertile Guides who would be as well matched. Guides who didn't have the gift yours has to carry pups. Or the healthy body. The litters must be spaced out so as not to tax the system....." The Vet was adding, between slurps of hot coffee. Blair hoped he was burning his tongue. Then he noticed with a guilty startle that Rafe was in front of him. He had a moment of panic that only slowly dissipated as he saw no censure on the younger Sentinel's face. Blair swallowed hard.

Rafe knelt down, a good foot away from the edges of Blair's robes, taking no chances that he'd actually touch Blair, even so Blair's heart rate accelerated, his skin prickled. He watched the other man intently. Carefully the dark haired man held out the plastic glass, pictures of cartoon characters decorating the sides, his fingers at the rim and under the bottom, leaving the whole middle section for Blair to grab onto. Stunned to be offered the drink, Blair nevertheless reached out, hands covered by the cloth of his robes, and took the iced tea, surprised when the offer wasn't withdrawn at the last moment, as if it was some unfair test of his willingness to conform.

Cautiously he raised the glass up under his robes, sipped. The flavor of the tea and lemons, tart and sweet, exploded over his tongue. Weeks, months of horridly bland food had left him longing for flavor. The tea was wonderful. He took another sip. Closed his eyes in bliss....sipped again.

"No!" He heard the word snapped at him from his right, from the couch. He flinched as the Sentinel Vet loomed over the edge and reached for him. He cringed back, tumbling into Rafe, losing his grip on the glass in his haste to avoid being touched by the man he so loathed. Blair gasped as the chilly drink spilled down his chest and stomach. "He is pregnant. He can't have....."

Rafe responded in two ways to the other man reaching for his Guide. He enveloped the tea soaked Blair in his arms, putting himself between Blair and the Vet. And he bared his strong, white teeth, growling loudly, aggressively. The Vet stared, shocked, then recoiled violently. His body recognizing the threat before his brain.

Blair shivered in Rafe's arms, clinging to him with bare fingers, their skin actually touching where Blair's hand hooked onto Rafe's arm. He shrank closer, as close as he could into the shielding embrace. He turned his head into Rafe's shoulder, gazed up.

"Thank you," he whispered, trying to convey his gratitude while also trying very hard to see the face
in front of his. Rafe's face broke into a feral smile barely more smile than snarl. Blair saw that, the flash of very white teeth in a lightly tanned face. The man was very handsome, he thought. Very appealing with his youthful face, his dark eyes and sculpted features, generous mouth. And he was protecting Blair. As if Blair was his own. Claimed. A Claimed Guide would never be sold. Blair's heart skipped a beat.

Claimed. Was that the answer? If he could be Claimed...he wouldn't be sent to a farm. He'd stand a chance of keeping his child, wouldn't he? Wouldn't they listen to him if he was their Claimed Guide? Blair shuddered...but being Claimed meant he'd have to let...

"Rafe." Ellison's tone was hard, inquiring as to what kind of mischief his Companion was up to. Rafe's predatory smile faded a bit, but he didn't withdraw from Blair. If anything his arms tightened. The Vet dared to look over the back of the couch again. But he stayed back from the edge, out of easy reach, kept his mouth shut. Blair's grip clamped down harder at the sight of the man. His nails left frantic, half moon crescents in Rafe's forearm that welled blood. He whimpered.

"The Guide mustn't have stimulants..." The Vet began, peevishly as Jim rose and came around the end of the couch. Jim held up a hand.

"Quiet." He said. And the Vet miraculously quieted.

Blair huddled into Rafe's body, into the security it represented. He wasn't happy with Jim's slow, smooth progress around the couch and towards him.

They had not touched since the first night, he and Rafe, the closest they'd come was the brush of Blair's robe on the back of Rafe's hand every now and then. But now Rafe's arms were all the way around him, partway under Blair's capacious robes. Blair let out a sigh. It had been so long since he'd been touched by someone he didn't feel repulsed by. Since Ellison had washed him.

"Rafe." Ellison's tone was firmer, daring his Companion to ignore him a second time. Rafe let out a growl and bent his head lower, but his eyes never left the Vet's head peeking over the back of the couch.

"Senior?" Rafe stayed where he was, Blair plastered to him, both of them now soaked with the spilled tea. The voice was all rumbling growl.

Jim looked over the back of the couch wordlessly for a moment, his attention fixed on the Vet, then he spoke to the doctor. "Get out." He told the man. "I won't forget what you have said. But any decision made now is premature. It is time for you to leave."

"Yes." The Vet did not sound happy. But he was smart enough not to insist on further discussion or to protest being tossed out on his ear. Ellison stood, tall and menacing in a way, though he made no overt threat. The Vet gathered his things quickly and went for the door, light blue eyes fixed on him as Jim escorted him to the door and shut it without bidding the man good-bye, turning the locks as he did.

Jim Ellison turned back to where Rafe crouched over Blair. He leaned on the lacked door for a moment, contemplating his disobedient Companion and the Guide he held so tightly. Blair did not feel threatened or afraid of Rafe, maybe he felt a little nervous, but he also felt confident that Rafe wouldn't hurt him.

Jim's next words dispelled his sense of safety.
"Are you going to take him, Companion? Are you ready to Claim him?" Ellison said, and Rafe's reply was a warning growl. He held Blair so tightly that Blair felt all of his body keenly, pressed intimately together as they were. He was that quickly aware of Rafe's arousal. Hard and insistent against his hip.

"Your Guide is afraid. He is not prepared to be Claimed." Ellison said, his voice growing softer, quieter. Sending a tremor through the younger Sentinel that was directly transmitted to alarmed Blair.

The younger Sentinel was indeed ready to take Blair and mate him. He ground his erection into Blair's hip, his powerful hands holding Blair still. Blair panicked. He shoved frantically at the man who had been his perceived protector only seconds before.

"No!" He said, trying to scramble free. All the budding contentment he'd felt as Rafe kept the Vet away from him, offered him tea, evaporated. Rafe refused to let him go, bending over him, one hand finding Blair's bare hip under the folds of cloth. Blair kicked out.

And was lifted away. Up into the air. Enclosed in steel-hard arms. Set aside, as Ellison turned to deal with his clawing, hissing Companion. Rafe smashed into the taller man and they grappled. Blair didn't wait to see who won the struggle. He fled into the fragile safety of the bathroom, shutting and locking the door before sliding down to the floor and curling up on his side.

He lay there shaking, listening to the sounds of struggle in the room beyond the closed door.
Chapter 5

Chapter by neichan

As a pregnant Guide, Blair was incredibly valuable, his health was of utmost concern. The Vet insisted on coming to the loft every week. Blair had endured another exam from the man with the invasive hands, wanting to scream at each touch. Jim had been there, and had not left his side, standing and then sitting closer than he had before, his expression telling Blair he was being monitored by the Sentinel. Oddly, Blair found it comforting, it made the exam easier, he felt not so alone, he felt acknowledged as a feeling being. Rafe had been nearby, too, watching him and the Vet, his lips rippling back from very sharp teeth at every flinch Blair couldn't suppress. Surprisingly, the unblinking gaze didn't make Blair feel exposed.

He saw instead how Rafe's eyes watched the Vet, measuring every action the man took, evaluating it. As hateful as the touch was, Blair knew it wasn't inappropriate, it only felt that way because he had absolutely no power to say no. No power to say he wanted another doctor to take care of him and his baby.

Blair gritted his teeth and put up with the visits. He needed them. He would get through them. For his child's sake. He was pushed and prodded like rising bread dough.

With each exam, he was reassured that his baby, the Vet used the word "pup", was fine, healthy and growing as he should be. Before leaving the last time the Vet asked Jim to consider allowing an ultrasound. Sentinels hated the tests, and Jim wouldn't be able to stay with Blair when it happened without becoming ill. Blair would be alone in the room with the technologist.

At least the Vet, also a Sentinel, wouldn't be there. A small victory that prompted a large grin under Blair's veil when he realized it.

The test would give more information on the "pup". The doctor then pulled Jim to the side and spoke to him very quietly. Blair's hands closed involuntarily over his belly as he watched the men talk through his muffling veils. His ~baby~. It was wrong that the fate of his child was not his own to decide. That he wasn't even actively involved in the discussion about the baby.

His pregnancy didn't really show much yet, maybe it would have if he'd seen himself naked. Blair felt it, the rounding swell of his abdomen, it was possible to reach down and hold the growing life cupped between his hands. When he closed his eyes, meditated, he imagined he could feel the little life flourishing deep inside his womb.

He knew without debate that he was indeed a good breeder. His body was singing, he had never felt so healthy. This might be his first and only pregnancy so far, but his body thrived on being pregnant. If he hadn't been pregnant he was sure depression and despair would have overcome him. He would have tried to end his life. But every time he thought of the babe inside of his body, he felt a surge of secret joy. And a fierce determination to live, to bring up his child in a better world.

Blair knew he didn't fit into the usual mold of a House trained but uneducated Guide. He'd been found out very late in life, comparatively, after attaining his advanced degrees, something usually forbidden to a Guide.

Naomi had not believed in the way the system treated Guides. She had prevented his testing as a child, aggressively thwarting all the mandatory school screenings, seeking out only sympathetic physicians, men and women who held the same beliefs as she did. She had also taught him to love
the way his body was, not letting him feel he was deformed or less of a person because he wasn't like the other people around him. That had been a hard task to manage, since he kept his condition secret, but his mom had been determined he should feel only pride in himself. He never doubted that she loved him with all her capacity, and would do anything to protect him. It hurt terribly that he was not able to contact her, had not been since his diagnosis and imprisonment in the Guide House. She might think him dead.

It had been such a common and accepted part of his childhood, having physicians who supported his right to stay free even if he was clearly, indisputably a hermaphrodite and thus, of course, a Guide, that he hadn't thought twice when one of the doctors at the student health center drew his blood during the last contagious bacterial meningitis scare at the university. He'd had no idea at all that the doctor, noticing with shock the extra-mammary nipples through Blair's T-shirt, had sent the blood sample out for more than the agreed on testing, and caused it to be forwarded to a national lab that specialized in Guide screening.

That fast, that easily, Blair's secret was out. He was a Guide, and had no rights, no brains, no self-determination. He was stripped of all of his degrees, hustled into a House with no titles, no name but Blair, his surname being taken from him along with his tendency to talk his way in and out of every situation.

He lost his beloved title of "Doctor of Anthropology" which he had worked so hard to earn. It nearly destroyed him, being indoctrinated into the life he'd now have to expect as his permanent lot in life. A life that constituted nothing but brain numbing activities and waiting on the whim of a Sentinel.

Don't talk back, obey instructions. Serve your Sentinels. Do what you are told. Obey. Obey, obey. And of course, don't talk back. Resistance...was not only futile, it was punished. He was whipped. He'd experienced overwhelming shock at that horrible event. It was so obviously a situation of abuse he was unable to accept it was standard practice and not a crime.

He'd learned. Whatever else Blair was he wasn't stupid. He learned fast.

Then he'd been kidnapped out of the House and held out a fantastical hope for all of an hour during the rapid flight from the Guide House. After an hour though, his hopes were killed off very thoroughly. Absolutely squashed, as he was forced onto his back, his legs jerked apart and the assaults began. Virginity wasn't prized in a Guide. Fertility was. So if a Guide could be brought to breeding, his price went up astronomically. That meant every Guide stolen was subject to repeated matings by as many males as was feasible, in the effort to impregnate him. A nightmare for Blair, for all of them.

For obvious reasons he'd never engaged in sex using his female parts. He'd never, in fact taken the chance of having a partner who might be interested in penetrating any part of him at all. He'd never despite his constant, pressing urge, taken a man to his bed. There were times Blair wondered if the drive to take a man to his bed was a symptom of his being a fertile Guide capable of bearing children. He suspected it was, his scientific brain collected the data and analyzed it, coming to the preliminary conclusion he had no intention of every exploring. There was no safe way to explore it. He'd been a virgin to all but women. It was horrible, his introduction to men. Brutal and inhuman. He did his best not to remember it in detail.

Now he'd been "rescued" again. Was the possession of two Sentinels. He was not any freer for the rescue. The one thing he'd gained was relief from sex. And from beatings. Neither Sentinel raised a hand to him. They were firm but not physically abusive. The two Sentinels who now owned him had not hurt or harmed him in any manner. He was gently handled. He was not molested. The also didn't speak to him often. Blair felt like he wasn't even there much of the time, like a table that was washed,
and cared for, but you'd never think to converse with it. He didn't doubt he was constantly under watch.

He was never alone. He accompanied the detectives to the police precinct, spent his days and afternoons in the Guide Care Center. Where there was nothing to do but placidly watch specialized television programs, or read the simple, excruciatingly boring books left around for the use of himself or the other Guides in the center, only a few of whom were actually able to read.

He was five months pregnant now. The pregnancy would have been apparent to everyone if he wasn't always so heavily draped. He ate the nutritious if bland food they'd provided for him. "Breeding Blend", the box read, with the picture of a massively pregnant and vapidly content Guide depicted on the front of the box. It was like a giant, green and brown, grainy cookie compressed into a slightly moist square. He munched on the cookies with a distinct lack of enthusiasm. Regardless of the claim it had all the nutrients a pregnant Guide needed, the taste was nothing to write home about, the texture wasn't so bad.

There was no variety of activity or of food. All interactions between the Guides in the Center were observed. If voices were raised, or any degree of excitement seemed about to erupt, the Guides were separated and kept apart until they calmed down into total un-reactivity. Then, docile, they were let back into the general room to mingle. Many lounged in heaps together, cuddling wordlessly. Absently stroking or petting each other. Blair couldn't bring himself to do that with total strangers. He'd never seen one of their faces.

From time to time a Sentinel would appear and take his or her Guide off to one of the surrounding rooms. Blair knew what happened in those rooms. The Guides returned a short time later, the Sentinels leaving with a spring in their steps.

Blair thought he would scream. What he wouldn't give for an hour on a computer. Or for paper to write on, not paper to draw on with crayons. A text book...anything that was a challenge to his mind. At this rate he feared they would make him insane before very long. His brain clamored to be used. Stimulated. He needed to do more than walk placidly through life, biding his time until a Sentinel wished to make use of him. He needed intellectual pursuits, goals, fun. He feared for his own child. The one presently safe in his womb, but due to be delivered in the not distant future. He couldn't tolerate having his child raised like this, to be a House Guide. Never to have a thought that was uniquely his own.

He had to do something to change this life. This boredom. He had to find a way. It wasn't a hard conclusion to reach. But what he should do to change his lot was harder. Much, much harder. He had only one tool to use. He couldn't talk to his Sentinels and reason with them. It was too automatic to the Sentinels not to listen to a Guide's words. They would tune him out, he wouldn't have a chance to change their views within the time frame he was working with.

The only tool he had that had any hope of succeeding to influence them quickly was his body. He had to make them care for him, care what happened to him and to the child he was carrying. Make them see him as a person. He had to take his veils off, at least in the privacy of their home. He wasn't sure what he'd do if they tried to take his baby from him after it was born. He had no idea if that was common practice or not.

The thought of sex was enough to make him ill. No man had touched him gently when it came to sexual intercourse. His enjoyment of the act had been unimportant. He'd hated it, dreaded it, each and every time. Especially when he'd figured out he was pregnant. He'd feared the rough, uncaring use of his body would result in a miscarriage. But his body was tough and his body's preferred state, it became apparent, was pregnancy. Nothing disturbed the child inside. Blair felt intense relief.
Now he was forced, for his own sanity, and his baby's, to contemplate luring his current Sentinels into sex. For his sake and for the sake of his child. He had to start now, as soon as possible, before his size increased to the point his Sentinels feared it would harm him to have sex. Because these two men actually cared if he was hurt. Blair was shocked, but also utterly confident of the fact.

They didn't see him as completely human, they weren't that enlightened, but they'd never hurt him. Never let anyone harm him. The one time when a whip was raised to him in the Guide Care Center, Rafe had appeared as if by magic and ripped the offending implement out of the caretaker's fist, shouting at him, radiating his fury.

The conversation that had followed once the yelling stopped, was low and intense and all from Rafe's side, the caretaker listening with huge eyes, mouth gaping in shock, backed up against a wall, Rafe's clawed hands digging into the plaster to either side of the man's head. But the man was a caretaker, and used to dealing with unreasonable Sentinels, so he took it in stride. Blair was very careful to keep his own head down, and not to give the chastised man any focus for his affronted pride. He sat all the rest of the day unmoving, giving no excuse to the man for milder forms of discipline, let alone raising the whip again.

Now, back at the loft, Blair knew he had to begin. He had to go to one of the men and convince them to lay with him. He shuddered. And he had to make himself want it. Which, while difficult, wasn't entirely impossible. His body was betraying him. He wanted to be near the Sentinels. He craved their proximity. Insane. He shook his head. How unbelievable was that? He'd only known rape at the hands of men, yet here he was not only planning to coerce them into sex, but actually wanting it at some distant molecular level. It was so very wrong.

But physiology was physiology. His body was tuned to them, to Sentinels. And if he didn't plan on being sold to a Farm, having his male genitalia removed so his body would concentrate on the very female role of conceiving and bearing children pregnancy after pregnancy, then he'd better get on with it. He'd better ingratiate himself to them.

Deciding which man to approach first was hard. The younger Sentinel responded to him with arousal not even Blair could miss. His breathing increased, his pupils dilated, his skin flushed, and from time to time Blair couldn't help but note the erection tenting his pants. Rafe desired him, but never touched him in anyway that wasn't soothing or comforting; when the younger of his Sentinels was aroused he kept his distance from Blair. It didn't take much to see why. The older Sentinel, the dominant one, would beat the holy crap out of him if he didn't. Blair, while not seeing any violence between the two men, was sure of it.

So that left him with the older Sentinel, Ellison. The Senior. The only one he'd seen taking a sexually active role, mounting his Companion, Rafe. Which happened with regularity, neither Sentinel seemed overly concerned with privacy from Blair when they had sex. Blair never saw Rafe in any position that hinted at dominance. Rafe was only allowed to be beneath the dominant Jim. Not to ride him from up top, even as the partner being penetrated. In fact, the only position they used was Rafe on his belly and Jim behind him, on top.

And Jim was an aggressive top. Blair was afraid, watching him, of that degree of aggression. What if it hurt the baby? He felt he was caught between a rock and a hard place, not sure if what he came up with as a plan was the right thing to do, but afraid of doing nothing and losing everything.

He was less afraid of Rafe as a sexual partner, but that wasn't an option, unless he was reading the situation wrong. He was left with Jim.
Chapter 6

Blair took a deep breath. Another. He'd made himself a deadline. Today was that day, that deadline. Today he would make the first step in his war to become more than a faceless, discardable, replaceable Guide. He took a third, timorous breath. Squared his shoulders. Tensed. Decided. Resolute. He was ready.

He didn't move, waiting until his courage built up, agreed with his resolve. His long fingered hands were cradling his mounded belly, taking strength from the knowledge of the life he was shielding inside. He would win, because failing was unacceptable. Failing would mean this little life he carried would have no more hope than Blair had now.

It was time. Now was the time. His gaze drifted to the windows, desperate for a distraction, he'd settle for one of any kind. Dark outside, rain falling in a patter against the loft's windows, one or two cracked open a mere inch to let a little of the freshness that always followed rain into the loft. It was warm, and homey, and Blair felt reasonably safe. He felt protected from the world outside. But not from the reality that lingered inside.

He watched the two Sentinels moving around each other in the kitchen. Rafe had come home with a limp that was slowly getting better as he gingerly walked it out, bending from time to time to massage the big muscles of his hamstrings. Ellison was quieter than usual, and more solicitous of his Companion, once stopping the other man to examine his leg with careful, but thorough hands while Rafe stood, docile. Those kind of hands, that kind of touch, Blair could live with. He clenched his jaw. It was time. He didn't move.

Blair wondered what had happened during the day. Rafe had come to pick him up out of the Care Center, had been limping then, almost dragging his leg. Obviously Rafe had been hurt, but how? And by who or what? Blair had wanted to offer to help him, to offer his shoulder as support, but they were in public...and he was afraid to push it.

Blair watched as Jim wrapped an arm around Brian's waist, tugged him near, taking the casserole dish out of his hands. It thunked on the counter, a frozen block of ice. Well, dinner was going to be late. It had to thaw first. Which would take hours. Jim held Brian against his body, running a hand up and down his spine. His head was only inches higher than Brian's, and was bent down so that their eyes were level. They, or rather, Ellison, was speaking, and Rafe was listening, his body melting into the touch that smoothed up and down his spine.

Blair wondered if he'd get some of that tonight. Warm touches. Caring touches. He wasn't ignored as much as he had been at first. When they let him alone, let him chose his sheltered places in the loft, places where he could hide, where no one could find him, sneak up on him without his knowing, seeing. But things were changing. A little.

More and more lately the younger member of the mated pair would put a dish for Blair at the table with real food on it, not Guide Chow, dry, processed "Pregnancy Treats for your Guide", or something equally repulsive. Ellison would frown, serious, but not stop him. Rafe had presented Blair with a sliced and cored pear just this morning. Blair had almost slipped in the drool that ran down his chin as he ate the fresh fruit.
Now he heard slicing again, the knife making its quiet impact on the well scrubbed cutting board. No chance of any lingering, food borne bacteria in this house, not with two Sentinels obsessed with cleaning, and supplied with unending quantities of bleach, baking soda and Mr Clean. Jim had stepped back from Rafe and was now the one in front of the board wielding the knife. Blair felt a tiny wave of disappointment. It was Rafe who liked to slip him tidbits.

Maybe two inches taller than his tall enough Companion, wider, thicker with defined muscle, and sporting less hair, Ellison was an impressive figure. He didn't walk around without a shirt, but nor did he try to hide from Blair. Blair had seen him naked, sweaty, hot, and in the throes of hard, energetic sex many times now. Jim made no protest, took no action to eject Blair from the area when he and Rafe coupled.

Blair's heart had pounded wildly, overcome with fear and loathing the first time. He'd had flashes of his own assaults while he listened. The second time he'd crept up the stairs and caught flashes of what was happening. He's gone up there because he had to be sure the noises coming from Rafe weren't sounds of pain. He couldn't bear it if he didn't try to find out. What could he do if it was force? If Ellison was forcing Rafe? Hurting him? Nothing, really, but he had to know.

The tableau of the two men together, it was stunning. Ellison's back was rippled with defined muscle, his buttocks and thighs clenched and released, beautiful, and terrifying. Blair shook as he made himself not leave, made himself be Rafe's witness, in case things turned brutal. Jim's response to seeing Blair was no response at all. He continued to drive himself into Brian's splayed body, bending down occasionally to lick at the sweat beading along the back of his mate's neck. An action that always made Rafe shudder and moan.

Blair stayed, crouched along the stairs, poised to flee if he was approached. He watched. He watched as Jim bent Rafe's head back, fist tangled in the luxurious brown hair, full of it, tugging Brian up, bending his head to the side, twisting, until he could kiss him, claim the open mouth, swallow the gasping, breathy moans and cries as he was taken with authority, passion.

Shock was the perfect word for how Blair felt seeing the kiss, the arch of Brian's neck, the trickling sweat slipping down his throat, his bobbing Adam's apple, the clean line of his chin, his spit shined lips, and Jim's as they fed on each other's mouths. Jim pulled away and Rafe's tongue followed a fraction of an inch out of those swollen lips. Jim had looked down at him, heard the sounds of his aroused mate, and pushed Brain face down onto the bed. And proceeded to fuck him hard and unrelenting.

It was then when Blair realized just how strong the younger Sentinel was. With Jim's power pushing down on him, he flexed his body, heaving, lifting their combined weight up off of the bed, pressing his hips hard into the cup of his dominant partner's pelvis, his arms out thrust, ripping the heavy cotton sheets with no effort, the tearing sound only making the whole scene hotter. Blair gaped.

Now, weeks later, here Blair was, watching the men prepare the evening meal they would share. They moved together as well as practiced dance partners, sliding around each other, never in the way, like a choreographed ballet. Even the new limp didn't effect their awareness and ability to anticipate and match each other's moves.

Jim reached out, his hand extending, plucking a fruit from the bowl on the kitchen island. The knife sliced through the tender flesh, parting it easily. Blair's mouth watered. He imagined he could smell it, a tendril of juicy sweetness in the air. Succulent and moist, the pear was at the peak of ripeness, it's pale green skin blushed with red here and there. Juice dripped as the blade moved in a slow arc, cutting away the inner core and seeds, then quartered the remainder, then into eighths. Jim set the
pear on a dish, washed and wiped his hands, then handed the dish to Brian.

Brian seemed unprepared for that and it wasn't until Jim's head tilted toward the Guide perched in a tight crouch at the end of one of the couches, that the younger Sentinel caught on. He looked over at Blair, who under his veil was licking his lips, unable to stop the flow of saliva rising in his mouth at the idea of that efficiently sliced pear. Darting an incredulous look at his Senior, Rafe hesitated, then at Jim's almost smile, more a relaxing of his stern features than a true smile, he went to kneel at the end of the couch in front of Blair.

It was now or never, Blair told himself. What better chance would he have than this apparently sanctioned contact between himself and Rafe? Hands trembling he lifted the edge of his veil, not all the way, but enough that from his vantage point on the floor, Rafe had his first clear view of Blair's mouth. The impulse that hit Rafe was to turn his eyes aside, not to look. One did not look on the unveiled face of a Guide that was not fully his to see. It was wrong. But, heart thumping, Rafe did what was forbidden, what was not to be done. He looked, and seeing, he failed to look away.

The full lips were naturally tinted coral, moist and parted just allowing a glimpse of small white teeth, the tip of a pink tongue, as Rafe watched he saw the Guide lick his lips, a quick nervous motion, leaving a trail of damp across the lower one. Brain could smell the want on the Guide. The need... He groaned sub vocally, only just suppressing it, keeping it from echoing in the loft. Was the almost sound loud enough for Jim to hear? He didn't know, he didn't look to see.

He held out the dish in both hands, holding the rim firmly, making it clear, he hoped, that he would not relinquish it to the Guide's hands. Blair's shrouded hands rose up, up, and molded around his own, only the one layer of finely woven, shimmering cloth between them, their skin. The heat was glorious. Rafe dropped his head, inhaled, smelled ripened fruit, silk, warmth, and Blair. He smelled his own reaction, pheromones splashing into the air around them, escalating.

Shaking he freed one hand, then the other, letting Blair take the bowl, move it to his chest, reaching with bare fingertips into the dish of wet slices, selecting one. Rafe watched from less than a foot away, leaning in, forward, close. Blair raised the slice to his mouth, bit into it, his lips fitting, framing the bit, his teeth biting into it. Juice lingered on his chin. Rafe started to shake.

Blair swallowed, something was not right. He hesitated before taking another bite. Vainly he tried to see through the now doubly thick veiling over his eyes. He couldn't see... and the dish was bumped, he glanced down, saw tanned fingers, shaking, reach into the dish and draw out a slice of pear. He watched as the slice was lifted, moving up, towards his half revealed face, to his mouth. What choice did he have? He accepted the offered fruit, taking it delicately between his teeth, sucking, drawing it into his mouth. Delectable. Juice filled his mouth, rushed over his taste buds. Fresh, sweet, tangy. He swallowed the nectar. Parted his lips, hoping for more offerings.

Slowly they progressed. Slice by slice, two, four, five...and a shadow fell over them as they huddled closer, robes brushing shirt, trousers, fingers sneaking tiny touches, accidental, except that they were calculated, deliberate, wanted. Blair felt a thrill of triumph. Rafe was touching him, gentle, careful, touches that were filled with desire. He would have him. He would care. A thumb brushed Blair's bottom lip, light, only a whisper, but the touch flew through him like fire. His toes curled.

And Rafe was gone, or at least not in front of Blair, not touching him any more. He was face down on the rug, Jim over him, holding him down, a knee in the small of his back, a hand cupping his head stroking his thick, shining cap of hair as Rafe forgot himself and struggled. There were words, a
constant stream of them, being spoken to Brian as he writhed, too quiet for Blair to hear anything but the tone. The soothing, deep rumble. And slowly, gradually, Rafe quieted. Lay still. Jim stroked his hair, and again, moved to straddle him rather than kneel upon him.

Blair sensed it when the Senior Sentinel's attention was on him, rather than on his Companion. He shrank into the cushions. Hung his head, let the veil fall to cover his face. Oh, gods, what now? Had Blair pushed too hard too fast? Heat, strength, the large body of the Senior Sentinel was there, crowding him back further into the cushions of the couch. The man was all around him, lifting him high, setting him down, between the iron hard thighs.

Blair felt an overwhelming urge to scream. Something cool, sweet, tender touched his compressed lips, he jerked away, before the taste registered. More fruit. His veil was tugged all the way off of his face, but he faced away from the Sentinel behind him.

Pulse racing Blair relaxed by inches, fractions of an inch. The pear slid into his mouth, Jim's finger making light contact with his mouth. Blair chewed, swallowed, his head tilting back on his slim neck, the back of his skull finding a cradle on Jim's chest. Resting there. Another piece, wet, delicious. Blair ate. Hand fed. Until the last slice and there was no more fruit.

Sticky fingers pressed his lips, feeling on the edge of a faint, on the brink of disaster, Blair parted his lips, gasping, panting, his mind not able to reason, to think, to decide if this was right, or if he should run, flee, hide. Gently the finger touched his teeth, slipped past, into his mouth, along his gums, over his tongue. Soaked with juice the finger was tartly pleasing. Bravely Blair closed his eyes, drew in a sharp, shuddering breath as the finger went deeper, gently.

He sucked. Suckled. The chest under his head and shoulders tensed, contracted, and rumbled against his back. The second hand, the one not belonging to the finger Blair was nursing, came up to caress his face, his puckered mouth, his cheeks. Blair licked at the finger, wanted to roll his tongue around it, but found he couldn't. His mind was already spinning, warning him to stop, to run. Before it was too late. It was too fast. Too soon. He drew back, fast, pulling off the finger, turning in a spasm of terror clinging, irrationally to the man on who's lap he rested, in who's arms he shook, and who's finger he had first suckled than rejected in the span of a few moments.

No blows fell on him. No words of censure. No slaps, nor was he turned to his back and put to use. He was rocked. Held. Then lifted and settled on the couch robes tucked all around him, snugly. From his vantage point he watched the big form of Jim Ellison move to the figure of his Companion, still spread eagled on the carpet. He watched as the fruit dish was set aside.

Blair watched as Jim tugged down the pants his Companion wore and with little preparation entered him. Rafe crying out. Straining, taking it all. Clawing at the rug, at the man behind him, lifting his hips. Meeting thrust for thrust. His flat belly off of the floor drum taut, his hips flexed hard, tilted. Head flung up. Eyes, a hot chocolate, glittering with more than a hint of madness, fastened on Blair as the Guide lay in his cocoon of silk, knees drawn up to his chest, tucked in tight beneath his chin.

There was a strange, fierce beauty to them as they came together, mating, an animalistic way in which they moved and responded to each other. It wasn't gentle it wasn't soft, it was all power overflowing, battling and writhing, two sweating grunting men, clothes ripping as they fought in an ancient dance of supremacy. Every time it was like this, alpha fighting for the top spot, and winning, by a hair. The straining, defeated male surrendering with ill grace, always starting at a disadvantage, face down, yet knee trembling gorgeous as he submitted to the victor, to the one who always won.

Blair could see him, could see how hard, how erect he was, Rafe's neglected shaft vibrating, flushed
with blood, hanging below his belly, visible between his spread and braced legs. Neglected as he was used, his hips held by rigid, triumphant fingers digging in. Yet he was beautiful. He head fell forward, his shoulders shook, tightened, his dark coppery disc nipples stood out, aroused nubs amongst the light sprinkling of flat, smooth chest hair. One single set.

Blair's hand moved up his own body, to his lowest set of nipples. Not a Guide's body. A Sentinel's lean rangy frame. Built for struggle, for battle. For competition. There was a reason, beyond senses that Sentinels made up the lion's share of the troops, the police, the law enforcement agencies. Pound for pound they shattered any notion of an equality of physical strength and ability. Mundane man could not touch them. Guides had no chance to resist.

Rafe's head went back hard, Smacking into Jim's shoulder. He hissed, then let out a howl as trembling took him head to foot. His ejaculation shot across the floor, into the air, untouched, falling like liquid pearls, translucent essence. And Rafe hit the ground himself, both hands smacking hard, his back stone-stiff, Jim glued to his back, his buttocks, tight driven, then shaking, balls taut against his pelvis, his lips peeled back in a grimace of pure, joyous conquest.

Then they fell, one on top of the other. Still but for the panting. The sweat rolling down heaving sides. Limp, stacked. Jim's knee slid down Rafe's hip to thump against the carpeted floor. Thump!

Blair drew in his first breath of the last few minutes. His head spinning. Gods. How could he? How was it...no, he couldn't. His hands clenched over his baby. He had to. There was no choice but to do it. He would, because he had to. Or he had to give up everything. He'd made the first move. And this had happened. He had had an influence. They reacted to him. He had a chance. They would see him. He wouldn't be just an anonymous Guide, hidden in layers of exquisite, expensive cloth.

He'd begun. He'd revealed, willingly, his face to them, in full light. They had looked on him. Or at least part of him. He'd had Jim's fingers in his mouth, both of them had touched his bared skin. It hardly mattered it was touch lighter than a feather. It happened, just as he'd hoped. And he wouldn't chicken out now. He'd be more than a Guide, more than a warm wetness to sink into, to breed, he'd be Blair. Or he'd die trying.

On the carpet Ellison stirred, Rafe letting out a noise of protest, wordless. Blair watched as the older man reached out, finding the empty dish that had held the incredible pear, and dipped a single finger into the juice that filled the bottom. One finger, shining, wet, lifted from the bowl. Ellison brought the finger to Brian's mouth, and Brian's eyes flew open, sniffed, and then engulfed the finger in his mouth, lids fluttering as he tasted Blair mingled with the juice. He sucked.

Blair shivered, undecided if it was a good, or a very, very bad shiver.
Blair showed now, even wearing the full robes, his belly riding before him, his back-leaning posture a dead giveaway. Men and women would stop on the street and turn to watch him go past. He was happy to have Jim, Rafe, or better yet both with him when he noticed the stares. Breeding Guides were a rarity, the vast majority of them lived at breeding farms. The most intense stares came from men he knew were Sentinels. The look in those men's eyes...a bright hunger. He always looked away, even bound in all the layers of his veil and robes he felt naked. Exposed.

Jim and Brian were intimidating enough and well known enough that Blair was never actually approached by any of the Sentinels who watched him. Everyone knew of and talked about the ruling family when they had the slightest chance. Even the caretakers held whispered gossip sessions in the Guide Care Center, right under James Ellison's nose at the Cascade PD. Blair, recognizing a valuable source of information, did not report any of the talk to his Sentinels.

Blair learned through judicious eavesdropping that the only Sentinel with enough clout to challenge Jim in the Cascade Territory would be his father, William. William Ellison had his own female dominant Guide, one he did not share. His Companion, as was expected by radical traditionalists unlike his older son's Companion, was piously celibate, dedicated to the indomitable will and need of his Senior. He was also thoroughly pitied by the gossips Blair heard, who held sex in high regard. The Companion's own needs were put aside in traditional matches, until such time as his alpha died and he himself would become an alpha in his own right.

Blair absently wondered if the Companion the caretakers were talking about was a virgin to all sex. He knew that some wealthy Sentinel families arranged pairings for their sons and daughters. It was conceivable that the Companion might have been kept utterly pure in hopes of attracting a traditional mate like William Ellison. Unlike virginal Guides, a virginal Sentinel was prized. On equal footing with a pregnant Guide.

Blair later, listening to a one sided conversation at the loft, had picked up on the salient fact that the elder Ellison was coming to visit his son. And at that time would expect to inspect his son's new Guide. He would either render his approval, or his disapproval. With the implications therein. Blair was reduced to a bundle of nerves as the day of the visit approached.

William entered the loft without knocking, using his key. Blair startled horribly when the door burst open and a tall, craggy faced, very tanned man confronted him as he walked across the living room floor, his veil lifted just enough to show his eyes, and make it easier for him to negotiate the apartment in the dim lighting his sharp eyed Sentinels preferred. He was wishing he had the courage to ask Jim for glasses. The door flying open shocked the thought right out of Blair's mind. He "meeped" in alarm.

Their eyes met, stern, slate grey and wide, shocked, cobalt blue. Blair froze in his tracks, afraid to even reach up and lower his veil, or to turn away and hide his face. Behind the 'Ruler of Cascade's Sentinels' stood an even taller man, at least six and a half feet tall, pale blond, wide and muscular, extremely handsome, about thirty years old. Blair realized it was William Ellison's celibate Companion, and that he was also looking over William's shoulder at Blair's unveiled countenance, his hazel eyes almost falling out of their sockets despite his success in keeping the rest of his face expression free.

The draped Guide between the two visiting Sentinels was a silent lump of thickly piled pure white
cloth, one that Blair hardly noticed as she stood unmoving as a stump. He could not even differentiate a single bodily contour under the many layers. Which meant only one thing. The Guide was wearing a frame, a lightweight but strong metal structure that supported the layered robes. Underneath it the Guide walked naked, not a stitch of fabric actually touching her skin, only straps from the frame making contact with her body, and padded shoes. Only the most conservative of the traditionalists framed their Guides, intent on reducing all external stimuli through the thickness of the robes, sounds were muffled, scent and vision impossible, the frame preventing touch or an involuntary taste. Blair's knees began knocking together.

Rafe reached Blair in three leaping strides and jerked the veil down over his gawping, milk white face. Then he knelt to his Senior's father and made his obeisance. Blair spilled down at Rafe's side, Rafe's arms shielding him, cushioning his belly, face down on the flooring, curled in as tight a ball as his pregnant state would allow. Rafe's hand was shaking on the back of his neck, gentle but obviously alarmed at the turn of events.

William Ellison moved into the room, each step deliberately ringing as booteheels connected with the hardwood floor. His head was held high, he didn't look down, ignoring the two persons huddled on the floor. The sole of his boot crunched down on an edge of Blair's coral colored robe, and then he and his group were past, in the center of the living room. Jim was coming down the stairs to meet his father, irritated but not surprised that he hadn't heard them coming and that his father had deliberately used his key instead of announcing himself by knocking on the door.

"I am here to inspect your Guide." The tone was cool, with a note of strong disapproval already embedded. No greetings were exchanged. Blair's insides writhed. What would happen if Jim's father found him wanting? The advice of the ruler of Cascade had to have an impact on his fate.

"Certainly, Senior Sentinel." Jim replied, excessively formal. No niceties passed between the two men, no mention of the family ties they shared. "Guide." Jim didn't use his name specifically, of course he couldn't, not without agitating his father, but Blair felt the summons, Jim meant him not William's Guide.

Blair remembered very well what traditional Sentinels expected without being told by Jim. He crawled towards the men standing in the middle of the loft's main room. His belly was heavy, ponderous, but he managed well enough, a rolling, swaying motion, he had no choice. He was immensely careful to keep his hands and feet covered by at least a foot of cloth, he wasn't going to risk showing even the tiniest flash of skin unbidden a second time. He made it at last to Jim's feet. He could feel the approval radiating off the older Sentinel, his next statement only confirming it.

"He moves beautifully, breathtaking. I will see the Guide upstairs," came the formal voice. "Our Companions will remain below." Blair knew without asking that William didn't want his Companion to see any more of a Guide unveiled. It was not a suggestion. Blair waited for the order to crawl up the stairs, it would be hard, but he'd do his best. He was sure that his every move would be watched, especially given the statement of how William Ellison thought of Blair's crawl to Jim's feet.

Jim made a sound that Blair interpreted as unhappy, and suddenly he was swept up in powerful arms. Jim had picked him up and was even now striding towards the upstairs bedroom. Blair had no idea if William was in front of them or behind. He was placed carefully in the center of the huge bed, Jim's arms sliding out from under him. Blair didn't dare move a muscle.

His robes were taken up at the hem and knotted under his feet, making it impossible to raise the fabric from that direction. Blair didn't even twitch. Then both sleeves to his robes were also knotted. The sleeves couldn't be scooted up to expose him either. Then Jim took his veil and knotted it under Blair's chin, protecting his face from exposure, though Blair thought mournfully it was a little late for
that. Then his Sentinel was gone from his side, Blair fought off a whimper. He wanted Jim back.

The mattress next to his right hip dipped. He tensed, and unexpectedly the mattress on the other side dipped as well. Both Sentinels were on the bed.

Unerringly the new set of hands that came to his body came through the robes at his belly, finding the slit in the fabric without trouble, no fumbling. Blair shuddered, anticipating the dreaded contact, then the hands were on him. Not Jim's touch, he knew that feel, the safety of it. It wasn't Jim touching him now.

These hands were of a size with Jim's, but less roughened, just as warm, equally strong and authoritative. Blair had thought the touch would be like that of the Vet or worse, that his skin would want to crawl away from it. That was not how it felt. He stopped shaking, his teeth loosened from where they'd been ready to sink into his lip. These hands were safe hands.

They spread out over his swollen abdomen. Careful, sensitive hands. Large, encompassing most of his belly, even distended as it was. Fingertips pressed, shifted, pressed again. The sensation of a powerful Sentinel touching him flowed over Blair like warmed honey. All of his nipples tightened in a wave of sensual pleasure. His toes flexed.

Hands of a Sentinel who valued a Guide. His belly was stroked, petted, every stretch mark traced. Breath feathered over the exposed mound of his middle, and Blair hardly had time to do more than draw a surprised breath before a face made contact with his skin, William Ellison's ear pressing into his abdomen, listening with hyper acute senses to the infant moving inside him. Not even Jim had done this. Blair knew Jim's hands, usually through the drape of fabric, cupping his belly, or bathing him with a soapy washcloth, but not this.

Blair gasped. William's hand patted his stomach soothingly. Then one moved lower, touching him intimately, cradling Blair's genitals in the palm of his hand. Warm again, safe again. Blair was not uncomfortable nor was he afraid. He didn't understand it, but he knew this man wouldn't hurt him, would kill anyone who tried to hurt him, protect him just as his son would. William kept up the listening, not lifting his head. He spoke against Blair's body, a quiet, low voice.

"Ah. He is carrying two. Look at the expanse of his belly. Far too large for one. You should have agreed to an ultrasound, Jimmy. The health of a Guide should not be taken lightly. Doctor Miller will attend the birthing. Not that imbecile you've taken on. He's lost four pups in the last year. Unforgivable." William Ellison lifted his head at last, caressing Blair's stomach with unmistakable affection. He even forgave the man for calling his baby, his babies, he corrected himself, "pups".

Jim grunted. Blair was more pleased. Did that mean he wouldn't have to see the Vet any longer? Would he have a real Doctor? He automatically crossed his fingers.

"He came highly recommended..." Jim began to say, defensively. His father interrupted him, petting Blair softly, comfortingly, keeping his voice well modulated, not upsetting the Guide.

"Not highly enough. Doctor Miller will see your Guide tomorrow. I will call him this afternoon. You know next to nothing about caring for Guides properly. The traditional ways serve a purpose. Guides are not Sentinels. They cannot endure the same hardships."

"We have had this discussion. I will not frame my Guide. I will not force my Companion to become celibate. We agree to disagree." Jim's tone was granite, final.

"A Guide's empathy is greatly enhanced by the reduction of physical stimuli. Their sensitivity climbs astronomically when sensory input is reduced. Framing won't reduce the closeness of your bond. It
will be close, intense, son. Claiming need only occur once or twice a year to maintain the strongest of bonds."

"I am not interested in becoming chaste, nor having my Companion or my Guide remain untouched in order to make my bond more spiritual. I know you believe in it, but I don't." Jim's tone was steady as a rock.

"Yes, I saw. I saw you allow your Guide to traverse your home without a veil. Soon you will be worse than Stephen, his Guide wears only the thinnest of veils, any Sentinel can pick out her features as if she was entirely unveiled. It is an invitation to assault. Putting a Guide in harm's way like that can not be countenanced." The way that William Ellison felt about that was abundantly clear. "I have seen the uncovered face of your Guide, for shame. A sight that is meant only for the eyes of one, for the eyes of the Sentinel who will Claim him, and rarely at that. A Guide is a blessing, and should not be squandered or treated as cavalierly as you do. How is he to understand you value him if you share him out like that?"

Blair wasn't at all happy with how the conversation was progressing. Strangely, William Ellison was still touching him, and the contact was still pleasant, more than pleasant actually. Blair wondered if the older Sentinel was aware of the ongoing touch as he spoke so intently to his adult son. Now Jim was talking.

"My Guide is a breeding Guide. He will of necessity bear many children, he will have to have contact with them. I won't take them from him..." Blair's heart leaped at the statement, he would be permitted to keep his children near!

"You are not thinking of having him bred naturally?" The older Sentinel's disgust was apparent in every word. "Artificial insemination is a simple, far more tolerable solution, rather than having stud after stud put to him until he catches."

It was Jim's turn to interrupt. "He has not delivered even one, yet." Blair felt uneasy, again. "And you know how I feel about medical procedures. The natural way is best. My Guide will not be inseminated, nor will he be cut to make him breed faster. He will nurse his pups, not bottle feed them."

"It is never too soon to plan. And new ways are not always wrong. I agree on the cutting, a barbaric holdover from darker times." William Ellison stated.

"I will take care of his future when the time is right. But the time is not now, the place for it not here. He is panting. He is frightened. Stress is the last thing he needs so near to his delivery." Jim said firmly.

"Very well, Jimmy. Later we'll talk again. And I will send Dr. Miller tomorrow to check in on him. Your Guide is magnificent, a glorious creature, you should be thankful and very, very careful wth his handling. There are so few like him. He deserves to be well cared for, by the best practitioners available, not some idiotic boob who might cost him his pups. And none of that foul Guide Chow, it is poison, feed him fruits and vegetables, real meat." With that the warm hands were gone. The robes falling back into place, covering every inch of him. Blair was almost sorry to have the touch leave his skin, It had been nice to be touched....even if he wasn't so keen on the topics of conversation.

Blair heard the steps of the two men going down the stairs. He was uncertain how he felt about it all. He hated the idea of not being able to be touched, isolated from his senses, just to make his empathy stronger. He also hated the idea of being bred, but if it had to happen he preferred artificial insemination to being put to breed with male after male until he conceived. He didn't care which was more natural. And since when was his older Sentinel into all natural things? He brought home
hamburgers and fries at least once a week, Blair smelled them even if he wasn't allowed to eat them. And pizza, too.

And how weird was it that he hadn't hated the feel of this man's hands on him? What did that mean? He was tickled pink over the Vet getting the boot....

Suddenly Blair heard the front door close crisply as presumably William, his Companion and his Guide, left the loft. Then he heard heated words start up in the living area below. He sat up, ready to roll to his feet, only to find he was still quite effectively tied. He worked at the knots, fingers made clumsy by the layers of cloth he had to work through. He couldn't use his teeth to get a grip. Finally he freed his hands, then bent forward to undo his feet.
Chapter 8

Chapter by neichan

Blair peeked over the rail of the loft, his head low to the bed, trying not to be too obvious and cause one of his Sentinels to run upstairs and pull him away from the edge. He was sent upstairs now whenever Jim or Brian heard anyone coming up the elevator or the outside stairwell. If he wasn't so hugely pregnant it would be a simple task, just a dash up the stairs. But it took both of them to get him up them quickly now. Blair felt his whole morning so far was spent going up and down. Jim had not forgiven his father the ambush entrance of the previous day, and both of the Sentinels were on edge, unable to relax. Rafe spent the majority of his morning in front of the door, on guard.

Blair was bored out of his mind, stuck up in the room, not even a television or music for distraction. And certainly not able to ask one of the men with hyper senses to turn up either downstairs loud enough that he could hear them in the loft room. He had paper and pen, an unexpected concession, but nothing tickled his fancy when he thought about writing. He did appreciate that the crayons of last month were no where in evidence. He was given a real, honest to god ink pen.

He could just imagine what would happen if he started writing his thoughts, impressions and experiences as a Guide down. That would get a quick veto once they saw what his views on the place Guides had in this current Sentinel dominated culture. Funny, that much of his Anthropology work for his thesis had focused on how Sentinels fit into and aided in the survival of primitive societies. And how Sentinels depended on the members of those societies. Not a lot of help now.

Blair had briefly considered what was different in the way modern Sentinels served their territories. That was one factor that didn't change. Sentinels had Territories and would not consider giving them up. They protected, policed and ran the territories with governments that functioned beside the Mundane governments. Sentinel law was different, sometimes subtly and sometimes blatantly, from Mundane law. Sentinels could not be tried or convicted in a Mundane court. However Mundanes were not extended the same immunity from Sentinel law. A Mundane breaking Sentinel law, might expect to be hunted down and punished. A bone of contention, but one no Mundane court had ever won an argument on.

Blair smiled, wryly. How strange was it that he had not found the time or inclination to look into the role and position of Guides. He was a Guide, always had been, and in the back of his mind he'd known it. Yet, he hadn't spent much brain power on the way Guides were forced to live in modern society, the system of virtual slavery that made up their lives. He intellectually knew the reason he'd failed to look into Guides. Part of it was because he was always secretly attracted to Sentinels. Another was he didn't want to draw attention to himself by the controversial study path. Guides weren't studied, except by Sentinels. He gave it a pass.

A big mistake on his part, he thought ruefully. There he was, one of the most recognized new talents on the scene, specializing in Sentinel Anthropology and the closed society of Sentinels, mostly in tribal cultures, and he'd lost his chance to look into Guides, to make a difference where it would have made so much more of an impact. Where it might have changed his own life. Maybe. Or he might just have been found out earlier.

Instead....he drew his head in from the rail, shifted on the bed, uncomfortable, his belly making it hard to find many positions he could tolerate for long. He plumped the pillows, at least three of which were brand new and were used every night to help his sleep, propping arms and legs and head so sleeping on his side was possible.
He smiled in relief once he found a semi tolerable position. If he began to write about Guides, if he began to pen down his thoughts and conclusions taken from his less than one year as a Guide....would Jim or Rafe feel compelled to destroy his work? They still hadn't let him near a computer, not that he'd asked outright. When he got near to one, they headed him off, almost as if they feared he would break it, something like that. Get jam on it. He shook his head, if they only knew. He could run circles around them when it came to computers. Even pregnant and standing on his head. The thought caused another twinge in his back. He shifted.

Rafe kept looking up at him, as if sensing the Guide's discontent. Blair was almost giddy with relief when finally a set of footsteps stopped at the door instead of continuing past. The knock was anticlimactic. Jim went to the door, Rafe stood at the base of the stairs to the loft bedroom, Blair looked out over the railing, refusing to hide.

The Doctor was slim, graceful, about fifty years old, and one of the rare female Sentinels. Blair was immediately intrigued. She held out a hand towards Jim. Blair heard the suspicious sniff of his Senior owner, all the way up where he craned his neck down. Jim circled the woman, who stood very still as he did. Then Jim took her hand. Shook it. They each took a cautious step closer, the female bending her head so Ellison, the higher ranking Sentinel, could access her unprotected throat. Blair had not seen a Sentinel get his throat torn out, but he knew it did happen on occasion. He held his breath. The Doctor made it through the greeting unscathed.

Blair liked her, she felt right to him, small and birdlike quick in her movement. Energetic, and yet, oddly not threatening. Blair wanted her to be his Doctor. Jim was not going to send her away just because he was mad at his father. Blair crawled to the edge of the bed, stood up balancing his ungainly weight, and headed for the stairs as fast as he could and not risk a tumble. He held on to the railing as he went, encountering Rafe partway down, the younger Sentinel hovering anxiously, eyes dilated. If Blair tripped, he'd be caught, he wouldn't fall.

But if he had more than one rail to hang onto, then there would not be any risk of falling. Blair reached out and grabbed Rafe's arm. Brain stiffened, but didn't pull away, knowing it would make Blair fall for sure. He kept all of his attention focused on getting Blair safely down the stairs. Which took almost no time at all with help and with Blair in such a hurry. And then Blair darted, well, made his best effort at darting, straight at the woman standing next to a glowering Ellison.

Jim cut him off at the last possible moment. Catching Blair under the arms and stopping his forward progress. Blair tilted his head backward and peered up through his veil, trying to read his Sentinel accurately. Then, exasperated, he flipped it up and off of his face so he could see his Sentinel. Jim was instantly shocked as their eyes locked.

"My Doctor." Blair said, his hands fastened onto Jim's upper arms. "I want her to be my Doctor." He was positive of it. He felt the rightness of it. Caring and compassion poured off of her. Best of all she wasn't a man, wasn't male. He trusted her. Her eyes were a faded, jade green and kindly. Her greyed hair short and neat.

Jim stared at Blair, his face going thoughtful. It was the longest sentence his Guide had put together in the whole time since he'd been with them, since his rescue in fact. Rafe glided past, positioning himself to defend his Senior and his Guide if necessary. The Sentinel woman held her place, waiting patiently for permission to move further into the room. She put her hands behind her back, making it obvious she was not going to try to touch Blair without permission. She smiled at Blair.

"Hello." He said. "You are going to be my Doctor, aren't you?" He wanted someone to agree with him. Jim was apparently speechless, in full possessive mode, and Rafe wouldn't dare speak up on something like this. He was standing turned sideways to present a smaller target, his hands up,
aggressively defensive. Jim started to back Blair up.

"I would like to be." She answered him. "If your Sentinels will permit me." Jim's shoulders relaxed a fraction at that, he stopped moving. He liked being asked, not told. His father had taken the wrong tack, telling him, making it all but an order. Now the Doctor was asking, not telling. It was an olive branch, it gave him an out, put the decision in his hands. He turned and regarded her, putting Blair firmly behind him as he did so. Blair peered around his side, determined to see what happened as it unfolded.

"Sentinel Doctor Miller." Jim said at last, when his gaze had seen all there was to see.

"Senior Sentinel Ellison." She inclined her head, let her eyes rest on her feet for a few beats to show she recognized his status. Then she looked back up. Now that he was speaking she kept her gaze fastened on his face, respectful, not to be misinterpreted as aggressive. Her stance was submissive, but relaxed.

"My father wants you to tend to my Guide." Jim stated. "I have a Vet, he has been seeing our Guide, has cared for him since his arrival here. Why should I change that now?"

"Because I will do everything in my power to see your Guide comes through this with his full health, and with healthy infants. And I have been doing this a long, long time. I love my work and I am very good at it." She answered him softly, her expression open and sincere.

Jim scented her as she answered, testing her veracity. His eyes narrowed, but he found no duplicity, no deception in her words, she believed what she said. Blair inched up behind him hopefully.

The exam was different this time. One change was that Rafe was there, at his side, facing towards Blair's head, not looking down or back. Rather he sat rigidly staring ahead, but he was there and Blair could feel the comfort of not being alone. Rafe sat, uncomfortably, putting on a brave face, his hearing supplying all the information he needed to follow what was happening. His jaw was locked. His eyes unblinking.

In contrast Jim was watching every move the Doctor made, and Blair's reaction to it. Her touch was gentle, respectful, and she kept up a patterning of speech as she went on, letting the Guide know what was happening, what she was doing or about to do, and why. She explained his body to him, described what she felt and what it meant. Blair made a small sound and she asked him what he was feeling.

"Pressure, right...there." He said in a hushed voice. "Feels weird."

"Your cervix." Dr Miller said. "The infants are pushing down on it, and it is starting to thin. To stretch a little even now. Though I doubt you will go into labor for a week or more at least. Stay off your feet, rest up. Take the time now to relax and do a few less strenuous things, you are going to be very busy after the birth. You will need your energy."

"What kinds of things?" Blair asked, before he thought better of it. "I don't have any books, or a computer, you know what kind of stuff is on television." Blair turned and looked over at the movement at his side. Rafe was staring at him, mouth hanging open. "What? I can use a computer, I wrote my thesis on one." Rafe's gaze left his, snapping around to look out over the rail again.

Dr. Miller frowned. Her hand rested on Blair's bulging stomach. "Blair," she said, as if his name was just registering with her, her forehead wrinkled. "Doctor Blair Sandburg?" As if she was only just
figuring out who he was. That he wasn't just a Guide, hadn't always been a Guide and nothing more. "By the gods, you are Doctor Sandburg aren't you? Your veil, may I look at your face again?"

Jim growled, suspiciously, putting an arm across Blair's middle, blocking her from touching Blair above the waist. She flinched, blinked at him. But she tried to explain, bravely Blair thought.

"Don't you know who your Guide is? He wrote the latest and most insightful work on Sentinel instinct in tribal cultures in the last 100 years." Her voice was admiring, disbelieving. Blair fought not to look away, not to cover his face with his hands under its filmy veil. Both his Sentinels were looking at him now. Rafe's dark eyes were puzzled, not able to understand how a Guide could do the things the Doctor was saying he'd done. And Jim's eyes, ice blue. Chilled. Angry. Possessive. As if Blair had played a trick on him. Ellison growled.

Dr Miller left shortly after that. Blair was miserable. He curled up on the bedspread and cried.

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Pushing was not fun. Labor was not fun. Blair had already had more than enough of both and as of yet, had not delivered even one child. He was profoundly unhappy with the event now taking place. He wanted to be able to stop it in its tracks, but he knew he couldn't. It was inevitable. It would continue, go on, out of his hands. He wanted it to be over. Done with. And he never wanted to go through it again.

Dr. Miller's calm voice, even and quite reasonable, had initially soothed, but now he just wanted to scream at her. It didn't help that he was not pleased with the bed he was on, the downstairs one, the futon, not nearly as comfortable as the big bed where he had been sleeping, Jim between him and the stairs. Someone, no doubt one of his fastidious Sentinels, had covered the futon with what had to be a dozen layers of heavy duty plastic. Then a few sheets, but it still crackled every time he shifted. He felt like he was on top of a huge, slicker bag of potato chips and was at risk of sliding off and onto the floor at any time.

Rafe and Ellison had been sent out of the room immediately when the Doctor and her two assistants arrived. Blair felt inexplicably alone, even as the women bustled around him. He did understand why his Sentinels were sent out, Rafe's face had been the color of parchment. Ellison's had frozen in an expressionless mask. But even understanding, he resented it.

Ellison had found the wherewithal to get Blair out of the shower into the bed and robed head to foot before the Doctor and her assistants showed up. The appearance of the assistants who Ellison had not yet been introduced to had been a moment fraught with tension. It might have escalated, if Blair's unhappy howl hadn't interrupted the Sentinels before they could face off with the new arrivals.

Doctor Miller had told Jim and Brian that unless they were planning on helping with the birth themselves, she needed her assistants. It was then that reality hit Rafe at least square in the solar plexus, and horror washed over his face, turning it white. Dr. Miller could not hide her satisfaction at making her point. Ellison still growled, but less loudly as they bustled around Blair, setting up bassinets and clean towels and hot water. Dr Miller also had a cooler full of fruit ices and dilute juice for Blair to sip and suck on. That, too made him unhappy. This was going to be a long haul.

Hours. Blair had heard stories, but they hadn't really affected him one way or the other. He certainly had never been invited to a birthing. And none of his friends or acquaintances had given birth. Here he was, as far as he knew, the first of his former circle to go through labor. And he was so not enjoying it. In fact he was beginning to panic. He felt the telltale tendrils of terror whisper over his nerve endings, finding purchase and digging in, holding fast.

His breath went in and out far too rapidly, his fingers and toes beginning to cramp. He was pale and shaky. And still his labor continued, the contractions becoming harder, sharper somehow. He let out a whimper of distress. Clutching at the sheets under him, and when Dr Miller, murmuring, tried to get down between his legs to check him, he feebly kicked at her. More out of reflex than malice, but he nevertheless tumbled her back onto the floor.

She took a deep breath as she righted herself. Then approached him from the side.

"Blair. Blair, look at me." He shook his head, blue eyes huge with his growing panic, flitting around the room, lids open so wide his eyes looked on the verge of falling out of their sockets.
"Blair, there is no reason to be afraid. Your body knows how to do this. This is your children being born. This is the time you bring them to life, right here, right now. Take a breath. Be calm. Very calm. No need to worry. This is what you know how to do. It is built in. Slow, even breath. Yes."

She wasn't as happy with his meager success at slowing his breathing as she pretended, but any small success would have to do. it was better than an escalation.

Blair felt like his heart was still going to climb out of his throat, but at least it wasn't about to tunnel out through his ribs. He gasped for a few minutes, trying to catch up on his need for oxygen. Hands stroked his forehead beneath the veil, a cool cloth wiping away the beaded sweat there. A large, bulky figure, smelling of powder and grandmotherly things, was at his side. He whimpered, not sure if he should lean into the touch, or away. She was a stranger.

"Don't touch him." Jim stood in the doorway. His voice was hard and low. He was glaring at the assistant who had frozen with the washcloth against Blair's skin, her eyes darting to Dr Miller's face for help deciding what to do.

"The Guide is mine." Ellison growled, his voice even more quelling. The woman glanced up at the Doctor again.

"It is alright, Claire." Dr. Miller soothed, her lips compressed as she tried to coax Blair into relaxing his knees. "Sentinel, take the cloth." Her voice was firm and assured. Jim stayed in the doorway, his jaw a granite slab, his eyes narrowed, nostrils flared, face disapproving. The faint scent of blood hung in the air, and he didn't like it. It was his Guide's blood, and he hated that. Blair whimpered again, beaded sweat trickling down his skin under the robes.

"The Guide is in labor, Sentinel." Dr Miller's tone was abrupt, impatient. "Take the cloth or get out. You are not helping." She didn't look at him, concentrating on Blair. Jim took a single step inside.

"The infants will not wait for us to be ready. For you to be ready. They come when it is time. Will you deny him what comfort we can give?" Dr Miller asked the large man hovering in the doorway, impressive shoulders hunched. She leaned forward to tell the Guide, "Blair, your Sentinel is here. Nothing can do you harm while he is here. He will protect you." Her gaze bored into Jim's, as his system reacted to the traditional, irresistible call to protect a Guide.

At last Jim moved to Blair's side. His gait was quick, decisive, showing none of the reluctance of only seconds before. Blair clawed at him, trying to grab onto his arm with both hands. He needed something to hang on to. Jim sank to his knees.

"Can't breathe!" Blair panted, panic flaring again. His nails dug into the Sentinel's arms. Jim never hesitated, he whipped the veil off of his Guide's face. He glowered at the assistants who averted their eyes instantly. Dr Miller was concentrating on lower things, and didn't require a glare to divert her attention. Jim positioned himself to shield his Guide, lips peeling back from his sharp, white teeth whenever he thought anyone might be thinking of looking, or getting too close. He picked up the wet cloth and sponged Blair's face and neck. Their eyes met, locked. Tendrils of fire licked over the Sentinel's body from the inside out.

"That was neatly done." A voice broke into the relative silence. Blair moaned and writhed, Jim ignored the speaker, but Dr Miller reacted as if she had been tasered. Her head snapping around to find William Ellison at the entrance to the room. "Involving the Sentinel in the birth will forge a deeper tie between Guide and Sentinel. How will he be able to give up the pups he helped to deliver, his Guide's pups? Guides themselves." He shook his head in grudging admiration, his gaze hard, his mouth compressed. "You remove the choice from the Sentinel."

"Senior Sentinel...." She began to move away from Blair to make her respects to the older man
"No," William Ellison said lifting a hand, waving her back to her task. "Don't bow to me. You have more pressing matters to see to. Later though, we will talk you and I." He stepped into the small room and glanced around. The two assistants were face down, shivering, foreheads on the hardwood floor. His eyes traveled over to Blair, showing no reaction at the undraped face. "How is he progressing?"

"Well...better if he were less afraid, but well enough." The Doctor was still uncertain, nervous that her intentions had been found out. Her efforts at binding Sentinels and Guides tightly through the births she attended. The way Guides were handled, treated, her soul cried out against it. If she could help, even a little, by giving a few a better, more secure life, by making the Sentinels "see" their Guides...

"I had heard rumors. Now I know." His grey eyes fixed her. "Tend to the Guide, as you have assured they will be tightly bound, his health is now fully linked to that of my son." There was little inflection in the tone. "It is imperative that they both be healthy and well." His gaze told her she would definitely face the consequences if her actions resulted in less than perfect health for either or both.

"Rafe. Brian." William didn't raise his voice. As if by magic, Rafe appeared on his hands and knees, his eyes respectfully downcast, but flicking in little pulses up and around the room, as if he was unable to resist. William waved him inside. "Do you see?" He asked the Companion.

Rafe looked over at Jim and Blair, as he was bid. Jim was leaning protectively over the laboring Guide. The drape was off of Blair's face. Rafe stared, his gut knotting. Then he looked back at his Senior. Jim's breath was in lock step with Blair's. They were looking into each other's eyes, their hands clasped. Rafe listened harder, chasing down their heartbeats. He found what he'd suspected he would. Their hearts beat in concert. Beat for beat. Breath for breath. Blink for blink. Matched, locked, bound.

Rafe abased himself. William tutted.

"Not your fault, Companion. But if things are to balance it is best that you get over to them and be bound to the Guide as deeply as my son." Rafe stared unbelieving at the standing man. William spoke again. "Was I unclear?" He asked mildly.

Rafe scurried over to Jim and Blair, meeting Jim's hiss of rage at being disturbed with a bowed head as he was taken lightning fast to the floor and sniffed thoroughly. Jim confirmed his identity and intentions with a lick, followed by a bite. Rafe held still, his Senior pinning him to the floor. Then Jim let Brian up and he crawled to Blair seeking the side of the Guide furthest away from the door and Jim, remembering to remain close to the floor and to maintain a submissive posture, the top of his head lower than his Senior's shoulder, still bowed as he crept to his place.

Rafe waited for several moments before daring to move close to Blair, close enough to touch him. And then he waited even longer before daring to look up and meet the squinted, deep blue eyes of the Guide. Blair shivered.

Rafe felt it steal over him. Not in moments, not in hours, it was instant. Every cell in his body strained forward. Obeying the call, he shuffled forward on his knees, his body against Blair's thigh. His hands curled around the leg, aware of the dampness of the skin, the strain on the limb, muscle trembling underneath his palm, under the robe. He took the strain away, offering the Guide his body to push against, to brace his leg. He felt some of the tension ease. And Blair opened his eyes after a
hard push and looked at him again.

It was deep, and binding, the look. Brian stroked the leg he held, felt the bared ankle in his hand, murmured. Unbidden his hand stole up, halted only by a hissed warning from the Doctor. He stroked over the distended belly of the Guide, his Guide. He looked. Felt no wrongness in looking. The Guide was his.

Jim was given the first infant, a squalling bundle of outraged Guide, kicking mightily until Jim's startled hands closed on him. Then the baby quieted, looking up, blearily, into the face of the Sentinel. The Sentinel looked down, equally mesmerized.

The second infant was born twenty minutes later, and Rafe was given the bundle to hold until Jim took it from him and laid it, wrapped in snug warmth, in the bassinet he was crouched protectively over.

The third infant was a surprise to all of them.
William stood looking at the woman who sat in front of him her head bowed, her hands knotted in her lap, knuckles white. Capable hands, hands that had successfully delivered thousands of Guide pups without mishap. She was good for Guides, that wasn't in doubt. Whether she was good for the Guide's Sentinels was another matter altogether. He had caught her red handed, still she didn't scent as cowed, or apologetic, she scented as defiant.

William sighed. This was exactly what he'd expected to discover when he'd finally found her out, a can of worms. No, more than a simple can of worms, a 55 gallon drum of worms. He rubbed his forehead, trying to discourage the headache he felt sneaking up on him from turning into a full blown migraine. It was a lost cause, he reasoned, but he tried.

He himself had recommended the Doctor to countless numbers of Sentinels to care for their Guides both breeding and not. She was his own Guide's physician. And it had taken him this long to discover what she was doing. Now he needed to figure out what to do about it. He was afraid to ask himself if his own Guide or he himself had been subject to her wiles. He'd rather not know. He wouldn't change it if he could. His Guide...was his Guide, and he would never reject her, not even if he found his feeling for her had been manipulated.

On one hand it offended him, knowing that decisions regarding the degree of bonding with Guides was being taken out of the hands of the individual Sentinels. Many Sentinels chose not to, or almost never saw their Guides disrobed and unveiled. It limited the depth of the bond that developed, let the Sentinel control his response to the Guide. By tricking the Sentinels into the room during birth when emotions ran high, when Guides were completely unshielded, using her assistants in close, nearly intimate proximity to the Guides to trigger the Sentinels reflexive territorial responses, Dr Miller was taking away choice for the Sentinels involved.

On the other hand, he disagreed with breeding farms and the impersonal way Guides were bred. He felt that multiple matings were unnecessarily distasteful, an affront to the Sentinels who bonded the Guides. He also believed such serial contacts, when invitro fertilization was available and would allow Guides to live with Sentinels, not in breeding farms, were a throwback to older, harsher times. Not civilized. Jim could keep Blair with him and not have to resort to a farm. A simple trip, maybe two, depending on Blair's fertility, to the Vet's and Blair would be impregnated without another male violating his body. Simple. Humane. Tolerable.

Even so, none of those arguments gave Dr. Miller the right to make the decisions she had for the Sentinels and their Guides. The Sentinels had to retain control because if they lost it...William found he couldn't finish the thought. What precisely would happen if Sentinels lost control? In a word, chaos. Pure and simple.

"Why?" William Ellison asked. "Why would you do this?" The Doctor clearly didn't see the same end result he did. If she did she couldn't do this. In times of chaos the weak, the fragile would be broken. It would be so much worse for all concerned. Sentinels would die, worse yet, Guides would die. Would be slaves, bartered, sold, stolen like stores of gold and silver, like territory. Bloodshed....

"A closely, deeply bonded Sentinel will protect his Guide. He will be incapable of the kind of mistreatment that most Sentinels subject their Guides to." Came the answer. Through clenched teeth if William's ears heard right.

"By taking the choice from the Sentinels?" William said, "you believe you are righting a wrong on behalf of the Guides?" No, she didn't see what he did. She had no idea of the risks.
"Yes, Senior Sentinel, I do." Dr Miller answered firmly. William paced up and down the carpet in his audience room. His Guide was absent, his Companion was standing near the door, saying nothing. William could still smell him, his distress. Something was upsetting him. William wanted to go to him, comfort him. But he had business to attend to first. Reluctantly he put his Companion out of his mind for the necessary time.

"And what is your view on how things should be?" William asked, more out of curiosity that out of a real desire to hear a differing view. What was it that motivated this woman? How could she think she was helping, why didn't she see how much nearer to anarchy her methods might bring Sentinel society? The Sentinel laws were old, ancient, and obeyed because they were ancient and as much a part of every Sentinel as breathing. Sentinels obeyed the law. At least Sentinel Law.

Dr. Miller leaned forward. "Guides are human. They have all the feeling that you or I have. Can you imagine a life where you were forbidden to talk, forbidden to volunteer your feelings. A life where you were used as a sexual convenience by men who never cared enough to look you in the eye when they took you? Who might never touch any part of your body but your genitals? All of the touch, of the caring you ever experience coming only through sex? Men who chose to breed you, send you to breeding farms and subject you to repeated matings with stimulant crazed "studs", other Guides or Mundanes who you didn't know, weren't permitted to talk to, and who you would never see again after you were impregnated? And can you imagine what it would feel like to lose child after child, have them taken and turned over to Guide Houses to be raised into servitude? I know that is wrong." Her eyes lifted and burned into his.

Oh, yes, she was right, while at the same time so very wrong.

"And you are seeking to change that." William said, gently once he'd seen her belief and how sincere, how sure she was of her position. He knew she was wrong. But he also knew it was not possible to convince her of it. "How?"

"Your son will not give up his Guide now. Last week, before he went through the birthing with Blair, he could have. Now he can't. Blair and Blair's children will stay with your son. Blair will be able to raise his own children, be able to know them. They will nurse from his breast. Not be raised by caretakers, not be brainwashed into being good little Guides. They will know their mother, he will talk to them, teach them, bond with them as all mothers do, are allowed to, all but Guide mothers. They won't be given up and sent elsewhere to be fed some synthetic blend of feeding formula that is laden with a preponderance of female Guide hormones in the hopes of making them fertile and breedable. They will develop normally, probably look exactly like Blair. Do you know how rare it is now to see a male dominant Guide like Blair? With most of the secondary sex characteristics of other males?"

"No. I don't believe I understand exactly what your point is." Ellison narrowed his eyes. His instincts were screaming at him, this was actually important. Even as it made his skin crawl to think of. Blair hadn't been hairy, he'd seen a smooth face, a beautiful face when he was undraped, huge lovely blue eyes. But he also knew why there had not been hair, he had known it, and not thought of it, there had been the minute signs of permanent hair removal he had ignored. He shuddered. Had Blair once been hairy enough to shave? Had he had chest hair? That seemed wrong. Incredibly wrong to William Ellison as he contemplated the possibility of having a Guide as hirsute as himself. At having a Guide who's male genitalia might be more than a small, soft penis and testicles, dominated by the far more appealing, seductive vulva and female apparatus. Guides should be androgynous or feminine, not masculine. And they shouldn't be capable of anything more than the soft, half-erections that the female dominated Guides on occasion displayed. William couldn't imagine what to do if he was faced with a Guide with a true, full erection. He wiped at his mouth.
The Doctor was still talking, rambling, and in desperation William fought to listen. To expel the unwelcome pictures in his mind. He caught up in mid lecture....

"It isn't widely known, the government, the Sentinel National Authority in particular, ordered the results of a study done in the 1960's kept under wraps. The scientist," Dr Miller's face was pale, she swallowed convulsively, battling for control. "The scientist was my father, Dr Barrent Miller. He disappeared one day when he was coming home from work. We never saw him, never heard from him again. I remember hearing him and my mother discussing his findings before he disappeared. My mother was a Guide not a Mundane." Her eyes fixed on William's grey ones. Daring him to comment.

"That is not possible." William declared. He straightened his shoulders. Maybe his Companion should leave the room, he didn't want him tainted with these kinds of thoughts....

"Yes it is. My mother carried the genes to function as a Guide, she was my father's Guide, my father was a pure Sentinel, and I am a Sentinel with Guide genes." Her direct gaze dared him to refute this fact. She was sure of her facts. He could see it. Scent it. She was not lying. But she did not smell like a Guide. Yet, she believed in the truth of what she was saying. When he could find nothing immediately pertinent to say, she went on. "It is a lie that Sentinels and Guides can't breed together. Guides are so rarely fertile, and so often sent to breeding farms, with multiple studs put to them who was to know when one of the Sentinels was actually the father and not one of the many others? How else do you explain that every once in a while a Guide births a Sentinel?"

William stared at her. He'd heard those rumors too. Ravings of possessive Sentinels, out of control, not willing to admit to reality, to the fact someone other than themselves had fathered a pup on their Guides. He'd not believed the far-fetched tales. Now this woman was telling him they were...true? And what else was she saying? Because, damn his objectivity, but he believed her. Instantly. She wasn't lying to him.

Sentinels and Guides could breed together. What did that make Guides? Human? He fisted his trembling hands. By the Gods. It could not be.

"Male dominant Guides are just one casualty of the current breeding program. They don't smell like the female dominant Guides, so we don't instantly identify them as Guides when we meet them in the world. We are used to the way the highly bred and hormone treated Guides scent. The unnatural use of hormone treatments, and selective breeding is damaging the Guides and reducing their fertility, their health in general. They are becoming weaker as a species. More homogeneous, rather than heterogeneous. As the collective gene pool shrinks, they are less fertile, more the same, and more fragile. Their mental capacity is less, and they are not provided an enriched environment on top of that. Most are hardly more mature than an average ten year old. Blair is an example of what they can be like, if allowed to develop and mate naturally, like you or I or any mundane human is allowed. Any one not a Guide." She was leaning forward, her hand splayed on the slim thighs. Passionate. Sure of her views. And still talking. Showing no signs of stopping.

"Blair is not naturally submissive, it was I believe beaten into him. He is highly intelligent, he has done ground breaking research on Sentinels. Research so innovative and intuitive that it is talked about and quoted at every medical conference I've gone to in the last five years. He is brilliant, and yet, the current law forbids him from more research. When he was discovered, Sentinels stripped him of his degrees and the titles he learned, and told him he had one function and one function only. To be a Guide. Nothing else mattered. None of the good he'd done, or would do in the future mattered. Only that he submit himself to which ever Sentinel bought him and filed ownership over him. He must serve in whatever capacity he is told to. And this is wrong. I can't tell you how wrong if you don't see it already for yourself."
"You say my son's Guide is this Blair you are speaking of? That he is unique?"

"That is my point. How can we know if he is unique? There may be thousands of Guides like him, if only we let them live a normal life. Let them live out their dreams and aspirations. Let them grow up with parents who love and support them. Rather than be farmed out to Houses, trained to obey and never question what they are told. To be sold to whomever bids highest, and forced to serve until they are sent elsewhere or resold."

"Sentinels can not live without Guides." William countered, carefully. "If you think to give Guides complete autonomy over their own choices, where would Sentinels be? It would be chaos. Take my word for it Doctor. I have lived through a dozen Sentinel riots when access to Guides has been restricted, or rumors of shortages got around. As long as a Sentinel can hope that if he has earned the money he can purchase a Guide of his own, or visit a brothel if he can't afford his own, peace and law abiding is guaranteed. Any move to reduce Sentinel's access to Guides will result in similar riots."

"Actually, by acknowledging the Guides as human and granting them rights that any other living human on the planet can expect will increase rather than decrease the pool. There are many Guides in hiding, like Blair." Dr Miller's eyes shone. William's narrowed.

"Are you saying there are wild Guides in abundance?" That would be very important. With so many Sentinels doing without their own Guides...it would go far to alleviate the stress placed on younger, less affluent Sentinels if a new pool of Guides could be found and tapped. But...

Again William had a flash of hairy Wild Guides, Guides who would shave as he did, become erect as he did, who would perhaps want to penetrate their Sentinels reciprocally. He felt the gorge rise in his belly. "I can't accept that. I don't believe..."

He couldn't go on. He felt his face freeze. But...Blair didn't sicken him. He wanted to touch him, couldn't resist touching him, through the veils, the robes, or when he could, skin to skin. And the pups, Blair's pups...William handled them as often as his duties permitted him to visit his son's loft. Those pups were beautiful...infants.

And Guides. He felt the connection every time he cradled them. Their soft, baby scented skin against his palms, against his lips as he kissed their cheeks. They were utterly perfect. But they couldn't be...what the Doctor said. Human? Could they?
Chapter 11

Chapter by neichan

William Ellison closed the last folder quietly. He sat in the lowered light that suffused his home office, his hands lingering on the cheap, pressed paper cover of the last report. It was all a lot to take in. Most of it in direct contradiction to what he'd been taught all of his life. He hated the implications. Sentinels, the self-appointed protectors of Guides around the world, were responsible for the most dire offenses against them. Sentinels were going to drive Guides to extinction. It was almost too horrific to believe.

He reached over and flicked his lamp off, plunging the room into greater darkness. Fitting. The leather of his chair creaked under him as he shifted his weight. He was close to wishing he had never heard of Dr Blair Sandburg. And yet...he was also caught in the Guide's web. He could not go for an hour without thinking of the smaller male. The Guide. The man. The scientist he had been. Still was.

William's head dropped back to rest against the elevated back of his desk chair. This whole thing...all of it...it was a nightmare. He was standing on the brink of annihilation, had been for years, decades, only now he could see it, courtesy of Dr Miller.

Dr Miller who had been fighting her own silent, desperate battle to stop the fall of Sentinel, Guide and Mundane. With only the few tools available to her. One Sentinel/Guide bond at a time. There was no way she could win, it wasn't enough, too little, too late. She was trying. He would see she was not stopped. But...it wasn't sufficient. He had to do more, a lot more. He had to come up with a plan of how to proceed. His headache grew.

He'd read for hours every day for more than a week, ignoring or delegating out his other duties. His staff had tiptoed around him, terrified of disturbing him, most never recalling a time he'd dedicated this much energy to one thing alone. But he had to, if he was going to bring himself up to speed on this subject. If he was going to know whether it was something he should believe.

He had to read all the reports he could lay his hands on. An appalling number of reports and secret research. Most disturbingly, he'd read the work of Dr. Blair Jacob Sandburg. Raised by a single counter-culture mother. Sent to university at fifteen years. A boy of jaw dropping intellect. His son's Guide. His son's brilliant Guide. Brilliant not only from the standpoint of what most Guides were capable of, but brilliant on any stage. William Ellison had needed the help of several PhD consultants to understand the impact of many of Blair's conclusions.

None of the specialists had disputed, or voiced the slightest doubt in the truth of the Guide's carefully thought out and occasionally revolutionary positions. Those who were not familiar with his work already, demanded more of his writings. They had been spellbound. William sent them what he had. Putting off telling the voracious, atypically excited scientists why there wasn't more of it. Why there might never be.

He now had to find a way to deal with the realisation that his conception of Guides as a whole was not the only one that made sense. In fact his vision of what Guides were, why they existed, was fatally flawed. As was the position of nearly every Sentinel in his immediate sphere of contact. Steven, his younger son, came closest to living the life that supported Blair's depiction of what was holistically healthy for a Sentinel's senses. And he, William Ellison, had always decried his son's ridiculous choices.

Blair wrote very little about Guides. Which considering the quality of work he put out on Sentinels
was a shame. William had always been more interested in Guides. But for whatever reason, Blair had put all his efforts into Sentinel Studies.

There were others who were authorities on Sentinel Studies also not spouting mainstream ideas and theories. Even as the leader of Cascade's Sentinels, William had not had an easy time getting access to the tightly controlled and suppressed works. Research that was not for public consumption, going against current popular thought. Research that showed Guides were not always intellectually inferior, not only partially human, an interim species. Research that proved conclusively that training and breeding were at least partly to blame for the decreased mental acuity that did exist. Guides were being bred into stupidity.

William could hardly stand to look over the volumes of material on Guide breeding and the prevalence of hormonal treatments for the ever decreasing segment of fertile Guides who ended up in breeding farms. He hands shook when he turned the pages, feeling soiled by the bald descriptions of what happened to Guides during breeding. This, he had always thought wrong. There were far better ways to breed Guides. Far more humane ways.

It was bad enough to understand that they were being altered by a campaign that preferentially took female dominated Guides and gave them priority in every way, including breeding, research, medical treatments. All seeming to have the goal of changing the natural state of Guides from a wide swathe of female-male dominated varieties, to the strongly preferred female ones, who were incapable of functioning in males roles at all.

And thus, being mostly female, appearing all female except to the closest examination, they would not offend the male Sentinels with an unexpected and unwelcome desire to penetrate, or an erection to spoil the mood. William felt his stomach twitch, again, less violently, but it was still there to overcome. He on one hand could not remember ever being as attracted to a Guide as he was to Blair. On the other hand...he knew that Blair was not a female-dominant Guide. Under his robes he was closer to being visually male than any Guide William had seen. And William could not stop thinking about that.

He couldn't stop wondering, doubting...himself. Maybe that was why he had such an easy time resisting the urge to couple with his own Guide. Maybe he wasn't attracted to her, because she was on the extreme end of female-dominant Guides. Perhaps...he was attracted to males and to male dominant Guides in particular. Perhaps it wasn't a question of Spirituality at all. He pushed that very painful train of possibilities away. He couldn't think of that, not while there were more important things to confront. Time was short. He had to do something. But what?

Sentinels were making Guides over into versions they'd been trained to prefer. And the methods were sometimes brutal. Castration and other surgical alterations were widely in use. Medications without regard to the side effects. Battling against nature.

Blair was one of a soon to be eliminated group. The male-dominant Guide. Only undetected Guides running free had kept that subset of Guides from being eradicated before now. William also wasn't ignorant enough to miss the precipitous drop off in Guide fertility that accompanied increasingly harsh measures directed at eliminating the male Guides. More and more, breeding farms turned to Mundane males to impregnate their Guides. And the number of attempts to impregnate Guides had gone from 3-4 matings in the 19th century records, to ten to fifteen cycles now. Soon Guides wouldn't be capable of carrying...except by sheer, dumb luck, and rarely at that.

Dr Miller was right. William scrubbed his forehead. The problem was how to disseminate the information. Where to start. How to start. How not to lose his power to the fundamentalists of whom he'd been an enthusiastic member just one week past. They would not stay silent if he voiced his
radical new position. He shook his head. It would have to be both forceful and yet gently done. With all the finesse and power he possessed. And he hadn't any idea how to get it started. He had never been called a rebel, not in his entire sixty some years. Now he was going to rebel. And it wasn't going to be easy, nor pretty.

Fiddling with the foot high stack of files. More than half were Blair's work on Sentinels. He drew in a deep breath. Then he stood. It was time to go and see his inspiration. The man who had made his change in thought and position possible. He wanted, needed to see Blair and the sweet smelling, sense focusing infants. The purity of the infants...the way they focused him...William needed it if he was to prepare himself for the upcoming battle..

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Blair spent the day as he had every day for a week, tending to his babies. He held them all, his Sentinels had surrendered the couch to him during most of the day, cuddling the three tiny infants to his body. He nursed them, blissfully reveling in the sensation of feeding them, of having them close to his body. He became less circumspect with his veil and robes. It was just not important to him now. The Sentinels, Jim and Brian became secondary. His babies primary.

Rafe and Ellison wisely made no mention of Blair's new habits. Never insisting he veil himself or replace the second or third layers of his robes that he'd abandoned. The layers made it too difficult to nurse. So, they hung in the downstairs room, unused. Even the new, beautifully embroidered robes that William had offered as gifts celebrating the infants' birth.

Jim and Brian were gradually permitted to handle the babies more often, always under their Guide's watchful eye. They took advantage of the leave granted to Sentinels over Guide related matters and remained home much of the time, only working half time on alternating days. Blair was never left completely alone. He accepted the vigil as his due, as his Sentinels protecting him and his newly born offspring. He was able to concentrate all of his vast attention on them without concern for his, or their security.

He was often petted and stroked affectionately himself, his Sentinels hovering as he nursed. Jim had gone so far as to wet one finger in Blair's generous amount of milk, and taste it, his brow wrinkling in concentration as he experienced all the flavors spreading across his sensitive tongue. Rafe had not dared. Blair didn't care one way or another. Apparently Ellison did. This morning he had touched Blair's milk again, and offered it to his Companion. Rafe had tasted the blue-white offering, his eyes closing, his face intent. The look on his face....he and Ellison disappeared up the stairs in short order. Blair listened with half an ear, then lost interest. They returned rather quickly, tugging at zippers, straightening clothes.

Blair turned back to his restless infants, gathering them around his body, curling around them like a mother cat. He preferred to sleep like this, his babies next to him. But it was one concession Ellison refused to grant him. The Sentinel would allow Blair to fall asleep with the babies, but once he was asleep, he and Rafe moved them to the safety of the large cradle they shared. The fear of his rolling over on them, or the tiny bodies falling off the low mattress was too much for the Sentinels to tolerate. Picking up on the level of their anxiety, Blair made no objections.

Today was no exception to the rule. He washed them, Rafe standing by with the new, softer towels that were reserved for the babies use. He watched as Blair bathed each in warm water, both Sentinels and Guide marveling over the miniature perfection of each one. Blair washed, Rafe patted and snuggled them dry. Jim wrapped them in soft robes, covering head and body but not faces, having learned the first day, that despite convention, Blair would not tolerate their faces draped, not even with the lightest of cloths.
Then it was time to sleep. Blair slept on the same schedule as his babies. Which meant much of the
day. Nursing took great energy out of him. He rested when they rested and woke with them. He was
surprisingly content with that. His mind no longer clamored for stimulus, for academic pursuits. He
was perfectly happy looking after his children. He didn't question that his Sentinels were happy, too.
As if the children were their own, and not children fathered by a nameless Mundane.

Peaceful, Blair checked on the three bundles tucked up next to his stomach and chest, seeing each
was comfortable and safe. Reassured his eyes grew heavy, and he drifted off to sleep.

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Blair woke, his heart pounding, thudding, knowing there was something bad, something dangerous
nearby. His head whipped around towards the cradle holding his babies. And saw the man bending
over them.

It didn't matter that Rafe and Jim were in the room. It didn't matter that the man was just looking and
not touching. Blair was not about to trust him. His skin crawled in memory.

He launched himself up off of the bed and into the man, aggressively knocking him back away from
the cradle and onto his ass. The man's eyes stared at him in utter shock from where he was sprawled
on the floor. Blair bared his teeth, growled, placing himself between the Vet and his babies.

Three stunned Sentinels stared back at him.
Chapter 12

Chapter by neichan

William Ellison paused in the hall outside of his son's loft. His hand wavered, raised, about to rap his knuckles on the door instead of barging in. A noise from inside caught his attention and froze him in place as he strained to hear, to analyze just what it was that gave him pause, sending adrenaline flooding through his body. His fist loosened, groping towards his pocket and the key that lay there even before he made the conscious decision.

Then it struck him. A Guide, Blair, was growling, a deep, sincere, threatening growl full of rage and defiance and fear. William had his key out and slotted into the lock before the breath fully exited his lungs. The door flew open under his hands as he shoved it, and he hardly gave a thought to it slamming against the wall as he moved ahead, faster than he'd moved in many years.

He burst into the living room and sprinted towards the downstairs room where he knew the infants rested, and where he heard Blair's frantic heartbeat and growling. The sharp odor of terror rode the air. His own heart was hammering in his chest, filled with fear for the babies, and for their mother.

He saw one man, a Sentinel, on the floor, sprawled on his back, jaw slack; he saw two other Sentinels standing behind the fallen man, looking down, their faces filled with a shock so complete as to be comical, and he saw Blair crouched and fierce, curly hair wild, un-veiled, barely robed, certainly not decently, his two rows of dark nippled breasts prominent against the thin fabric, leaking milk, leaving damp rings. The room was filled with the rich scent of that milk, and with the perfume of Guide scent, the mature scent of Blair, and the younger, fresh scent of his children. The scent of fear also tainted the air.

It was the second growl from the distressed Guide that galvanized the three standing Sentinels into action. William surged forward shoulders hunched, aggressive, his own teeth flashing, bared; Jim and Brian reacted by seizing the man on the floor, the interloper, not family, by his shirt front and dragging him out of the room. William stationed himself in front of Blair, between the Guide and the door, on guard for any other threat, determined to protect the Guide.

Blair reacted to the protective stance by turning his full attention back to the crib, to his babies. He checked them over, unwrapping their undisturbed blankets, checking fingers and toes, and obsessively, anxiously counting and reassuring himself that all the toes and all the babies were present. His breath came in short, harsh pants. William sidled nearer, purring reassurance, the sub vocal sound meant to calm, to let the Guide know he was safe. That a Sentinel stood watch over him and would die before letting him be harmed.

Blair felt ill as the adrenaline left him, his limbs shivering and threatening to collapse. The low purr coming from the older Sentinel allowed him to relax enough to check on his babies. He hooked his elbows on the edge of the crib, clinging, unable to stop checking and rechecking his children, terrified the Vet had harmed them...had stolen them, despite the evidence of his own eyes. His heart thudded as it slowed. It was a scene out of his worst nightmares. The Vet having access to his infants.

The front door slammed, and William heard the hurried, returning steps of his son and his son's Companion. Blair's attention never waivered from the occupants of the crib. William took advantage of the returning Sentinels to move up behind Blair and support him, as his trembling grew worse, his legs giving way. Rafe and Jim reentered the room, by that time William was supporting all of Blair's weight.
More help to guard the Guide. William looped his arms around the Guide who was sagging next to the cradle. He caught Blair as his knees gave fully away, and he crumpled towards the ground, despite his tenacious hold on the railing of the cradle. The scent, the heat of the Guides body enveloped the Senior Sentinel. Surrounded him. Milk splashed his forearms, Blair squirmed trying to stay at the crib's side.

"No, no! My babies. I can't leave them. He'll get them. No!" Blair protested as William tried to ease him away and down onto the bed. Blair clung to the railing, unwilling to leave the infants.

"He is gone. He won't be back. He won't get near your children, Blair." Murmuring into the Guide's ear, William lifted him bodily into his arms, breaking the determined, futile hold on the rail. And then Jim was in front of them, plucking Blair out of his arms and rushing him to the futon bed. Rafe went to the crib and began examining the infants, freezing at Blair's anguished cry.

At the sound, the Companion gathered up an infant, expertly, efficiently wrapped it under William's bemused gaze, and rushed it over to the Guide who lay on the futon, his Senior Sentinel crouched over him, examining him to make sure he was unharmed. Rafe carefully deposited the baby into Blair's outstretched arms and hurried back to the crib. William handed him a second bundle, and carried the third himself to the the Guide. Blair pulled all three bundles to his chest and rocked them back and forth, tears sliding down his unveiled face.

William looked for a second, two, and then his own fury struck. He stepped up behind his son and his Companion, delivering two sharp smacks to the back of their heads. Then he thrust his way through to Blair's side. He placed himself slightly in front of Blair, bending down over the Guide and the infants, stroking Blair, murmuring wordless sounds of comfort. Blair was crying, huge silent tears rolling down his face. He whimpered, still shivering. He was soaked all down his front, the thin robe offering no protection, see through now even to non-Sentinel eyes. William pulled a blanket up and around the shaking shoulders.

"You two." He said, his tone rigidly controlled, as he rocked Blair and the infants he held. "Idiots. Why would you allow that quack in here to see the babies at all?" He shook his head, disbelieving, but not surprised, not really. He thought his son had more sense, and yet....

There was a huge monetary reward for finding and delivering wild Guide pups to the Houses. The Houses competed with each other on the sums they offered the finders. And from what William suspected, the Vet had been set on talking Blair's two Sentinels into giving up the pups and delivering them to the House that offered the most. The Vet had no doubt heard of Dr Miller's disgrace, temporary as it was, and called to offer his services in her absence. Playing on the need of the Sentinels to keep their Guide safe and well. William shuddered. His blundering had put Blair and his pups at risk. His arms tightened.

Jim made an unhappy noise. And William frowned at him. Jim was asking, as politely as possible, for William to release Blair. He was exhibiting the signs of a Sentinel on the verge of escalating into violence in order to protect his Guide. William looked over at the younger Sentinel, Rafe, and actually met the dark brown gaze directly. Rafe was also on the edge, or he'd never have dared to look William Ellison in the eye. The younger Sentinel's mouth rippled as he fought not to show his teeth, to threaten Cascade's ruler.

Carefully, William eased his hold, sliding his arms from around the shaking Guide. He moved back, lowering his gaze, his head, backing off of the futon, the other Sentinels wasting no time in moving in, taking his place, examining their Guide as instinct demanded. William watched the frantic motions gradually become more controlled, more caressing than searching. Blair's thin robe, was thrust aside, until he was naked under William's eyes, naked and so beautiful, ripe and yet male.
William watched, unable to resist. The maleness was not revolting...the maleness was right, perfect. The breasts, full, the glowing drops of bluish milk like precious pearls as they rolled down his body under the questing hands of his examining Sentinels. William was privileged to see him, to see them, to view the ritual examination. When was the last time he'd done this with his own Guide? He could not remember. The couplings he'd had with her, all the way back in his memory, she remained draped, in the dark, and though he'd loved her...he and she had not had this. This. William knew this was as it should be.

He watched as his son's hands ghosted over Blair's body, cupping the breasts, gentle, strong. As his tongue, and his Companion's licked the spilled fluid off of hands and skin. Not sexual, but bonding, intimate. Rafe's hands, too, were on the Guide's skin. His mouth pressed to bare flesh, tasting, making sure his Guide was uninjured. Reacquainting Sentinel with Guide. Blair allowed the exploration, the lapping tongues.

William shook watching it all unfold. This. Oh this. This was how it should be. Un-veiled, uncovered. So...he tasted his own tears as they filled his eyes. He had wasted so much time. He grasped his own forearms, fingers digging in as he observed the bonding. His grip slipped, and he looked down, his sense of smell focusing. His arms were covered in still damp milk. Blair's milk. He raised his arms without hesitation, he would not let himself question the decision, and licked at the wetness.

Flavors, complex, rich, exploded across his palate. He swallowed, licked again. It was filled with the taste of life, of love, of mothering. His distant, dreamlike memories of his own infancy, the smells, the tastes, flooded back. He heard the heart beat of his mother, beating under his infant ear. Felt it with the sensitivity that made him a Sentinel from birth. That sound had been his life, his whole world. The taste...he lapped at the milk on his arm, the taste had been all. Mother's milk. His tears flowed faster. How many children had been denied this simply because they were Guides?

William Ellison forced himself to lower his arms. To not taste the fluid splashed on his arms again. Who was he to deserve it, when the babies for who Nature designed it couldn't have it from the source as intended, couldn't sup on it while being held in loving arms? He clenched his fists, watching.

The movements of the Sentinels on the futon slowed. Jim glanced up into Blair's face as he slowly, slowly moved in, took a nipple in his mouth and gently suckled. William saw the bliss unfold over his son's face. Then Blair very gently pushed him back, a shift of his arm dislodging the adult's mouth and put one of the infants to the breast instead. Jim's hands reached out, held the baby to the nipple as it nursed. Blair, with the help of his Sentinels put all of his babies to nursing. There was no shortage of hands to hold them. Jim's large hands dwarfed the tiny bundle he held.

Jim's eyes lifted, met those of his father. "I needed....I wanted to know that the babies were well. Dr Miller..." Jim said, before his father held up a hand. His son did not have to explain that to him. And William could see the anxiety, the need to know on his son's handsome face. William's answer was a whisper.

"That issue, the issue of the Doctor's trustworthiness, has been resolved to my satisfaction. She is correct in her actions and her care of the Guides she has attended. It was I who was mistaken. And it is she who will attend your Guide again, no other." William's voice was shaky, and his eyes burned as they met his son's. Rafe was busy trying to make a nest of his own body, cupping himself around the babies on the side that Jim didn't occupy. Blair seemed reassured by that, his whimpers were decreasing as the babies nursed, his broken monologue died out.

Jim returned his father's stare, his face stiff...and ashamed. William saw the shame, knew his son was
thinking better of having let the Vet in. He'd only wanted to know the infants were doing well. A mistake on his part to use the Vet, yet he'd had limited options when William had forbidden them to call Dr Miller. Jim regretted it. William regretted it. But too late. That was done. Blair was traumatized.

Now was the time to start afresh, to mend what fences he could, and to build new bridges. William lifted the phone from his pocket and dialed for Dr Miller, stepping out into the living room, but keeping Blair in his sight. He couldn't manage to convince himself it would be OK to retreat further, to take up a position where he was out of Blair's range. Not even to keep from disturbing the Guide. His eyes didn't want to leave the Madonna-like sight of the guide, nearly naked, his skin a pale, warm gold, nursing his babies at blush tipped breasts.

He kept his voice low as he was routed from one secretary to another and finally reached the Doctor herself. Blair had settled onto his side and was running his hands up and down the little bodies in their blankets that were snuggled between himself and Rafe. Jim was behind Blair, so close that there was not a molecule of air between them. As Blair was stroking the infants, Jim was stroking their mother. Blair was accepting the touch. William could scent the tang of tears and of the beginnings of relief in the air. Blair was finally starting to believe he had not lost the babies, not even one, to the man he despised and mistrusted.

William told Dr Miller of the events that had just transpired, of Blair's need to be checked and reassured. He wanted to be certain the shock did not affect the Guide's milk, either stopping it or making it taste bitter, so the infants would reject it. If it did there was formula that could be bought, William made a face at that, or even the milk of other Guides, for a steep price. Guide milk was a delicacy that only the wealthiest of Sentinels indulged in. Every vial of it tasted different, the emotions within it, clear as crystal when it slid over the palate. It could command a thousand dollars an ounce for the sweetest vintage. But if Blair's children required supplemental milk until Blair's own milk was sweet again, William would see they had it, no matter the expense.

William clapped his phone shut, his jaw set. Dr Miller would come to check on Blair. William would alert his own staff and have the ban lifted on her attending further births. The good Doctor would have his full support and recommendation. It was the first step in his campaign of change. He was moving carefully, but he was moving. Next he would have to reach out to his younger son, Steven and find out what kind of contacts the boy had that he could tap into.

But today he found himself reluctant to leave the loft and Blair. He would work from his son's home. Set up the web he needed to use to begin his fix. The fix. To educate Sentinels all around the world before it was too late. Before Guides faded into memory and left Sentinels broken and nonfunctional, destroyed but their own actions. Before Sentinels killed off that which they valued most in the world.

William paced the living room, at first hardly more than a circle of steps that kept Blair in view at all times. Then as his upset eased his other senses sharpened, and it was enough to scent and to hear the Guides, small and large, he retreated further from the Guide. He went into the room from time to time and glanced down at the curled clump of two Sentinels and four Guides on the futon. The arms of the Sentinels were shielding the Guides, their eyes alert and fierce as they fastened onto William when he entered. He didn't aggravate the stressed men by remaining in the room long. He noted Blair's deep even breathing, the tiny babies safe in his arms, and then he stepped out into the hall again, leaving Blair and his vigilant guardians alone in the small room.

Then William called his Companion, got him on his way over here. This was a job that would take both of them working it to move forward. All possible repercussions had to be detailed as they moved the plan forward. The risks, not only the benefits had to be anticipated. As soon as Blair and his children could be moved they would transfer to William's own compound. For now it was
impossible, aside from extreme circumstances, to move the recovering Guide. The family needed
time to bond and to reassure itself that all members were safe and accounted for. Moving them now
would only add to their distress.

William mentally went through his brain. He'd had contact with thousands of Sentinels who had
beliefs as widely varying at his own and his youngest son. Now he needed to reach out and find the
men who could help him in his new direction, spreading the word. He considered. Then he dialed.
He hadn't talked to the man he was calling since their last, fiery exchange, when each had called the
other stubborn and misguided, and a few far less kind things. Now William was calling, and fully
prepared to apologize on his knees if he had to.

The phone rang in his ear. He waited for the line to be answered. This was the first official step he
was taking on his new path. It wasn't as hard as he'd thought, nor was it easy.
Blair answered the door without thinking, wandering downstairs while he waited for the children to waken, to demand more milk. It was a brief moment of freedom for him, a moment to take a relaxed breath.

He smiled. His breasts were generous with the supply of milk, for which Blair was grateful. He didn't want to have to use formula to keep the babies fully fed. Formula in his opinion, as in his own mother's, was a far distant second to mother's milk. He shuddered thinking of the artificial ingredients, the unnatural additives.

The knock came in the middle of his reverie, and he answered it, assuming that it was Rafe coming back with the groceries. Rafe hadn't been gone a full hour, so it would be early for him to return, but Blair wasn't thinking of that wasn't all that aware of the passing time. Blair had been cautioned of course not to let anyone else in to the apartment. And he had no desire to. Still he turned the lock, mind not completely on what he was doing. It was only Rafe after all.

It wasn't Rafe. A towering man stood in the hall, four others fanned out behind him. All clad in the same dark uniform, silver chains of office trimming their impeccable fronts. Shock sticks in their belts. Blair recognized the uniforms. Five massive men, Sentinels, broad shouldered and intimidating. He'd seen those uniforms before before. The Cascade S/G Protectorate. Sentinels who had to be larger than the norm to be considered, necessary to men who must face down and control dis-stressed Sentinels for a living. Why were they here....? A mistake, surely.

Then he heard the indrawn breath.

All eyes were on Blair's unveiled face. He froze. He wasn't wearing a veil. Oh god. His hands flew up to his bared face.

"Guide." The voice was deep, authoritative. The man standing in front of the others was speaking to him, feet set wide apart, aggressive, immovable. "Cover yourself." Impatient, stern. The brawny form of the Captain, he was a Captain, Blair saw, cataloging the information even as he fumbled at his robes, moved to block the view from behind. Why....? A Captain...because he was at the home of the heir of Cascade. It wasn't a mistake. Blair knew it for a certainty.

Blair grabbed at the edge of his robe, lifted it up over his face, backed away, stumbling. Defiance, resistance wouldn't be accepted by this man, he could sense it, the mind was solid, unflinching. Very much like Jim's. The Sentinel Captain's eyes were not averted, they were hot, intent.

If Blair had been wearing his usual robes, all would have been fine. But this was not a standard Guide robe, it was a nursing robe. Pulling the front up to cover his face bared his chest.

"Eyes front." The officer barked out to his troops over his shoulder, moving closer to Blair. Blair could see only the huge hand reaching out. He took hold of Blair's arm, spinning him around, hiding him from the very observant eyes of the other officers. Blair belatedly dropped his handful of robe, clutching it closed across his chest, letting out a moan of distress at his blunder.

"Where is your veil, Guide?" The Captain asked him in a low growl.

Blair tried to pull his arm free, wanting to back away from the other man, his heart pounding as he tried to recall where he'd left his blue veil. Was it downstairs? Upstairs? He never wore it indoors any
more. Jim had never asked that he do so. Not since the babies....

Blair gasped. His babies. These Sentinels were here and his babies were unprotected. As if on cue he heard the little ones stirring. He watched as the dark haired Sentinel's head lifted, zeroed in on the nursery room, his mouth pursing a fraction, jaw tightening.

"Please. My Sentinel is not home. Come back later?" Blair tried to draw attention away from the infants, back to himself, averting his own eyes though he could feel the heat of those eyes on him. He tilted his head forward, chin resting on his chest so his hair covered his face. Almost as good as a veil he prayed, combing it down across his face with unsure fingers. He wanted to go to his babies. To hold them. He was held firmly where he was.

"Your veil." The Sentinel insisted. "Now, Guide." And he was free of the hold that had encompassed his arm. Blair headed for the robes he had folded in their drawer. An unmatched veil would do. Any veil. Yes. He scrabbled through the drawers, tugged out the first veil he found. He pulled it on over his head, tying the cords under his chin to keep it snuggly in place. One of the babies, Ange, he recognized her inquiring cry, was more awake than the others. Making noises for him to come to her. Blair felt her new, innocent thoughts touch his mind, her hunger, her wanting to nurse. His body gave a sympathetic surge, his nipples dampening.

The officer watched him, dropping his gaze down to the darkening rings of moisture growing on the robe, his fine nostrils flared, drawing in the scent of warm milk. Blair remained stock still. Then he moved jerkily, his hands trembling. Stepped in front of the cradle, forcing himself to lift his chin defiantly. Until he was between it and the Sentinel. The deep voice was tightly controlled.

"The pup is hungry. Nurse it." The Sentinel ordered as if Blair was behaving irrationally by hesitating. He didn't turn aside, his eyes, were they a dark green?, boring into Blair's through the veil. The Guide couldn't disobey that tone. His training, brief as it was, re-asserted itself. Blair bent over the railing, reaching for the one babe that was awake looking up into his veiled face with deep blue eyes. He bent forward, the seams of the robe falling open, and put Ange to his leaking breast. His body curved over her, hiding her and himself from those too sharp eyes.

"We are here to serve a warrant. It is not necessary that your Sentinels be home. We will leave the paperwork for them." The man stayed in the small downstairs room that served as a nursery, his presence blocking other's view and preventing them from entering. Blair wished, anxiously, that he dared to look up, to gauge the expression on the man's face. He could hear the other men in the outer areas of the loft. Moving around. Searching. For what?

Ange fidgeted in his arms, picking up on his unease, his fear. Blair murmured to her, kissing the top of her head. A few silky, soft curls there, not many, golden brown, like his own hair. The other two, who were stirring as well, picking up on Ange's pleasured nursing, were blond. The only clue as to who had fathered them. Blair had deliberately forbidden himself to remember who that blond man might have been. Which face was the face of the father of his children. He never cared to know.

The big man stayed with him, never looking away from the activity Blair was engaged in. And he was large. Taller than Jim, broader. Which was terrifying. Jim was large enough. Intimidating enough. This man was...too much, a huge, threatening shadow in the dimness of the nursery. His gaze swept over Blair, Blair felt it, even without being able to see it. And Blair was absurdly grateful for the coolness of the morning that had prompted him to put on one of his heavier robes.

"What..." Blair swallowed. "What do you want?" He asked, he edged backwards.

Instead of answering the man stepped closer to him, towering over him, and to Blair's shock reached
out and grabbed his arm again. Shock raced through Blair.

"You speak well for a Guide." The Captain said, no censure in his voice, just noting a fact. And Blair was left with the impression the man was familiar with his history. All of it.

Unknown Sentinels didn't touch claimed Guides, not without permission. Blair was Jim's Guide, his property, and thus the man touching him like this was...the Protectorate was outside the usual hierarchy. Blair was terrified. He let out a small moan, shivering. His knees tried to give out, he tried to fall to the carpet, to bow to the Sentinel. His arms circled around Ange to protect her.

He sagged. Was lowered to the futon, his baby hugged to his chest, a bit restless after the movement, her tiny mouth rooting after being dislodged by Blair's motion. A big hand was at Blair's breast. Warm. Calloused. Gentle. Putting his nipple back into the baby's suckling mouth. Holding Blair's swollen breast even after Ange had latched on again. Blair lay perfectly still, hardly daring to breathe.

Rafe approached the loft, his arms full of supplies and food. Bags dangling from his arms and his hands. He knocked with his only free knuckle, waiting for Blair to answer. When he didn't following a second knock, the Sentinel shrugged. No doubt he was busy. Setting down half of the bags, Rafe found his key and let himself in.

To an empty loft. He felt it. There were no infants' hearts beating in sweet synchrony. No gurgling or cooing. Nor Blair's well know heart beat. No Guides. No babies. No Blair. Rafe swallowed. Echoing emptiness.

His eyes dissected the room as he dropped the remainder of the bags in the doorway with a crash, not caring if fruit bruised. He sprang for the stairs, dashed up. Found nothing, no one. Sped to the bathroom. Empty. Turned in the center of the floor. No one. Fuck. He pressed a hand to his upper abdomen, bent forward. Tried to breathe around the cramp. His Guide was gone. The shaking started in his hands and spread over his entire body like fire. His gaze swept the loft again.

He found the papers resting in a neat stack on the kitchen island in less than ten seconds. He read them, his comprehension jittering from word to word to phrase to phrase. What? What?! He pulled out his cell, hands shaking so hard he had to set the instrument on the counter and redial, and called his Senior.

"Blair and the babies have been confiscated. The Protectorate." He said before Jim could finish identifying himself. "They left the warrant." Jim hung up without saying a word. Rafe let himself collapse onto the rug, curling into a fetal position.

Jim fumed. His rage knew no bounds. What he'd been able to find out pissed him off.

An anonymous tipster had phoned in a report that a Guide House was being run at the address of Jim's loft without a permit. More than two Guides in residence at any one address was enough to require a permit. The investigating officer had agreed with the assessment, finding a total of four Guides on the premises. All the Guides were confiscated taken immediately to the Sheehan Guide House for an examination.

Jim let the phone settle back into it's cradle. He wanted to smash it. Break it apart. Rip the cord out of
The big, bold signature scrawled across the bottom of the paperwork made Jim both ill and almost relieved. He'd heard of Captain Rathe, met the man a few times. Not a bad man, much like Jim, a stickler for the law. He would not listen to any explanations. He would press the law to its fullest. He would investigate. Make or unmake the case without outside interference. Even from the heir of Cascade.

Rathe would be like a dog with a bone. Implacable. But he would also look out for Blair, Ange, Paua, and Kjell. All the Guides he had confiscated. Jim's family. Jim's Guides. Jim might want to kill the Captain, want to throttle him with his bare hands for daring to invade his home, court order or no. But he felt profoundly grateful it was a man of integrity that was watching out for his Guides. Even if he was a son-of-a-bitch.

Rafe found the second sheaf of papers once he stopped shaking, handing it to Jim, not saying a word, the pale faced fury of his Senior keeping him silent. Jim had no time for Rafe's distress and pain.

Jim read. He didn't trust his legs to hold him. His hearing was going in and out, his head spinning, his vision blurred, then too sharp, the light blinding. He smelled the ammonia of discarded diapers. Pungent.

The second sheaf of papers was equally devastating as the first. Blair's delivery of three pups was registered as being one month past. The adult Guide had not been registered in that requisite time with a certified Guide House for future breeding. Jim was not in compliance with City requirements. The confiscated Guide would be evaluated and a court order for impregnation obtained if it was appropriate. This was the only required notification Jim could expect. Following up on the ultimate disposition of the case was his responsibility. He could circumvent a hearing on the matter by producing papers proving Blair was contracted for breeding with an certified breeder or Guide House in good standing.

Blair was a suspected victim of mistreatment and was being taken to an approved House for examination, evaluation and possible permanent confiscation.

Jim threw the papers across the room.

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even try to lift his veil, it was hopeless to try to remember.

"So beginning with an examination of the Guide's limbs. Sentinel Chevo, can you tell me and your classmates your observations."

"He doesn't appear to have any marks or bruising. No lacerations, nothing that would indicated restraints used on him recently. His hands are clean, his nails trimmed. No spots on the nails, no deep grooves. The Guide retains an unusual amount of body hair on his arms. Most Guides have been completely depilated." The last offering was half-statement, half-question.

"Excellent. The reason for the retention of body hair is that this Guide was a wild Guide. He was raised outside the House system. While pubic and chest and facial hair have been removed, often the black marketeers don't invest the time in removing hair from the rest of the body. Excellent observations, Chevo. The Guide exhibits no injuries to his extremities. Guides often require a gentle restraint at the wrist or ankle to keep them in one place when they are not under direct observation. So the absence of marks may or may not be a good thing. It may be an indication of insufficient supervision." Blair heard the disapproval in the familiar voice. "But, let's move on."

Blair was turned onto his side, his coverings moved aside. He felt hands running over his the skin of his back, his buttocks, his thighs.

"Tell me about his lungs. How does his back look." The instructor asked, selecting out another student. "Sentinel Daly."

"Clear breath sounds, his respirations are a fraction below the standard normal. There are no marks on his back, buttocks or the back of his legs as far as I can note. He has a rather dense musculature. Presumably for the reasons you gave earlier."

"Yes. What is the normal respiratory rate for a Guide of his age and apparent condition?"

"Twelve to twenty breaths per minute." The answer came back in a chorus.

"Heart rate?"

"Seventy to ninety beats per minute." The class chimed in.

"Yes. His pulse is what?"

"Sixty four."

"Theories as to why that is?"

"He is medicated with a sedating medication with a side effect of lowering his heart rate?"

"Yes. With Pordomian. a mild tranquilizer that works well in Guides as well as several other species of mammals, but has the benefit of not affecting Sentinels at all. It is commonly used to sedate recalcitrant, or difficult to manage Guides. It was chosen for this particular Guide for one very important reason. Can anyone tell me what that reason might be?" Shuffling noises all around, Blair felt his forehead wrinkle. They were talking about him.

When no one spoke up the instructor tutted. "Very obviously the Guide has recently had a litter of pups. Pordomian will not cross into the milk. He can be pumped and the milk will be safe to administer to pups. Though in this case it isn't likely. The Guide has already been nursing for a month. The pups should have been advanced to formula at least two weeks ago."
There was a low murmuring and tapping as notes were taken down. Blair, still limp, was carefully rolled back to lay supine, blinking through the heavy gauze of his veil. He wanted to sleep. To just drift off. But more hands were at his chest, and the touch was just enough to keep him from sleeping.

"How many of you have seen a nursing Guide?" The instructor asked. A hand moved up to Blair's chest, encircling his breast, toying with a nipple. He let out a small sound, not liking it, wanting to shrink away. The touch was disturbing, wrong.

"Normally a Guide is allowed to nurse for a week after delivering its pups. Then it can be mechanically milked for several months if desired. Most often with a breeding Guide it is best to bind the breasts and decrease milk after the first week. There is some truth to the old wives tales about breast-feeding decreasing the likelihood of conception. But the main impediment to this Guide's rapid re-impregnation lies in an entirely different arena."

Blair felt his robe parted further. His male genitalia grabbed in a large hand, tugged. He heard several gasps.

"Yes." The instructor's tone was filled with satisfaction. "About half of you had seen a nursing Guide before. But have any of you seen a breeding Guide with intact male genitalia before?" The murmuring got louder. "It is this that is the greatest hazard to the Guide's re-breeding. It is a sign, also, that is not incompatible with abuse. This should have been taken care of prior to the birth of the first litter. It wasn't. If we cannot discover a legitimate reason why..." He let the thought hang.

Blair stirred, trying to pull away from the grip. It was too tight. Painful. He was happy when the hand dropped away. He wanted to lift his knees protectively. If only he could find the strength. If his muscles would obey him.

"Being a Veterinarian specializing in Guide Medicine is a challenge. Finding specimens such as this Guide is rare. Every opportunity should be taken to examine the Guide fully and glean as much experience as possible from it."

"First off. The texture of the breast is unusually firm due to the congestion of milk, the skin a little hotter than usual, perhaps as much as a degree above the expected norm." The pad of the speakers thumb continued rubbing across Blair's nipple absently as if toying with an inanimate object. He wanted it to stop. Needed it to stop. Hated it.

"I would say the Guide is a few hours past due for milking. What I would like you to do is each of you take a breast, there are six of you and most conveniently six breasts. Examine it visually, then palpate it, manipulate it." The voice directed and the hands obeyed. Blair felt his sensitive nipples tugged. It wasn't very gentle, not meaning to offer harm or discomfort, but lacked the awareness that this could be an intimate act at all, or that the body part in question was tender.

"See how easily the milk is expressed...." There was a grunt, and a low, sonorous growl, filling the examination bay.

"I beg your pardon." The outraged tone of the Instructor's voice was breathless, lacking the authority he'd tried to give it. "Who are you sir..."

"Step away from the Guide." Came the order, interrupting the Instructor's protest.

Hard, clipped tone. A voice that was not to be disobeyed. Blair felt relief as the hands feel away from him, as he heard a scurrying of feet leaving his bedside. "This Guide is in the custody of the Protectorate. The Guide will not be touched, or examined or discussed without an officer present. Or by any personnel not personally approved by me." It was the big man, the Captain, Blair's memory
suddenly was willing to supply.

The Vet found his voice enough to splutter. "I'll have you know I am the head of...."


Blair whimpered as he was covered with a warm blanket from chin to toes. He struggled to open his eyes, to speak. To ask about his babies. Jim. Rafe. William. William wouldn't let him stay here. Would he? William could help. William who Blair knew desired him. William would help....wouldn't he? If Blair could ask....

Blair drifted off, the sedative overwhelming his feeble consciousness.
Jim Ellison paused outside the door of the room holding his Guide. It had taken him far too long to
gain permission to visit the House where Blair was being held. He understood the reasons for it, the
requirement for caution. But he resented the reasons and the pretence that was being maintained that
he was a risk to Blair at all. Each and every one of the trumped up charges angered him, he kept that
anger close, it would be useful when he found out the person who was to blame for starting this ball
rolling. His need for re-dress, for revenge was boiling over.

Getting permission to visit Blair was the first hurdle he had faced, not as easy as it had first seemed.
He understood why his father had hesitated to intervene. Had taken the time to think through the
ramifications, before countermanding the orders that kept any Sentinel from the Guide during the
course of an investigation.

Then he and Brian had been delayed as the harried House administrator had insisted, despite the
signed, notarized Order of Visitation in the Sentinel's hand, that the Protectorate Sentinel had to be
called. That verbal permission from the SGP had to be heard by his own ears. Saying without saying
anything, that the order of the ruler of Cascade was not enough to get him through.

It wasn't until the lofty, doorway-filling form of Captain Michael Rathe appeared in the door of the
administrator's office that Jim had been allowed to learn where Blair was being kept. In one of the
countless shielded rooms, impossible to track by scent or hearing. Or Jim wouldn't have waited. No
matter what the rules dictated. He would have pulled his weapon and fought his way there, if he'd
known where to go. He ground his teeth together, hard. The person responsible...would pay, dearly.

William Ellison had been as furious as his son. When it came to Sentinels in Cascade, he was the
embodiment of the law. He purposely stayed out of Protectorate business. Kept himself apart. But
this had been too much. He had personal knowledge of the falsity of the accusations.

William, hand trembling with rage, had signed the writ of Visitation and had it couriered over to his
son. He had little doubt what was happening and why now. His changes were not welcome. Even
the less conservative of the Sentinels residing in Cascade were nervous, worried the changes were
too much, too fast. The more conservative were talking about leaving the area. Taking their Guides
with them.

And there were those who would fight him, fight in any way they could to keep the changes from
happening. From destroying their way of life. Tradition, the way their fathers had lived, their
grandfathers, and so on, far back in time. Some would fight openly. Others...would resort to
measures such as this. Underhanded. Honorless. Stabbing him and any who supported him, his
administration, in the back. He growled deep in his chest. Well they wouldn't win. His resolve was
only made stronger.

So while Jim was visiting Blair, William was on the phone, making sure his supporters knew what
was happening. Making sure that it was crystal clear to those who were on the fence that that
position, one of neutrality, was no longer tenable. And those who opposed him, who dared support
such a move as devious and underhanded as having his son's Guide confiscated, with rumors of
abuse that fueled gossip, he let them know he was taking them on. He wasn't going to let it go on
behind the scenes. If they were going to oppose him, they would do it in the full light of the day.

Even with the personal knowledge of the ridiculousness of the claims of abuse and neglect, William
Ellison chose not to halt the investigation. The Sentinel/Guide Protectorate was outside all the usual
channels of law. He did not rule over the men and women there, not in the performance of their
duties. They investigated. No one had the power to stop them until they were satisfied with what they found. Either in favor of the Sentinel, or against. So this fiasco would have to play out. And Jim would be vindicated. It would not be just William's word that made it so.

Jim, as bad as his day had been was having a far better one than his father. Jim, at least was about to see his Guide. He followed the wide back of the Protectorate Sentinel to a moderately sized, comfortably warm room. As soon as the door opened Jim smelled Blair. He heard the soft, insistent beat of Blair's heart, slower and more sluggish than he liked, but unfaltering. He saw his Guide, who lay curled on one side under a pale green blanket. Fully draped and veiled. Drugged. Not responding to the nearness of his Sentinel at all.

The anxiety that had been a band around Jim's chest eased a fraction as his gaze swept up and down the slowly breathing body. There was no scent of alarm, no scent of blood. And, Jim thought grimly, no scent of semen. Blair had not yet been put to stud. His jaw clenched even as his breath came easier.

Rafe, coming in behind him let out a sound that was very close to a moan, telegraphing the depth of his distress. He crowded nearer, brushing against Jim's back, going around him without waiting for an OK, making sure he went around on the side away from the Protectorate Sentinel. Jim watched him go to Blair. The look on his Companion's face open, urgent. One of overwhelming relief.

Jim let him go first, then he followed. Stopping just out of reach of their Guide, he took Rafe's chin in his hand, using the hold to turn his Companion, tilting the brown eyes up to meet his own.

Rafe's eyes were brilliant with emotion. His body was wracked by faint tremors, every inch of his body crying out to go to the Guide. Jim held him against the front of his body. Ran a soothing hand down the shorter Sentinel's side, molding his palm to the small of Rafe's back. Feeling the tremors continue. He felt Brian's need, gently he let him go. Took his hand and put their linked grip on top of the sleeping Blair.

Blair. His Guide. Warm. Alive. Safe. In a place where Jim didn't want him to be. But as far as he could tell, unviolated. Asleep. Watched over. He spread his hand, releasing Brian's, so his own hand splayed wide over the softness of the Guide's belly. He moved the robes just enough to touch skin without exposing it.

Peace. Acceptance. Relief. Belonging. Jim and Rafe next to him, let out a shuddering breath, another sound from the younger of the two, a sob. Then Brian leaned down over Blair and lightly draped himself across the slumbering Guide's body. He felt the cushion of breasts, all in a plumped line down Blair's torso. Wet warmth came through. The scent of Blair filled him, he drew it deep into his lungs, felt his cells open to the essence, take it in until it became a part of him.

Rafe clambered up on to the low bed, not trying to find the will to stop, not caring that a stranger watched him, lifting the blankets, the veils, until Blair's hair spilled out, a full, rich mass of dark curls. His shoes fell with dull thuds beside the bed. His arms folded around the pliant body. Hooked a leg over the compact thighs. Buried his nose in the curls, pulled the Guide closer, until he felt the fine, silken strands catching in his lashes. Held him tightly, all along their lengths.

Jim moved his hand to Blair's head, threading his fingers through the thick hair, put his other hand on the back of Rafe's neck. His Companion, his Guide. Together, safe where he could see both, assure himself. He gave a silent murmur of thanks. It could have been so much worse. It didn't make him want any less to raze the Sheehan House down to the last brick, but...Blair was here, in front of him. And that, for this moment was enough.

Blair could have been sold. Could have been sent where Jim would never find him, no matter what
resources he brought to bear. He might have been put to breed, might have more memories of hormone crazed men penetrating him, while he could do nothing about it, nothing to stop it. Jim shoved that thought away. But it refused to go.

Hadn't he argued with his father that it was more natural for a Guide to be bred that way? That insemination wasn't natural, and thus... He had himself argued for just what he'd feared had happened. It hadn't, but now he knew, he had been wrong to suggest it. Idiotic. To think he could stand it being done to Blair, man after man going inside the body of the Guide who he...cared for...maybe more? Jim shied away from that thought, went back to thinking of other things, less threatening. Wrong to think it would be possible for him to let Blair lay under a series of unknown men until he was pregnant again. Jim couldn't let that happen.

Dr Miller had to be right. It had to be true that he, or Brian could give Blair the children. One of them had to be fertile with the Guide. Even the thought of other men's seed inside Blair's body, artificial or naturally placed there, made Jim burn with a dangerous rage, flecked by the equally volatile desire to strike out, to punish indiscriminately any one who presumed to lay hands on his Guide.

Over him, at his side stood a massive figure. Jim glanced up, his eyes icy, anger barely controlled. Like his voice when it came out, razor sharp, precise, cutting, ringing with a low fury. He felt a viciousness rising in him, choking off his ability to reason. He showed his teeth, sharp and white. The man next to him didn't react beyond letting Jim see he saw the threat. Accepted it.

"Rathe." It took a supreme effort to make the name come from his lips, but Jim got it out.

"Ellison." Milder tone. Deeper voice. Respectful, but anything but subservient. Rathe was not giving Jim position.

"I am here to see ~my~ Guide." Jim said, the distinction crucially important. His lips peeled back from his teeth again.

"Yes." The dark green eyes flicked to Rafe and Blair curled together on top of the bed the blankets and veils so jumbled it was impossible to say one wore them and one did not. Both faces were uncovered, their hair tangled together. Blair was limp, his head lolling resting against the side of Brian's forehead, his throat stretched, vulnerable to the slow lick of Rafe's guilty, needy tongue. The Companion wasn't able to stop his exploration, his need to re-imprint the Guide. The two Alpha Sentinels watched as it progressed.

The larger man nodded, a short, no nonsense motion. His dark green eyes returned to the standing Major Crimes' detective. The examination of the Guide held no interest for him.

"The charges are bullshit." Ellison said, his words coming out like they were being squeezed, fisted out of him, sharpened to a razor's edge. He drew in a breath, drew in his Guide's scent. It calmed him, gave him back a fraction of the control he'd lost, the loss that was burning a hole in him, fueling the rage. The requirement for revenge.

"I know." Michael Rathe replied. "You do not need to convince me." His attention was fixed on the bed. Not on Jim. Jim stepped across the sound absorbing floor, relinquishing for now the touch of his Companion and his Guide. Rathe's head turned slowly towards him. Jim stopped moving. The Captain turned his attention back to the bed, to where Rafe was struggling to get out of his shirt and pants without letting go of Blair, or moving away.

The younger of the Guide's Sentinels. Rathe looked him over. Pants fell to the floor. Nicely put together. In shades of brown. Hair, eyes, skin tone. Handsome, especially for a Sentinel. No way he would have made it through the whole term of Academy without being Claimed. Ellison had just
gotten there first. A shame. He could have used the young man himself. Beautiful.

Rathe saw the need in the dark eyes, the cliff’s edge the man was poised on. Tension poured off of him. Need. Desire. Unable to wait, Brian didn't voice it, but he didn't have to. A button torn from his shirt skittered across the floor as frustration won it's awkward battle towards bare skin. The feeling vibrated across the intervening space. Intense, powerful. Impressed, the uniformed Captain jerked his head towards Rafe and the sedated Guide.

"Your Companion." He commented. The words communicated less than the way they were delivered.


Michael Rathe smiled, lifted his shoulders in a shrug, big, massive, dwarving even Jim. That much larger again than Brian. Jim stared at him, not letting his feelings show. He shook his head, repeating the negative nonverbally. Returned to Rafe and Blair, standing over them, standing vigil, watching as Rafe was unable to do anything but imprint his Guide.

The Captain watched absently as the two men carefully went over every inch of the Guide. He could hardly blame them. Their Guide had been whisked out from under their care, taken without notice, with accusations of abuse and demands to breed. He could well imagine his own fury if it should happen, ever, to any Guide he possessed. He had to grin at that idea. Himself, with a Guide. As if.

The complaint had been worded in such a way that the Protectorate could not in good conscience ignore the report. Even if it went against everything he knew of the younger Ellison, the heir to Cascade. Rathe owed it to every Guide to investigate such charges. Even if the reporting complainant wasn't courageous enough to give his name, it wasn't all that difficult to find out who he was.

If Rathe failed to investigate because he didn't believe the charges...then someday, he would miss a true case of abuse, someone would not report, thinking it was not of any use. He would miss a Guide being hurt. He would lose a Guide. His jaw spasmed. And that would never do.

A ruckus in the hall made both of the Alphas look up and in the direction of the heated conversation. Footsteps stomped past. The conversation, argument really, wasn't all that loud, coming from behind a closed door, but both men could hear it clearly. The subject not one to bring a smile to either face. Ellison glowered, standing fierce, over his Companion and Guide, his part in the imprinting of the Guide done for now, his fists knots of white-knuckled anger.

"How long have they been discussing that?" He growled. Discussing which studs to put his Guide to. Jim's teeth again were bared, his speech harsh, abrupt.

"How long have they been talking crap like that?" Michael shrugged. "Since your Guide came in. There isn't one of them who doesn't want a piece of him. They believe him to be a rare find."

Ellison relaxed a fraction at the casual acknowledgement that Blair belonged to him, before stiffening on hearing how much others wanted his Guide. Rathe almost smiled again, seeing the reaction. Predictable.

Ellison knew him. He should know that he would not be in here, in this room now, if the Protectorate Captain had any doubts as to the care of the Guide. Ellison was no risk to the curly haired Guide. The rest was just going through the motions, doing nothing rash, nothing too fast to be taken seriously. But as far as Captain Rathe was concerned the Guide was as good as Ellison's again.
Had been since the first real examination of the Guide by the Protectorate's Veterinarian revealed a healthy, happy Guide. Well, happy aside from the current predicament. A certain level of anxiety was expected in these circumstances. Guides did not like disruption or excessive excitement. And being taken from its home was...exciting, in a negative way.

"Any progress? Any sign of who is winning?" Jim asked sarcastically.

"Winning? No. Neither is willing to see the other's point. It is the same thing, over and over. Put him with a Guide stud or a mundane. One is cost free, one requires a substantial stud-fee payment. They go around and around, the same crap every time. Besides, their argument hardly matters. They will not be allowed in here to carry out any order they settle on. The Guide is under my protection. Let them argue." He waved a long arm dismissively.

"Meaning?" Ellison's intent ice-blue eyes met his, challenging. The Captain let his own lashes sweep down to hide his gaze, hard to do when he was a full six inches taller than the detective. But worth it. Important to let a riled Sentinel know he wasn't at risk, not really. Of course Ellison knew that, but he couldn't war with the instincts inside of himself, instincts that demanded he defend his possession of the Guide. A Guide Rathe didn't want. That however wasn't important. Michael Rathe was a Sentinel. That was all that mattered to Sentinel Jim Ellison.

"They seem to have forgotten that your Guide is with me. With the Protectorate. They think their decision will make a difference in his fate." He shrugged minutely, a gesture that conveyed much with such little motion. There was a brief flash of white teeth.

"But, it won't." Jim said, with no small degree of satisfaction. Rathe nodded, pleased the other Sentinel understood.

Brian was just managing to bury himself and Blair in the pile of blankets, hiding both from view, tucking them in. Now hidden, an unhappy sound rising in his throat. Jim's Companion could hear the words as well. And he didn't like them. His hands explored Blair, searching for injuries, for anything wrong, for anything right, trying to tuck Blair completely under his own body.

Rathe watched the concealed, shifting mass. Yes, the Companion was beautiful. A worthy Companion. Uninterested in what was going on between the two Alphas, focused on the care of the Guide. Worried about...Ah!

"The pups." The Captain said, inclining his head towards the door. "They are being bathed, changed," he wrinkled his sensitive nose, giving a clue as to why the babies weren't being changed in the room. "I thought it best that they continue to feed from their mother."

Rathe noted the way the Companion stiffened, went still under the covers at the mention of the "pups", the corner of the blankets lifted, his chocolate eyes sliding over and up, up until he met the emerald gaze fastened on him. The Captain licked his lips, slow and hungry. So lovely, those long lashed, dark eyes.

It was a simple matter of one step, and reaching out a long arm. Rathe touched that lightly tanned skin, running the backs of his fingers over a freshly shaven cheek, up into the silky wave of dark brown hair. Brian was unmoving, wrapped around Blair like a boa constrictor. Head tilted back, looking all the way up into the face and eyes observing him. Trained not to protest an Alpha's choice. But clearly not liking it.

"Rathe." Ellison's voice was hardly amused, he was up close. He watched as his Companion was handled surprisingly gently by the huge man. No overt, unforgivable touches, nothing like a Claim being laid on him. Just a curious fondling, friendly, interested, but harmless.
Alpha Sentinels liked Brian Rafe. They liked him a lot. Captain Rathe was not the first. But they also knew, every second, they never forgot who outranked whom. Ellison knew they knew. But what of the Captain? Rathe was a man outside the usual power structure. Unconcerned by Jim's rank. He didn't cross the line, neither was Jim sure where the line was with the man. But oddly Jim trusted him. Enough to leave his Guide temporarily in those monstrously large hands.

"The babes?" Ellison asked for more information. His eyes watching, watching for any impropriety as Rathe stroked Brian's face.

"Not unaccompanied. I know well enough how unlikely it is that these...people here can be trusted. They will not leave the sight of my men. The", he looked at Jim strangely, a question in the next word, his lips pursing, "babies" are also mine, for now." Another shrug as his hand dropped away from Brian's cheek, the tip of his forefinger lingering as it brushed a full lower lip. Lush. Tempting. Far more so than that little, warm skinned Guide who smelled of mothering and milk. A Guide was a Guide, they were all the same, but this...this Companion....mmmm.

"I think you will grow unbearably fat on this diet of yours." Rathe remarked to Jim. "Such a wealth of choices on which to feed. Perhaps I might relieve you of one?"

Jim reached over, moving up behind Rafe, his hand sliding up the back of his Companion's body and into the thickly curled hair at his nape. The tightening of his fingers tilted Brian's head back, showing the long, smooth length of his strong throat, his head falling back along Jim's hip. Displaying Rafe in a way. Letting the other man look. Just look.

"Yes. Beautiful."

"My Companion." Jim said, leaning down, turning his head to nuzzle Brian's ear. "Far too expensive for anyone to tempt away."

"I am saving up." Captain Michael Rathe said. Letting the implication hang. He smiled his first, full, blindingly white smile.

Brian watched them from the corner of his eyes. He was sure, absolutely certain that the large Sentinel wasn't interested in Blair. Not like he should be. No. The man had instead paid more attention to Rafe himself. To Brian, another Sentinel. Not to the Guide. It made no sense to him. A Sentinel should want a Guide. A Companion, sure, but not when a Guide was present. The Guide was more, so much more. Rafe didn't understand it. But he knew if given a choice Captain Rathe would pick him over Blair.

Rafe stroked his fingertips over Blair's wrist. It was the only part of his Guide left uncovered. He made sure of it. The idea of other Sentinels seeing any part of Blair stirred up his rage. Rafe wanted Blair covered and Protected.

Captain Rathe, not taking his gaze from the slender, strong form of Ellison's Companion, smiled wryly. "He doesn't understand." He said, traces of amusement in the words. "Does he?"

Ellison shrugged. "No. You aren't something that can be understood by any other Sentinel who is not one of your kind."

"Yes. Maybe you are right. But without men like me, Sentinels like me, who would protect the Guides from Sentinels like him, like you, like that creature who calls himself a doctor?"

"What doctor?" Suddenly all of Jim's attention transferred from the shared observation of Guide and Companion.
"The one who has tried without fail since we arrived to take over the care of your Guide. Who has tried to assert his will in how the Guide will be managed and bred. The man who has filed a petition for ownership of your adult Guide and all his offspring since they were rescued from your "inadequate" care."

Jim faced Rathe fully now.

"I would be interested in knowing who this doctor is." He said with careful control.

"Yes, I know you would. Normally I would say nothing to you. Nothing at all. An anonymous tipster is not always a bad man. Sometimes I do find I have to protect a Guide from what is being done. But, this man, he wanted only to stir things up. He has reported falsely. Vindictively. I can't tolerate that."

Jim's eyes glowed with the blue lights of the predator he was at heart. Far deeper, far more primitive, more ingrained than the protector, was the predator. The hunter. Who was hungry for it's rightful prey.

Protectorate Captain Michael Rathe smiled.
William Ellison looked up as the footsteps echoing in the hall stopped at his door and a knock, a very quiet and respectful one, sounded. He sighed. Even the thick carpets couldn't make the house Sentinel silent. Well, he glanced at the clock, it had been a few hours since he'd shut himself in here. It was time for a break. He could hear Christopher's breathing, quiet, but not calm. Something was causing the Companion some degree of agitation.

"Yes?" The query did not convey his fatigue, rather hid it behind years of practice. He took in a deep breath as the door eased open. It was indeed his Companion. He raised his brows, actually pleased to see Christopher. They had led very separate lives of late, William instituting the most important of the reforms he'd chosen and Christopher running the rest of Cascade. He had been doing an admirable job of it. William felt a wave of pride, of satisfaction.

"Your son is here." The deep, resonant voice told him, at odds with the elevated heart rate.

William pushed back from the desk. "Jim? Here? I thought..." Why wasn't Jim visiting Blair at the Sheehan Guide House? He was sure his son would be there until Blair was released into his custody later this afternoon. Was something wrong? Had Blair been harmed? The babies? He stood, hurrying to the door as it opened wider to let a blond man into the room.

William stopped in his tracks. It was one of the last faces he expected to see in his office, in his house, despite recent overtures of reconciliation on his part.

"Steven." He murmured. "You were in Africa." The ruler of Cascade added helplessly.

"Dad." A tentative smile accompanied the greeting. He was looking well, tanned, slim, fit. His eyes a darker blue than his brother's, his hair far lighter, and longer, long enough to curl into short ringlets at the ends. Tipped in pale gold as if bleached by the sun. He looked healthy, very young, strong.

William stared at his son, afraid he was dreaming this. Wishful thinking on his part. He had done so much to drive Steven away. Unwilling to even listen to his son's views where they differed from his own. Ordering the boy and then the man to stop such foolish prattlings. He'd been wrong. He'd said as much to him when they spoke last week. He'd apologized. But he'd never expected this. His son to be here.

"Steven, I didn't know you were coming! You said nothing." They stood, less than a yard apart, each man afraid to make the first move closer. Steven bit his lip, smiled again. Held out his hand. William seized it, held it in both of his own. Looked into the welcome gaze, both looking into each other's eyes as if memorizing the features once more. Grey and blue. Father and son.

William noted a stir behind his youngest son as someone else came into the room behind him. Reluctantly he released the young man's hand as they both turned to face the door. Christopher naturally knew what was coming, and William should have taken a clue from the way his Companion looked everywhere else, every where but into the face of the person who entered. Of course, Steven's Guide. Unveiled. Completely unveiled, and in a shirt, jacket and trousers, just as Steven was. A Guide without robes at all. Scandalous in many corners of the globe, including Cascade. But par for the course when it came to his younger son.

And it wasn't the Guide William expected, he knew he hadn't forgotten the other face, hadn't made it up. This wasn't the Guide Steven had been with when he'd left home. Not small, not feminine, rather tall and slender, wiry, athletic, only a few inches shorter than his very tall younger son. No this
Guide was on the masculine side of androgynous, brown skinned, with luminous amber eyes set in a narrow, elfin face. A serious and boyishly handsome face.

Dark brown, unbelievably spiky hair, square jawed, ethnic, not American. Something screamed Continental, perhaps French, Spanish. Both? William wasn't certain. But the way the young Guide moved was not American. There was a limber sensuousness about him. Guides raised in America did not have that confidence. They were...more circumspect, more cautious in the way they dared to move. Drawing attention was not always a good thing.

Christopher's gaze was fixed resolutely on the floor. William, though, gaped. He was aware of a certain level of embarrassment, but he couldn't stop himself, couldn't tear his eyes away.

"This is not...not who I expected. I...I am afraid I don't know..." He could feel that this was a Guide. He also could feel the bond between his son and this one. Adding to that, the young man immediately took Steven's hand and moved to press up to him, until they were in contact all along their sides. The long lashed, superficially innocent but knowing eyes met William's and he almost looked away himself, disconcerted.

"No. She died." There was a wealth of sadness in the words. A history William wanted to know, ached to know, regretted he didn't share. He could never get those years back. He had missed so much of this son's life, driving him away as he had.

"This is Dahl." Steven's tone went from hurting to affectionate. "He's been with me for almost a year." He looked, well...proud, and ecstatic, grinning as he glanced down those too few inches, pressed an unreserved kiss to the wildly irregular hairline.

William wondered for a panicked moment as the two shared an intimate, slightly shy smile, just how old the Guide was. He didn't look legal when he peered up through his lashes like a naughty child. William cut that thought off at the knees.

William averted his gaze. He'd missed so much in his son's life. His son had lost a Guide, one of the most traumatic events a Sentinel could face, and William hadn't been there to help him through it. He opened his mouth to tell Steven how much he regretted their estrangement, when yet another person entered the room.

A man, a Sentinel, with curly brown hair, dancing brown eyes, muscles popping out all over him. He was slightly shorter than the Guide, but twice as wide. His dark brown skin gleamed, setting off the blazing white of his smile. William immediately wanted to put his desk between himself and the man. There was something a little too aggressive, too unpredictable about the Sentinel.

"Dad, this is my Companion, Clemente Andrei Hernandez." Steven said, with another blinding, pleased smile. He held his free hand out to the man.

Clemente beamed, took Steven's hand, and dragged Steven and his Guide across the intervening inches. William was taken aback as his hand was grasped, squeezed within an inch of breaking, then went rigid with shock as he was pulled into a bear hug. The shorter man pounded his back enthusiastically. His one free arm a vice around William's shoulders. Strong, very strong, the shorter man's arm's and chest were hard as a rock.

"Call me Andy. Good ta meet'cha." There was some sort of soft accent in the background, as well as the tones of the east coast, maybe New York, but hidden. Latin? Perhaps. The name Andrei was what? Russian? French? Too many possibilities.

William was happy to have Christopher step closer to him. Happy for the large presence of his own
Companion. Happy to have...Andy release him. Steven's Companion radiated bonhomie, a cheerful exuberance, at odds with the usual formality William expected and received. It wasn't a common habit, another man's Companion getting so close. William couldn't recall if he'd ever hugged Jim's Companion. Perhaps when he'd first learned they were bonded? His memory failed to supply the answer. Maybe not.

And William knew for certain he'd never seen Jim, Rafe and Blair holding hands like this. He'd be surprised if he had seen any bond group do it so openly. Trust Steven to open his eyes that much further, not to let things settle too comfortably.

William extricated himself with as much grace as he could, wincing, feeling off balance, waving to the collection of chairs at the far end of his office. The other Sentinel seemed not to notice, he also seemed the least like a submissive Companion of any Sentinel William had ever met. Which, when it came to his younger son, was what he should have expected.

Andy looped an arm around the waist of Dahl, hugged him, as possessive an act as any Alpha Sentinel displayed. Dahl relaxed into the embrace. William could literally feel the heat coming off of Christopher as he flushed red to his roots, shifting from foot to foot uncomfortably. Nothing overt, nothing sexual. But Christopher wasn't used to being touched, or to seeing others touch. He was celibate. He was virginal. And aside from the gentle contact, the reserved affection of William Ellison, he had experienced no closeness, no physical intimacy in his adult life.

Another problem. William resolved to address it soon. If he was wrong to keep touch from his Guide, he was without a doubt equally wrong to keep it to a minimum with his Companion. And sex? Could he have sex with such a masculine person as his Companion? When his tastes went so far to the other end of the spectrum? To the feminine? What was the alternative? He certainly wasn't going to give him up. They were a team. He relied on Christopher, couldn't imagine his life without him. Yet, Christopher, naked, in bed...William's mind shied away from the visual that provoked.

Very carefully William reached out and wrapped his fingers around the wide wrist of his towering Companion, and held on through the surprised reaction, a startled jerk that almost took the wrist out of his grasp. Christopher's pulse raced under William's fingertips.

"Sir?" Christopher's voice conveyed his total confusion, searching for answers. William squeezed his wrist gently, he hoped reassuringly. As any good companion, Christopher surrendered to his Senior's choice. But he also didn't move back or out of the way enough to let Steven or his group move nearer to William. William knew Christopher didn't like the other Companion touching him. That Andy would dare had caught them both by surprise. Now they knew better.

"Why are you here? Can I offer you a drink? Something to eat?" William ventured, stepping further back to gesture again at the over-stuffed chairs grouped together at the far end of his personal office. He had more formal leather upholstered ones in his main audience room, but he liked these. For all their sombre colors, muted browns, greens and black, they were very comfortable. "Not to say that I am not happy to see you after this long. But you never said you were coming this way."

Steven let his hand come to rest on his father's arm as they moved towards the seating. William was aware of Christopher stiffening again. Christopher, who's wrist he still held, who he refused to let go of no matter how years, decades of propriety urged him to do so.

"Dad, how could I miss this? My father is finally listening to the sort of arguments I've been pounding his ears with for years. Finally making the kind of changes I begged him to consider, to just think about...how could I not be here to support you through this? It isn't going to be easy."

Steven settled his Guide in the middle of the couch, his Companion next to him, where they fussed over each other. Steven stood facing his father, Christopher towering over them both. "Dad, this is
the most incredible time of my life. I'm here for you. I'm not leaving again."

William felt tears prickle in eyes. His son was home. To stay. He smoothed a hand down the younger man's shirt. "I am glad. I've missed you. I was wrong. I know that now."

"And where is this incredible person who convinced you when I failed to? I want to meet him."

Steven said, his smile once more lighting the room.

"Blair. You want to meet Blair. Jim's Guide." William said. "That is going to take some time. But, as soon as it is possible. I do want you two to meet."

Steven frowned. "What's wrong? Has something happened to him? Is it Jim? Is he against me meeting his Guide?"

William shook his head. Of course Jim had always been more conservative than Steven, but never as conservative as his father. Still, it didn't surprise him that Steven might think Jim wasn't happy to have them meet, his beautiful Guide and his beautiful beach boy blond brother. Jim had always thought Steven was the more attractive of the two, when they were younger it had been a problem. But Jim and Steven were adults now. Surely it wouldn't be an issue still?

"No, it isn't that. There have been many attempts, some overt, some under the table to convince me in reconsider. To return to the positions I've held in the past. Jim has been the subject of harassment. His Guide Blair was reported to the Protectorate as a victim of abuse." William explained as he sat, Christopher placing himself in a chair between him and his son's Companion and Guide. His jaw was set. William was actually a little flattered to note the display of jealousy.

"Abuse?" Steven was incredulous. "Jim would never abuse a Guide." He stated it as a fact, a natural law. And he was right. His older brother, Jim Ellison, heir to Cascade, former special forces soldier, police detective, and political conservative, would never harm a Guide. The idea was ludicrous. Anyone who knew Jim Ellison, really knew him would know that. "I heard he has a Companion?"

"Brian Rafe." Andrei said, directing the statement towards the two Sentinels he'd just met, his eyes dancing with bright curiosity. "A detective. Just like your brother, Jim." He smiled, William was momentarily startled all over again that the Companion had spoken up without checking for leave. Then he reminded himself, this was his son's, his very liberal son's, Companion. He should expect it.

He cleared his throat. And told them all the tale.

The Vet wiped his hands on his pants.

None of this was happening the way it was supposed to. He had called in the Protectorate, just as had been decided. He'd been assured he would be anonymous. His backers had promised they would protect him. They had promised him immunity. Given him assurances, and now, it was all falling apart.

Now it was turning into a disaster. He wiped his damp palms again. Nothing was going right. His petition for ownership of the Guide was supposed to have been approved quickly, pushed through all hush-hush, signed, filed before anyone noticed. Then with the ownership in his hands, it would have been twice as hard for Ellison to contest it. Ownership was everything when it came to Guides.

Only it hadn't happened. He wasn't the proud and soon to be wealthy owner of a fertile Guide. Blair hadn't been bred, wasn't pregnant again. A whole week had gone by, he'd not been put to a single stud, and now the news was worse than any the Vet feared he would hear. The Guide was being
returned to Ellison. It should have been impossible.

To make things that much worse. The pups would be repatriated along with their mother. So he was getting exactly nothing out of this.

Well, no, it was a lot worse than nothing. Ellison was looking for the anonymous reporter. And the Protectorate, far from keeping him confidential, was apparently not standing in the heir's way.

If he didn’t do something soon, he was going to die. James Ellison was not a reasonable man. He was arrogant, violent, stubborn. And stupid. Unable to see the gold mine he had in his breeding Guide. Worst of all he was tenacious. He was going to find out who had ratted on him. And he was going to take revenge. A bloody revenge if he kept true to form.

There was only one thing the Vet could do. He had to roll over on the group of men who had backed him, put him up to this. They had failed to take care of him, so it was only right he give them up to protect his own skin. He would negotiate a settlement, get a guarantee of safety, then spill it all. Name names.

Maybe he could hope to get one of the pups in the bargain. The names he had to hand out were big ones. One of the Guide's pups would be worth it. Make it all worthwhile. The pup might even be more fertile than the mother. Wild breeds often were. In sixteen years he could begin breeding the Guide. At a rate of one litter a year he could hope to get maybe fifteen litters of up to three pups a litter before the Guide wore out. He would be a multi-millionaire. There was nothing he wouldn't be able to afford. He'd retire in luxury.

All on the back of just one fertile Guide.
Protectorate Captain Michael Rathe stood beside the podium in front of the television cameras. His Admiral stood at the podium, every bit as large as the Captain, but significantly older and far more irritable.

The Admiral was not in a good mood. He'd made a career of the Protectorate and considered Cascade's current form his own special baby. He hated when people thought they could mess with it. Especially to do their own dirty work like the asshole who had called this particular complaint in. It didn't do anything to salve his temper to have the whole thing turn into a media circus either.

Paul Bellingham had been running the SGP for the last seven years. He gripped the edges of the specially built podium with his big paws and glared out over the crowd of reporters. A hardy lot, only half physically cringed from the glare. His iron grey hair was cut military short, his wide mouth turned into a perpetual, glowering frown. His teeth showed between lips drawn thin with anger. He began without preamble or introduction.

"On Tuesday we received a call from an anonymous tipster, phoned in to the switchboard at the Sentinel/Guide Protectorate. The call reported that an unapproved/undocumented Guide House was being run at an address in downtown Cascade. Further the complaint accused that one of the Guides in the House was not being managed per the Sentinel Laws of this city. The Guide being a victim of both neglect and abuse." His stare raked them all, eyes blazing like twin silver lasers. "We take these reports seriously."

A silence descended on the crowd, and the huge man looked from face to face. He growled into the microphone, everyone in hearing distance excepting the man at his side jumped, swallowing hard. It was an immense relief to all when he began to speak again. Sweat was wiped from a number of brows, and there were many wishing fervently for a good stiff drink, just a little liquid courage would not go amiss.

"Captain Michael Rathe was immediately dispatched to check out the report and to secure the safety of the Guides in question." Another fiery glare. "He found four Guides at the address. One Adult Guide recently delivered of three pups. All were confiscated and placed in the Sheehan Guide House pending further investigation."

His hands flexed, and the groan of the tough wood came through the microphones clearly, the popping of wood and nails as his grip tightened. But nothing burst apart before the briefing picked up again.

"The claims were investigated. Our own Veterinarian examined all four of the Guides while they were at the Guide House. They were all in good health, none showing signs of abuse or of neglect. They were well fed, active, alert. Adequately hydrated. There were no bruises, no welts, no lacerations either old or new."

"The Adult Guide in question was deemed a fertile Guide with its own Veterinarian. It was 36 days past delivery of its pups, and not yet re-breeding. Old Sentinel Laws state that the Guide should have been contracted to a Guide House or to an independent breeder for re-breeding within a period of thirty days, said breeding to commence within two months of delivery, pending medical exams. However, recent medical reports argue the time period is too short and that the law is obsolete." Paul Bellingham drew in a great breath, is came though the mic as an echoing hiss. Eyes widened even further all around the room.
"We at the Protectorate exist for the protection and benefit of Guides. We will, despite the laws on the books, do what is best for the Guides of this city. After conversing with a number of specialists and reviewing the literature, we have decided there is no case to be made for abuse, and no case to be made for neglect. The Guides in question will be returned to their Sentinel owner." Bellingham reared up away from the microphone, stretching to his full height. Then he bent down again, resembling nothing more than a striking snake.

"It is clear to me that some one has chosen to use MY agency to further their own political needs. And..." he reared up, his voice a bellow, not requiring a microphone to shake the walls. "...I will not tolerate any more of this horseshit! Do I make myself clear?" His fist came down on the podium and it collapsed into three pieces. He didn't seem to notice. Or the piercing feedback as the sound system hit the floor. He glared out at everyone occupying a chair in the audience.

"The Protectorate will make it priority one to find the individual who perpetrated this outrage and ....." His raised fist made it perfectly clear without words what would happen to the hapless creature once found. Several minutes ticked by. Captain Rathe, hands clasped behind his back stood at attention next to his fuming superior. Most of the rest of the room's occupants were under their chairs.

A deep sigh, not a pleasant sound, more like the tortured grating of a rusty gate than a sound from any human throat, and in an eerily calm voice the man spoke again. Heads peeked out from under the chairs.

"Captain Rathe will be available to answer your questions for as long as he deems necessary. Good Day." Bellingham glared out over them witheringly, and strode off of the stage. The silence that descended was absolute for about ten seconds, long enough for him to disappear, then the audience of reporters, made of stern stuff, scrambled back into their seats and burst into shouted questions as Rathe stepped up to the shattered podium.

He lifted a hand. Gradually the shouts tapered off.

"My name, for those of you who didn't catch it, is Michael Rathe. My title is Protectorate Captain. I will answer questions under the following conditions. You will speak one at a time, when I point to you. You will not shout. NO questions will be repeated. You will listen to my full reply. If you don't know my name, ask the reporter next to you to spell it for you. Most of you already know me. Those who don't, ask someone later, don't waste my time now."

"Very well. First Question. You." He pointed. A small woman stood up. Her voice shook. She cleared her throat.

"Admiral Bellingham did not address the issue of whether or not the housing of four Guides is legally a Guide House."

Rathe looked at her. "Three of the Guides were pups, being nursed by their mother. That does not meet the criteria of running a Guide House in the view of the Protectorate. Next Question." He indicated a man far in the back.

"Is it true that the party accused of abuse was the heir of Cascade?" There was a distinct waver in the reedy voice. Rathe could see why the man pursued a career in print news, not broadcast news.

"Yes." The Captain replied. The man was startled to receive a one word answer, yet thought better of insisting on more.

Rathe pointed, to the left this time. A leggy blonde stood, batting artificially long lashes at him. He
stared stonily back at her, unmoved.

"Captain Rathe, is there any truth to the rumor that the basis of the complaint was an organized effort to derail the new reforms that are being implemented by Ruler Ellison?" Her honeyed voice inquired.

"All tips regarding the abuse and safety of Guides will be thoroughly investigated. The truth of the allegations will not be decided prior to a full investigation of each and every complaint. That being said, if a complaint is maliciously instigated, the Protectorate will not stop in its efforts to bring the perpetrator or perpetrators to justice." His glare was a close rival to that of his supervisor, the reporters were suitably impressed. "Our official position on that subject has been adequately expressed by Admiral Bellingham."

"What will happen to the pups? Are they going to stay at the Guide House?" The next person piped up when he pointed at her chest.

"No, they will be returned with their mother who is still nursing them." He looked over the group, seeing a young, rather attractive young man. Hmmm. He pointed. The man smiled, almost flirtatiously on being selected. Pretty, Rathe decided, and going to ask something stupid.

"Will you answer questions about something else, sir?" The reporter asked, and at his slight shrug, barrelled on. "There have been...hints for decades that there is a new kind of Sentinel, and that you yourself are one of these kind. Is there any truth....." The questioner petered out. Michael Rathe was walking away from the remains of the podium without looking back.

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Dr Miller was seated on one of the couches in the upstairs suite where Blair was occupied on the bed with his waking babies bundled up all around him. Jim was seated across from her. William, Christopher, Steven, Andrei, and Dahl were also in the room. Dahl had immediately gravitated towards Blair and the babies, the fascination on his face impossible to miss. Dahl's movement towards the babies had gotten Rafe out of his chair and over to Blair in a flash.

Blair, initially wary had finally, cautiously, allowed the young man to touch the babies under his direct supervision. Dahl had taken to it like a duck to water. Steven stared at his Guide as he watched diapers being changed, infants being fed, burped....Dahl had never shown the least interest in children before. With difficulty Steven turned his attention back to the discussion at hand.

Jim had headed off the attempt by Andrei, "call me Andy", to examine the infants in Dahl's wake. Multiple attempts had been thwarted, the last one resulting in a blow, not pulled in any way, that knocked out the muscular Companion for several minutes. Recognizing that his older brother was at the absolute end of his patience Steven now sat with one arm locked around his frustrated Companion, who watched jealously as Rafe and Dahl cared for the infants alongside Blair.

Steven understood his Companion's frustration. One of the main functions of a Companion was Guide care. That, in the most fortunate of instances, included shared care of any infants. Andy wanted to take care of Blair's babies. Jim wasn't going to stand for it. Dahl was a Guide. That, if Blair allowed it, was fine. However, a Companion not Jim's own coming close to Blair, was not.

Christopher, showing far more discipline than Andy, still gave off longing vibes, even as he kept his seat, making no moves in the Guides' direction. Steven sighed. Sometimes it was tough, having such independent mates. But, honestly he wouldn't change them for the world.

"It is a mutation, a variant that was first documented more than fourteen hundred years ago. It isn't passed on genetically, which is a good thing, because the Sentinels with the mutation are exclusively,
aggressively homosexual. While artificial insemination now makes that a moot point, in the past it
was not." Dr Miller progressed along in her mini lecture on just what kind of Sentinel Captain Rathe
was. "It is theorized this propensity for such extremely focused homosexuality kept these particular
Sentinels from attempting to mate with or bond to the Guides who are, of course, hermaphroditic.
That in turn allowed other Sentinels to accept their care of all the Guide for a tribe."

"So...Rathe...why didn't he answer any of the questions? What is wrong with people knowing about
it?" Andrei blurted out, crossly. Pouting at Steven, and when that wasn't effective, sulking while he
burrowed next to his young Senior Sentinel. Steven fought to keep his expression neutral as he
listened to the lecture. Andy was adorable when he pouted. But it certainly wasn't going to do Steven
any good to let him know that.

"Like all things, it isn't looked up on as good to be different in modern time. Other institutions have
been created, Guide Houses for example to focus on the care of the Guides. Just like there is
objection to Blair being a Guide and intelligent enough to get a degree, there is a strong prejudice
against a Sentinel who doesn't need a Guide. Who will never need one. There is a feeling that the
Sentinel is somehow unnatural. Perverted." She looked around. "And face it, despite the sexual
nature of the Claiming between many Senior Sentinels and their chosen Companion Sentinels,
homosexuality is frowned on by the majority of Sentinels."

"Why? That makes no sense." Andrei said, his puzzlement clear. "In fact given the number of
Guides and the number of Sentinels needing Guides, it sounds like a good thing. The gay Sentinels
are just that much less in the way of competition."

"You would think." Jim said, his eyes fixed on Blair, who had handed off one well fed baby to Rafe
and was feeding the second. Jim was watching the other Sentinels, pleased to see Christopher
studiously concentrating on the doctor, not even sending a single glance in Blair's direction, Steven
was being equally circumspect.

Jim couldn't do anything about his father who occasionally glanced over to check on the group
clustered on the bed, but he wasn't about to tolerate Andrei's continued interest. Blue eyes peered
over Steven's arm at Blair, eyes locking onto the exposed breast, the tiny mouth locked over one rosy
nipple.

Jim let out a low warning growl. Andrei jumped, guiltily. Then he growled back, scowling.

"What? I'm just lookin' fer Christ's sake. Look, no touching!" He held up his hands, waggling the
fingers. "Jeez, ya can't blame a guy for looking."

Jim though, could, and wholeheartedly did, he was on his feet and standing over the Companion
who tried to get up and face him, every bone bristling with aggression of his own. Steven held onto
his stronger companion grimly. Christopher looked at William and got to his feet.

"Sit down." William's voice cut through the action. "Jim, Andrei. Both of you. Your Guide is safe,
Jim. Leave it at that. Andrei, stop baiting him. It isn't wise. He is a Senior Sentinel, he will mow you
down as if you were a blade of grass."

Having Blair back wasn't relieving all of the anxiety that had been stirred up by having him taken.
William understood Jim's predilection to violence at this time. Progress on tracking down the elusive
Vet who had started the whole thing was frustratingly slow. There was contact through an attorney,
demands for a negotiated settlement before the man came in to tell his story. Jim had rejected that
offer loudly, vociferously.

He didn't care at all if the story was ever told, the man who had tried to use the Protectorate to steal
his Guide was going to die. Preferably by his own hand. He wouldn't tolerate anything less. Blair's voice startled the doctor and the other Sentinels. Jim stalked over to him, legs stiff. Blair made room on the bed, then leaned on the agitated Sentinel, letting his nearness soothe the big man.

"The possessors of the variant are of normal weight at birth," Blair said, "but they grow at an accelerated rate from that point on. It usually isn't noticeable until after puberty when they often exceed classmates in size by up to 25%. They are taller, stronger, faster. Some say they are a throwback to the Primal Predatory Sentinel found in the fossil record. That the variant may have only been noticed fourteen hundred years ago or so, but it has been around for a much longer time."

Blair was sitting up, Jim got to his feet and helped his Guide reposition himself. Blair rubbed at his eyes. "In primitive cultures it isn't unusual for one Sentinel, always a very big male, to sleep with and guard exclusively, a tribes' Guides. Other Sentinels come to that Sentinel with any requests to pair with the Guides, not to the Guides themselves. The same physical arrangement is noted in the fossil record, evidence of multiple Guides living with one Sentinel, or two at the most in a dwelling in the center of the settlement. With the other Sentinels living in a group, without Guides intermixed with them. Cultural anthropologists have argued about what this means for years. We anthropologists can't agree on anything, not even if the sky is really blue. The accepted, the politically correct theory, is that a king, or a ruler of sorts kept a harem of Guides for his own use. I think it is pretty clear that is a load of crap."

Rafe blinked, his mouth falling open at the speech. Then he took the baby Blair handed to him, passing it on to Jim, who put the infant over his shoulder and proceeded to do a very creditable job of burping it. Taking the last of the infants that had yet to nurse, Blair put the infant to his breast waiting for the nursing to begin before turning back to look at the startled group.

Dr Miller, recovered first, she nodded. "I read something to that effect in one of the articles you published a few years ago. It pushed me along on the theory that there are different kinds of Guides and that fertility didn't necessarily depend on breeding the most feminine of the Guides to the exclusion of the more male dominated."

"Hmmm. I'm not sure I can see the connection." Blair murmured, settling himself more comfortably, visually checking to see the other two babies were fine before stroking his fingers over the baby he held, cupping the delicate skull in his palm.

"You see, I think it is probably more a case of evolutionary adaptive behavior, the Guides needing to share infant care, one Guide can not care for three or four infants, and Sentinels in that time didn't have the luxury of free time in the same way as they do today. There was no maternity leave then, not for fathers. The Primal Sentinel, the big guy, kept the Guides safe, the other Sentinels provided for the tribe, food, shelter, clothing, defense, other survival needs while the Guides as a group would raise the infants. That also explains the tendency for Guides to have a low fertility rate. If all the Guides of a tribe were pregnant and caring for their own infants at the same time the system would break down. Guides in proximity have a lower fertility rate in general. The system we use now, the one that puts fertile Guides all in one place in a Guide House or on a breeding farm, is actually lowering their fertility. I don't know if it is pheromones or what but something makes it harder for Guides in one location to all get pregnant at the same time."

"Blair." Dr Miller breathed the name. "My god...I never noticed it...I thought..." She got to her feet. "Excuse me. I have to go. I have to look into this..." She rushed from the room.
Chapter 17

Blair groaned, stretching his back when he felt the spasms tighten, growing much worse. He rubbed at his tired, red-rimmed eyes. It was late and the babies were down for their nap. They had started sleeping a little longer at night recently, but he knew that soon they would awaken again, hungry, and he would feed them once more before going to bed himself.

While he waited for them to waken, he had started in on the huge number of confidential files that Dr. Miller had sent him. Files that were not open to public distribution as they were thought to be too inflammatory or controversial. What that really meant was not in support of Sentinel Government and popular Sentinel thought. Blair read each draft eagerly, soaking up the classified information. Study after study, paper after paper. They mapped out a very different world from the one he lived in now.

As he read he was compiling his own paper in his mind, jotting down notes.

When it came to Guides it was painfully obvious to him that the focus of energy was on children first. Yes, despite the way the Sentinel world thought, it was absolutely irrefutable given the evidence of his own life and the observations of others in the reams of documents in front of him, that Guides gravitated towards their children first and foremost.

The unnatural and brutal custom of removing the babies so early from their Guide parent perhaps gave the illusion that Guides were more attached to Sentinels, but it wasn’t true. Premature removal of children did push Guides into Heat more rapidly than otherwise would happen. Which in turn made them receptive to conception. Meaning sex. Being as most had only Sentinels available to them for such activity, of course Guides focused on Sentinels until they gave birth. Then they had about a month, most of them, to care for the true priorities of their lives before the babies were taken away to live in Guide Houses and Nurseries.

Blair shook his head. A real life muck up of experimental structure. If you give any subject only one choice the subject will choose the choice he or she is left with. What is the alternative? No choice? He sniffed.

Heat. Now there was an interesting topic. Creepy, too. No matter who he read on that particular subject he had the uncomfortable feeling that he was reading articles relating to animal husbandry. He felt like an animal, because it was him, his kind, being discussed. He was a Guide. The double blind studies, the attempts to cause Heat artificially, it made him shudder. It was inhuman, what they were doing. These people, scientists, would look on Blair himself as a test subject, not a fellow human.

As far as attachment to children being a stronger pull than sex, Blair had his own experience to add fuel to the fodder. When he heard a coo, a cry, or a murmur from his children it went through his body like an electric shock. His breasts tightened, he could actually feel his nipples engorge in preparation for feeding, the letdown of milk, dribbling from his body if he took too long to reach his babies; he was always ready to nurse them, eager to do so.

The waves of warm affection, of love that overwhelmed him when he held his children was more intense than any emotion he had felt before. He loved them. He’d had little affairs of the heart before with various women, thought he loved and was loved in return, but now he knew what real love was. The secret had been locked in three small, helpless bodies, waiting to be born. He had love now. And he would hold on to it with every fiber of his being.
With his Sentinels, Jim Ellison and Brian Rafe, he felt safe. He felt cared for. He felt his children were also safe and cared for, and that was even more important.

Certainly he felt some attraction to the two men. They were handsome, virile, strong. But he wasn't about to let himself forget that some of that attraction came out of a very real need to bind them to him, thus to ensure the safety of his children. Blair needed them to care about him. To attain the greatest possible security for his babies. Sex was part of that, or he told himself wryly, it soon would be. Sex spoke to Sentinels. Sex would bind them to him with pleasure as well as the duty any Sentinel had to care for his Guide's well-being.

The problem was he didn't want to become pregnant again, not so soon. He had trouble meeting the needs of the three infants he had now, they were the center of his life, his world. If he had three more it would be impossible to care adequately for all of them. He feared if Jim saw how much attention and time they took he might consider placing some of them in a Guide House. Or a Guide Nursery. The idea itself came close to stopping Blair's heart.

He searched frantically for something to help him out of his dilemma. Yet, of all the research Blair went through, and it was extensive, none of it mentioned any way of controlling the period of time between conceptions. Not even in passing. There was a total absence of information available.

Admittedly the concern over hyper-fertility wasn't as common as infertility. Few Guides were likely to need access to any kind of birth control. But, even so Blair found it curious that there was no research at all on the subject. At least none he could find. Which was the same as saying there wasn't any available. Because Blair had years of practice finding obscure data in obscure places. If it was there, he would have found it.

So, there was no way to control conception, aside from abstinence, if you were a Guide. Not a variable most Guides were in control of. Sentinels decided on sex, on taking Guides to Houses to be mated, not Guides. There were laws on the subject. None of those things were subject to Blair's will. Abstinence wasn't going to be an option for Blair much longer. He was feeling the drive already, the tingle that presaged true Heat, with his children only four months of age.

Soon he would be in Heat, fertile. Blair read the article now on his screen, the cool, precise descriptions of what would happen to his body. Was happening already. He didn't like it, not at all. He could understand how anyone observing a subject in such a state could equate Guides with animals.

Encouraging Brian and Jim to handle the babies, to bond with them as parents would work to a degree to keep the babies here, with Blair. But Blair didn't delude himself. It wouldn't do the same thing as binding his Sentinels to him. That would forge them into a family group. That arrangement would be the most secure. And that meant dealing with being sexual, being in Heat, and finding a way not to get pregnant immediately.

Sentinels didn't think of children first. Not like Guides. They thought of Guides first. Mating. Possession. Sex. Territory. Position and Rank. Blair had no doubt of it. Jim's hand on his shoulder, leading him around, controlling his movement in public, showing his ownership, Blair could feel it. He could also feel Jim's, and Rafe's, physical interest in him. Blair's Empathy was in full evidence now. He felt the babies waking before they opened their eyes, felt it when they were wet, hungry, anxious, needing anything.

He also felt the desire, the lust that Jim and Rafe experienced when they looked at him. They suppressed it, kept it under control for the most part. But it wouldn't be that way forever. He felt their eyes on him, on his body, seeing him even through his clothing. Lingering on his breasts, which were visibly engorged with milk, not hidden and flat against his chest any longer, not since the end
of his pregnancy.

More and more frequently of late, he felt arousal himself. That more than anything scared him. Lust, want, need, it all cluttered the mind, made thinking second to desire. He might give away everything and gain not enough in return. Blair hung his head for a moment, gritting his teeth. He hated having to think this way. He hated it. But his children were relying on him. He was their only chance at a normal life, a life as more than an object, a thing for a Sentinel to use, a breeding machine.

The arousal was sharp, not gentle when it rode him. It came at odd times, most often when he was near his Sentinels. And once or twice, even when he was near William. He had caught himself leaning closer to the older man, admiring his strength, his power, knowing William could do much for Blair and his children. Finding to his distress that he was thinking of what kind of father William might be to any new children he had with Blair. And planning how to lure him into fathering them.

Blair had fled after that stark realization, taking refuge in the nursery, holding the babies together in his arms, against his chest. Shuddering until his lingering arousal faded to a manageable degree.

Blair had thrown himself into his research and the children after that. He meditated when he could, struggling for calm. Not letting himself think about sex, isolating himself as much as he could to give himself time to think, to find an answer. He avoided any Sentinel when he was able. He also forbid himself to think of William. Not completely successfully, but he kept what sexual thoughts he did have on Jim, not on Jim's father.

Blair stretched again as his back twinged. He wished fervently the chair wasn't so big, that it offered him more support. As it was...he had his feet propped up on a stool, a pillow wadded behind him, and even so, his hips didn't go all the way back. It was a chair made for a Sentinel, not a Guide. As far as manufacturers were concerned, there just wasn't a market for Guide-friendly desk chairs. Of course if Blair asked maybe William would order him a chair from some Mundane shop. But so far, the fact William hadn't thought of it himself was a pointed reminder Blair thought he needed. Whatever words William Ellison spouted, he still saw Blair as a Guide. Not an equal.

Blair lowered his forehead down to rest against his balled fists on the desk top. He missed the time in his life when sex was just sex. Another hunger to feed, another itch to scratch. Simple. Intense. Pure pleasure without so many consequences. Sex was no longer so uncomplicated. Sex was a monster, and the consequences were huge. From the first moment he was kidnapped, when he had discovered his body wasn't sacred, or protected, that he could be raped. All the way through the months to now, when he had to seriously consider his body, his sex, as a tool to use to get what he desperately needed.

Blair moved his hands out from under his head, rubbed along either side of his spine, trying to work out the ache before he realized he wasn't alone. He looked up to see Rafe in the doorway.

Taller and stronger than any Guide, and watching Blair with dark, smoldering eyes. Blair, caught unprepared, felt a spike of desire tingle through his pelvis along with a healthy dose of fear. He felt his body soften, moisten, his nipples peak, his nerves sing. A flush rode his cheeks, traveling up his neck like wild fire. He groaned involuntarily, arching his chest forward as if offering the wet peaks to the Sentinel who gazed down at him.

Blair watched, helplessly as Rafe's nostrils flared in reaction. Blair knew without being told he was that suddenly in deep trouble. Yet he couldn't stop himself from arching even more, letting his knees part, making the invitation.

A dozen steps across the sound absorbing, thick pile carpet, and Rafe was at Blair's side. The
Sentinel swung the chair around. Reaching out with his wide, Sentinel-strong hands, hands that clamped around Blair's waist, fingers digging in, gripping him. Blair felt the bite of those powerful fingers even through the folds of his robe.

Then Brian was lifting him bodily out of the chair. Blair sliding out of the leather chair like he was riding on a cushion of air. Then all the way down to the carpeting, to lie flat on his back. Settled there with a little less gentleness than Blair had come to expect. It jarred him. Like a knife tearing through his gut. Sharp and startling.

Blair had for a while taken to wearing Levi's, a T-shirt and a loose, flannel shirt on top, as had been his custom before he was outed as a Guide. But the Mundane clothing made nursing awkward. And so, he more often than not wore robes, especially at night, when he would soon be going to bed. There was another reason Guides wore robes, Blair thought, a little panicked. Easy access for amorous Sentinels. Robes, traditionally were not worn with underclothing of any kind.

Rafe's hands found their way under Blair's robe and onto his skin. Blair felt the fingers moving, spreading out over his belly, brushing against his sex, moving around to lock around his sides, holding, squeezing, pinning him down. In contrast to what he expected the next caress was soft, light, barely ghosting over his flesh.

It was Rafe's turn to moan, pressing his face into the softness of Blair's belly. His tongue stole out, he licked the trembling skin under his mouth. Licked and sucked it, a spot just below Blair's belly button. Innocent flesh, not sexual, but sensual.

Teeth were there next, teasing him. Sharp if sharp could be called gentle in the next breath. Blair's legs spasmed, closing the fraction they could around Rafe's wide shoulders, then lifting to rest on top of them. He couldn't be more open, more vulnerable. Rafe's hand cupped over his hip, thumbs sliding down, parting him and Blair shuddered, as the long thumb rubbed him, so close to intimate parts. So close. He tried to sit up. Couldn't. Fell back and lay there, heart pounding, tripping like he'd run a race, his whole body singing, burning, begging.

A tongue lapped at him, low down, wet muscle gliding across tender flesh, licking, licking. Tasting him. Blair groaned again, pressing up into that shocking touch. He'd never had this done to him. This hungry nuzzling, almost feeding. Rafe was making sounds that raised the hair along Blair's neck, ran down his spine and exploded in every part of his body it passed.

Then there was a deeper sound, a rumbling cry, different enough to raise Blair's head, make him fight up out of numbing, confusing pleasure. He focused, not without difficulty, on the lean, strong form of his Alpha Sentinel. Jim was behind Rafe, his face a study of anger and lust both at their most most pure.

Blair's vision blurred. He couldn't think. Couldn't consider what would happen now. What had he lost letting Rafe be the one to touch him this way, to play with his magic tongue? What had he lost by not ensuring the first to do this was Jim? His head fell back, lifted again.

Rafe let out that sound again. Blair tried to see. Jim was closer, up tight against Rafe's back, moving in an unmistakable rhythm. Driving into the body beneath his, while Rafe's face turned and pushed against Blair. Blair tried not to, but at last he had to. To reach down, to hold Rafe's head, to turn him just so, and tilt his pelvis up against the parted mouth, hold Rafe's mouth there, where he needed it to be.

Jim's hand came up, fisted in his mate's hair. Dragged his head back. Blair whimpered at the loss of Rafe's mouth, met the Alpha's eyes, too far gone to hate it when he heard his own voice plead. "Please." A breath, nothing more. "Please." Blair asked. Louder.
Jim pushed Rafe's face down, held him. Folded down across his bent body, growled into his ear, white teeth flashing. "Taste him then. Taste him well." Blair's heart stuttered in his chest. Rafe obeyed. And Blair had no time to be afraid. Only to feel the tongue finding him unerringly, slipping through the wet folds, tasting him as their Alpha said.

"Gods, god, god...." Blair moaned. No wonder women loved this. He whimpered, writhed. "Oh, gods......" The tongue was finding every secret place, laving all of him, piercing him. Blair managed to open his eyes, stared up into the ice blue eyes narrowed down at him, eyes eating up his every reaction. Blair panted. Jim's own tongue stole out, he licked his lips, watching with unflinching hunger as his hips continued their dance, driving hard into Rafe's body.

Blair watched him, couldn't tear his eyes away. His Alpha Sentinel was all primal instinct, power and danger. Jim returned the look. Very slowly he reached up, still fucking Brian, still riding him. His fingers found the lower set of Blair's nipples, now coated in milk. He rolled them, tugging gently yet strongly on the sensitive nubs. Rafe's tongue darted deep.

Blair screamed, his whole body convulsing, seizing hard and fast.

Down the hall the babies woke and howled.

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Blair sat in the chair, waiting with ill concealed impatience while Dr Miller went over her notes and the results from Blair's blood tests. He wrung his hands under the folds of his robe.

He was close to screaming from his burgeoning anxiety by the time she looked up and into his eyes. "I don't think there can be any doubt, Blair." She said softly.

"What?!" He snapped, nerves stretched to the breaking point. "What is wrong with me? What can I do?"

"You are in Heat." She told him, flatly. He felt a rush of anger so strong as to be bordering on incoherent rage.

"I know that. What I don't know is what to do about it." His voice rose at the end of the word, snapping like the crack of a whip. "In Heat like some animal. I need it to stop."

"It can't be stopped, Blair." Was her soft response. "It is one of the differences between Guides and Mundane. It is part of the ongoing argument that is used to keep the Guides from being recognized as fully human. Guides go through cycles of Heat when they are fertile. There is no way to stop Heat short of conceiving."

Blair held up his hands. "No. Wait. Stop. No way? Even...animals...don't go into heat when they are nursing young. I am still breast feeding. Doesn't that preclude...." He saw the negation in her eyes, stumbled on. "Can't you...aren't there hormones, medicines to try?"

"Nursing doesn't stop or delay the onset of Heat in all cases. Delivering live babies is often the only trigger a Guide needs to start the cycles. The length of the cycles are individual to the Guide. Your cycle is just that, your cycle. Yours is very short. In fact the shortest I've seen in years. You are fertile now. Your body is telling you that."

"I'm not ready." Blair said. "My children are barely four months old. We are working on changing the laws. I don't have time for this. How can I stop it? Can we try birth control pills? They exist for Mundane women, I don't see why they can't work for me."
"You can't." But she wouldn't look into Blair eyes as she said it.

"Are you expecting me to believe that despite there being birth control of one kind or another for Mundane women for centuries, that there is nothing that will work for me?" Blair almost shouted at her. He needed something. "Cervical caps? Diaphragms?"

"Think about it Blair. Barrier methods are not going to alter the fact you are in Heat. They can prevent conception in a small number of cases, though the shape of the Guide cervix makes Mundane cervical caps and diaphragms useless, but that will only aggravate the condition. Until you become pregnant again you are going to remain in Heat. And it is likely the feelings, the hot flashes, the arousal, the lubricating will worsen. There is no way to stop it short of being impregnated."

"I am not ready. I can't go through that again, not so soon. I know there has to be some way. You have been looking into Guide biology all of your professional life." Blair's large blue eyes begged the doctor for help. His hands shook.

Dr Miller bit her lip. "It is illegal Blair. I can lose my license. I can be imprisoned. I can't even talk to a Sentinel about using condoms with a Guide. If a Sentinel has say, a sexually transmitted disease, the only alternative I am able to offer him during treatment is abstinence from his Guide until he is cured. I can't tell him to use protection. With another Sentinel, yes, with a Mundane lover, yes. But I can not, I am forbidden by law to mention his using condoms with a Guide for any reason at all."

Blair shivered. "You have to give me something." He said. "Something. Anything."
Chapter 18

Blair woke slowly, feeling warm, content. He smiled even before he opened his eyes. He was surrounded by the scent of powder and babies, which reminded him he was in his favorite place to be. The nursery. He stretched mightily, until his body shuddered with the force of it, then abruptly went limp feeling the peace of his surroundings, the boneless relaxation of his body. He loved this room. Light filtered in from windows set high enough that the sun never touched delicate skin directly, suffused the whole interior with a golden glow.

Blair let his eyes open and drift towards the one large cradle the babies shared. He wanted them to be close, to know each other, and always be together. He had not had siblings; there was only his mother. She tried to be enough, but she was also a wanderer at heart, so from time to time, Blair had no one but himself. He shook off the memory of loneliness and sat up. The babies were so quiet this morning. He got to his feet, sweeping the robe out of his way and stepped up to the edge of the cradle. His heart seized up in his chest. It was empty, even the sheets and blankets gone. His babies were gone.

Blair whirled, his gaze dissecting every inch of the small room. There was nowhere else they could be. Their diaper bag was gone. He started to shake. He made it to the doorway on unsteady legs. Gone. Gone. Gone. It had happened. He leaned against the door frame, tried to breathe, to think beyond his panic. Oh gods. They were gone. He'd never find them. In a few months time perhaps they wouldn't even remember him, some caretaker replacing him in their memories. Trembling Blair forced himself out into the hall, grasping the wall for support.

"My god." It was William, business-like in his flawless suit. "Blair! What is wrong with you?" The older man reached Blair's side in an instant. Blair clung to him. Christopher, as perfectly pressed as his senior joined them a moment later.

"Please." Blair begged, his voice no stronger than a whisper. "Please." Tears choked his throat. His knees sagged.

At William's nod Christopher swept the Guide up into his arms where Blair lay limp, like a child in the huge man's hold. "Are you ill?" William hustled them down the hall and into the nearest room. "Put him here. Damn it, his skin is like ice."

Christopher gently lowered the Guide onto a wide couch. William tugged a throw down over Blair's shoulder tucking it in. "Call Dr Miller in here. She'll have to finish examining the babies later."

But Christopher only turned, not making it to the hall, before he could go after the doctor, Jim appeared in the doorway his brow beetled, his face tight with concern, Rafe close behind. Jim's expression was thunderous, worried as he zeroed in on his Guide lying pale and trembling.

"Blair!" The Sentinel was beside him, reaching out, pushing urgent hands under the throw and running them over his Guide searching for the problem. Rafe stepped into the room further, carrying a bassinet. From which echoed three distressed cries in perfect synchrony. Blair shot up off of the
"They were gone." Blair exclaimed, sitting down in the middle of the floor, the bassinet in front of him.

Over his head the Sentinels exchanged looks.

"They were gone. When I woke and looked into the crib. It was empty." Tears were running down his face.

Jim sat down on the floor with him, scooting up behind Blair and enveloping him in a loose embrace. "You knew Dr Miller was coming today. To examine you and the children." He said mildly, resting his big hands on the softness of his Guide's belly. He felt the lowest set of Blair's breasts brush against the tops of his hands.

Rafe was on his knees, helping Blair unload his babies. Blair wanted all of them in his lap, in his grasp. William and Christopher watched the group on the floor until the doorway was once again filled with a figure. Dr Miller watched with them as Rafe, Jim and Blair unwrapped each small, wriggling, cooing body and made sure they were still as perfect as they had been.

"Blair," Dr. Miller said. "What is it?"

"He woke up and the babies were gone," Jim said. "It frightened him."

"You didn't wake him when you took the babies from the room?" the doctor asked, her voice held the edge of disapproval. Surely they were aware of Blair's persisting anxiety when it came to his children.

Jim's immediate impulse to the accusation in the doctor's tone, was to throw her out of the house, but he knew doing that would only stress Blair further. He clamped down his anger as much as possible, but it still made itself known in the timbre of his voice and his glare as he answered the doctor. "Blair has been very stressed lately and not sleeping well. You know this because he was in your office just last week for an exam. He needs sleep, I saw no reason to wake him when he knew your home visit was today. He made the appointment himself if you recall." Jim's words were icily correct.

"I apologize Sentinel," the doctor said, backing down immediately. "Of course, as always, you did what you believed to be best for your Guide. I didn't mean to infer otherwise. I am always concerned for my patients. I meant no insult."

"I'm sorry, Jim," Blair said, drawing his Sentinel's attention away from the apologetic woman. "I wasn't thinking. I woke up and they were gone. I panicked."

Jim reached up and stroked his Guide's tangled hair back from his face. All his anger flowed away replaced by a rare feeling of contentment and a surge of protectiveness. "You're all safe here, in the compound," he said with a fierce, toothy smile. "No one will take our babies while you sleep. They would have to go through Rafe and I not to mention my father, Christopher and every Sentinel here. No one could sleep through that battle. Not even you."

"Our babies," the words were no more than a whisper on an exhale of Blair's breath.

Jim leaned in and kissed Blair on the forehead. When the kiss broke the no nonsense Jim had returned. "The Sentinels have just arrived for a meeting about the Guide reforms. Father wants Rafe and I to attend. Will you be okay alone with Dr. Miller or would you like me to or Rafe to stay with you?"
"I prefer to be examined in private," Blair said. He didn't really want to be alone, but if either of them were there Dr Miller couldn't give him the pills he hoped she had.

Jim nodded and stood up. "If you need anything call out, Rafe or I will come." The two Sentinels left the room closing the door quietly behind them.

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The doctor busied herself helping Blair put the babies to his breast, she wanted to be sure that the Sentinels would not overhear their conversation. When she finally looked up into Blair's eyes concern clouded her face. She pulled a small bottle of pills from her doctor's bag and held them in her fist. "Are you sure you want to do this, Blair? I'm not even sure these will work as a contraceptive on a Guide; they've never been tested. Your physiology is different than a woman's and I'm concerned they could be harmful."

"I just need a little more time before becoming pregnant again. Jim's right, I have been tired out. Taking care of them, worrying about getting pregnant, it is so hard to relax. I only want what is best for my babies. I'm afraid that their care will suffer if I conceive again so soon, or that the pregnancy will be effected and the newborns won't be healthy."

"We can get you a nurse to help with the babies if it comes to that," the doctor said, gently. "As far as a healthy pregnancy, there is no reason to fear otherwise. All you need is vitamins, proper diet, exercise and rest, you are a healthy Guide with good Sentinels that care for you; you will have healthy babies. Which reminds me..." She produced a second bottle of vitamins, handing them over as well. "these are very strong, a stress formula. I want you to take one every morning, always with food so they won't upset your stomach."

Blair nodded. "But I want to be more than a baby machine. I want to be a parent to my children. I want to be involved in raising them. I can't do that if I am constantly pregnant. The drive to mate with my Sentinels is overwhelming. I've been avoiding them, but last week... with Rafe... I begged Jim not to stop him."

"Blair, you can't take these pills if you're already pregnant." The alarm in her tone communicated clearly, and he hastened to reassure her.

"I'm not. I haven't had intercourse with anyone. It was only oral with Rafe," Blair blushed, "but I wanted... want more. They've been occupied with work and the new reforms, but it is getting more difficult for me. Please, I know I can't put it off for a year but six months or even three months would mean a lot to me." The doctor sighed, "There are things you will have to agree to before I give these to you."

"I promise, I will be careful," Blair said as hope began to fill him, "and if the Sentinels do find them I will never tell where I got them."

"Thank you for that Blair," the doctor said. "But I am concerned about your health and the babies health. Everything you ingest goes into your milk. If the babies stop nursing or if you notice any changes in behavior you have to stop taking the pills."

"I promise," Blair promised, and he meant it. "The last thing I want is to hurt my babies. I am doing this for them."

"Then remember their mother's health is very important to their well being. If you experience any
dizziness, ringing in your ears, fainting or leg cramps you have to stop taking the pills. Also if you have breakthrough bleeding or you think you have gotten pregnant stop taking the pills and call me immediately. Day or night."

"I promise," Blair said. If any of those things happened he knew he wouldn't have to call. His Sentinels would be shouting loud enough for her to hear anywhere in Cascade. He grimaced, praying it would never come to that.

"I am breaking the law by giving these to you."

The doctor said her voice absolutely serious. "I hope I am doing the right thing. Do you remember the list of things I told you to watch for?"

Blair repeated the list.

"Okay good, don't forget." Dr. Miller said. "I'll be back in a month to examine you and the babies. But remember; call me if you experience any of those symptoms or anything out of the ordinary for you or the babies. Understand?" The doctor reluctantly handed the small bottle to Blair.

"I understand Dr. Miller," Blair said. "I wish I could express how grateful I am for this."

Dr. Miller smiled. "Let me help you get the babies back in their crib before I leave."

Blair clutched the little bottle of pills to his chest, hiding it in the many deep folds of his robes, right up against his pounding heart and hoping like hell not to run into any of the Sentinels who frequented the ruler's compound. His fist was clenched so hard around the small bottle it was actually painful. It was his imagination, he was sure, but carrying the container made him feel as if he had a flashing neon sign over his head saying, "Guide up to no good, stop him!" If he didn't think Jim or Rafe would eventually find it, he'd have made a small, secret pocket in his robes. It wasn't the first time he'd wanted somewhere to keep private things. Blair believed Dr Miller was right. Sentinels could get Guides pregnant. Even if Jim didn't believe, and William doubted. Blair knew better. He could feel it was true.

It had taken all his powers of persuasion to convince Dr Miller to give the tablets to him. She had cautioned him repeatedly that the formulation might not work as contraception for him. In fact she was a little worried they might prove unhealthy. They certainly had never been tested on Guides. No one would find out she was helping him like this. He couldn't fail to note her ambivalence, her doubt she was doing the right thing. She was nervous, made him an appointment for a recheck with her before she even left the compound. She wasn't going to let him be harmed. He was grateful she cared.

He swallowed one of the pills. Washed it down with a full glass of water. He finally secreted the remainder of the tablets under the drawer of his bedside table. He hoped it would be safe enough. Then he rushed back to the nursery. The children were beginning to stir. He loved spending time with them. They never failed to fill his heart with love and hope. Now if only he could rid himself of the guilt that was threatening to overwhelm him.

The Vet snarled at the pile of papers he'd gone through. There were three months worth of statements, copies of charts, and pharmacy requisitions on his desk. He'd paid dearly for them. All of it was from the office of one Dr Miller. He'd bribed a janitor to steal paperwork destined for the
shredder and deliver it to his back door instead. He scowled at the thought of her, his teeth bared in hate for the doctor who had reduced him to sorting through garbage. He was seeking any possible advantage he could get over her. She was the one responsible for the ruination of his plans. For his humiliation. She had stolen the Ellison Guide from him and prevented him from acquiring one of the pups he so richly deserved and desperately wanted.

When William Ellison had suspended her, he'd thought things were looking up. He thought it was his chance to present himself, to fawn... no, be understanding... and get himself invited back into the role he'd wanted to keep, Blair's veterinarian. But that hadn't lasted long. He'd had Blair once more in his clutches... in his care, he amended once again, and then that huge, lumbering idiot from the Protectorate had interfered and taken the little beast away before he could get anything started.

There was nothing he could do about the Guardians; they were untouchable. Besides, he had only himself to blame, if he'd moved faster and not tried to involve the students the Guardian wouldn't have noticed that Blair was missing from his room, he would not have had the time to come and snatch him away. He had been so close to realizing his dreams. Time, if only he had had just a little more, just enough to at least mate the Guide once, or artificially inseminate it. If he'd done that, he'd have some claim on one of the pups for payment. There was legal precedent for it. As it was... he'd lost that chance. He wouldn't make the same mistake again.

He set aside the stack he had just finished going through and eyed the remainder. Only a few hundred sheets left. Then he saw it, near the bottom of the stack of papers. He was so tired he almost missed the significance of it. It was a single requisition for birth control pills. He quickly rifled through the rest of the papers and then he returned to the one he had set aside, a frown creasing his brow. She was a doctor as well as a vet, but he had never known her to take on any non-Guide patients. Why then should she have any use at all for birth control pills? She shouldn't. He felt the smile grow wider across his face and he showed his teeth. Oh, yes, this was good, better than he ever could have imagined. He had her this time.

Dr Miller was prescribing birth control to Guides, a felony. She was going down. No one would save her from herself. He savored his victory for a few more seconds. Then he reached for the phone on the edge of his paper-strewn desk. He was so going to enjoy this. And he was doing the right thing too, the legal thing. He grinned; there was no way he could lose.

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William sighed. He was feeling the strain of fighting for the reforms. How easy it would be to relent and give into the unending pressure from so many factions and to let the Guide Laws stand as they had for centuries. He hung his head, but there was the small matter of Guides not reproducing and the inevitable decrease in the number of Guides. There was the suffering of Sentinels, now and in the future. No, he couldn't back down. He had to stand firm. The Laws had been outdated for too long.

Daily visitors came to the compound, bent on seeing him and changing his mind. Oh, sure there were as many supporters as there were objectors. William's younger son, Stephen, was out on the road, touring with his junior Sentinel and his Guide, an outspoken advocate for what his father was doing, his eloquent writings on the subject had created more than a passing interest from around the entire continent. Support was growing. But still, William was tired. He was tired of the stream of worried Sentinels at his door, men he never refused to see and counsel on his position and the facts behind it, his belief that reform was good, it would make all of their lives better. And now, to top it off, Christopher, his own partner, was having difficulty. A different kind of problem, but no less serious.

Christopher was having trouble being in close daily proximity to a Guide in Heat. William was well aware of what Christopher was going through, he himself felt the burn. It nagged at him every
moment. William had been very quickly aware of Blair's Heat when it first began. His whole body had gone on alert. His senses engaged at a level they hadn't reached in years. He quickly tracked down the source of his new state of affairs, Blair, wrapped up in a scent so enticing William found his mouth watering involuntarily. He desired nothing more than to be able to put his mouth on Blair, his hands, his tongue, he wanted Blair. Not with love, but with the deepest instinct a Sentinel had. He wanted to slake himself in the fertile body. He wanted to mate with a Guide.

Blair didn't make it at all easier, flitting around and spreading the scent of his body's need, a need that was never relieved. William wanted to shout at his son to do something, to take some action, to put Blair on his back and give him what he required, to bring them all a little peace. Before William or worse yet, Christopher lost control completely and took the Guide.

Dear Christopher was a still a virgin and dedicated to the traditional ways, customs that dictated that he would not have sex until he was alpha himself, if ever. Or until it was William's will that he do so. Christopher had always borne his virginity with pride in the past. But now, well, they had never had a fertile Guide living in the compound with them before. Christopher now, instead of feeling proud, was suffering. William considered sending him away. Yet, he was first to admit he needed his second with him. To accomplish all that had to be done he had to be at the top of his game. Christopher had been at his side for so long and William needed access to his second's strength, his faith, and his belief that they were doing the right thing, no matter the struggle it was. Christopher's unswerving support and unflagging energy was more than important; it was vital.

Yet, Christopher was suffering and William knew that there was little to be done to alleviate the condition. He and Christopher had a public reserve, unfailingly correct, they had little contact physically unless they were alone. From time to time they touched, but discretely and it had never come close to sex between them. Not even when William was younger and far randier.

Christopher was questioning himself, asking if his faith was true and doubting his commitment to a way of life he and his entire family had always believed in. It pained William to see his indecision and the hurt it was causing his long time partner. His life without Christopher would be empty and truly bereft. William reached out and put his hand on Christopher's cheek, cupping his palm around the strong, handsome jaw. The far larger man turned his face into the touch, letting out a groan. The salt-wetness of his sweat coated William's skin. William leaned in to offer what comfort he could.
"You are wrong, William Ellison." The burly Sentinel sitting across the table from William asserted, beetling his brow. "The Laws have stood the test of time. They are workable, they are effective. There is no reason to advocate for change. None." The man folded his thick hands over his powerful belly, scowling mightily.

William almost let out a sigh. Instead he turned to face the big man. "Senator Miles, I can only point back to my earlier arguments. Look at the facts. Guides are becoming more scarce with every generation. We are mismanaging them. That has to change. We need to ask ourselves why Guides are rapidly heading towards extinction and how to stop it. After looking at all the data, I came to the conclusion that Sentinels are the reason fertile Guides are increasingly rare. Not Guides themselves. I respectfully suggest you read the documents." William kept his voice modulated and even with the practice of long years of debate.

"Yes, you are being very stubborn about reading the material. I found it invaluable." The other speaker, a short man with a very serious, intent expression on his round face, met the belligerent gaze of the first speaker.

The Senator gave a disbelieving snort, eyeing the foot high stack of printed material at his elbow. He made it abundantly clear he wasn't going to be wading through any of it any time soon, if ever.

"Stopping it won't be enough," a slim, dark haired man mumbled as he read over a few sheets from the packet he held in his hands. Beside him rested more than half the stack he'd already gone through. "We need to reverse this trend of infertility and quickly. The falling population has reached a lytic point. The fall in Guide numbers is only going to accelerate from here on out. There is little time left to intervene without dire consequences."

"This is drivel. What the hell is a lytic point?" A second state official opined, hands widely placed on the table, as he leaned in aggressively. "Fabrications made by fringe scientists who have nothing better to do than stir up trouble."

The narrow faced man was not happy. William gave him the courtesy of listening to his objections more than half his attention on how the man's temples pulsed every time he was overcome with outrage. He had to think the man was a conspiracy theorist more than anything else, the half dozen sharp comments he'd made from time to time pointed that way.

William raised a hand when several men angrily opened their mouths in preparation to respond. There had been several shouting matches earlier, he was too impatient himself to sit through another now. "No, it is not so simple. I think we need to listen to Dr Braun's conclusions. All of this research is confirmed by our own state labs. It has been suppressed, true enough, but only because neither state officials nor national officials are sure of how to fit it into current guide policy and Laws. That is because it doesn't fit. It can't. It radically and directly calls into question the science behind the existing Guide Laws. Our predecessors, made a huge miscalculation. Sentinels, gentlemen, we must alter our path, or our kind will die out along with the Guides who make our lives possible."

"Preposterous!" Several indignant voices chimed in. But more stayed silent, faces all around the table thoughtful.

The two men who were outspoken and disbelieving were actually in the minority now. Ten hours of heated debate over two days and William had eroded the certainty that had been a united coalition.
against him and turned the tide into grudging neutrality bordering on terrified acceptance of reality. A reality that included the possible extinction of Guides within a few generations. Of course it had taken every ounce of his persuasive powers. He was exhausted yet strangely energized by the debate.

"This is very foolish, Ruler Ellison. I hate to see you make this kind of mistake, and to drag other territories in with you. Think of how the younger rulers look up to you before you do this." The stately figure of Senator Thaddeus Grover was seated at William's right hand. His thick, greying hair brushed back from his high, noble forehead. The much older Sentinel was not convinced that William wasn't panicking unnecessarily.

"Believe me, Sentinel Grover, I have spent hours, days contemplating every decision I am making. There have been no hasty moves. No jumping to conclusions no listening to fringe theorists. After exhaustive reading, talking to specialists who have looked at this problem for decades, I believe what they are telling us is true. I've put these packets together for you. I encourage you to read them, have your staff review them. They are all true. We are at fault. Our laws are at fault. Our practices are at fault. We must change. I will change. Cascade will no longer support the wholesale decline of the Guide population by stubbornly clinging to outdated practices and Laws."

"This is a mistake." Growled the first Senator. "I warn you, the state body is not behind you on this." He offered up the threat. Instead of reacting William ignored it.

"Now Miles," a far younger voice was heard. Paul Keats was a dynamic civic activist with leanings that more reflected William's youngest son's opinions than William's own. "That is not helpful. I for one want to know more. I think others seated here at this table are also willing to entertain the idea that there are better ways to govern than the ones we have used for a few centuries. Maybe that won't turn out to be the case, but just maybe it is true. Maybe there is a better way. I want to hear about it before I make up my mind."

"And I, too." A tall, slender man who was the youngest of the rulers at the table said. "I've heard these kinds of rumors from my own scientists. There is a body of knowledge that has been kept from us and from the public. I think we deserve to see it, read it and question it. I've had a dozen of my own people urge me to read the work of one researcher. His name is Sandburg. After finding his work and reading it, I tried to contact him to have a face to face meeting, but no one seems to know where he's gone, only that he has vanished. I intend to approach this with an open mind. My people are still looking for Dr. Sandburg and when I find him, nothing is going to stop me from talking to him and hearing what he has to say, especially not loyalty to laws we all know are archaic and ineffective in today's world."

William's eyes flashed over to his elder son's. Jim's look was glacial, making his position on revealing Sandburg's current whereabouts very clear. William gave a faint nod. He would not reveal Blair, not now. It might prove the deciding point, some of the Sentinels at the meeting might not read his work if they knew Blair was a Guide. He thought that if they read the work, thought about it, then found out at a later date Sandburg was a Guide it would mean they wouldn't dismiss him out of hand. They might actually believe what William was trying to say, that Guides had an untapped potential equal to any Sentinel or Mundane.

"Sentinel James Ellison." Jim looked over towards the man who was calling to him. "You are William's heir, yet you remain silent on the subject matter we are discussing. Would you be so kind as to share your thoughts? Do you agree with your father's position?"

Jim cleared his throat. "I support my father's position. I've read the work he is recommending to you. I believe it for the most part. Regardless of the truth of all of the research, there is something very
wrong with the population of Guides all around this country. I am, as you point out, the heir to Cascade. But I have one Guide. One whom I share with my junior Sentinel. In the nineteenth century, I'd have had two or maybe three Guides to myself. In the eighteenth I'd have had a harem full. I think that says it all, gentlemen."

His statement prompted a lingering silence as the men present contemplated the truth of his words. Of the men sitting at the table only one or two had a Guide who was their own exclusively. Most shared a Guide with a junior Sentinel. Their faces were thoughtful, uneasy. The truth wasn't exactly welcome or comforting. In fact it was almost embarrassing to have a heir with only one Guide at his disposal. Then Dr Braun cleared his throat delicately.

"I have believed in and upheld the old laws. They are laws that have been around a long time, as has been pointed out. We all grew up with them, know them inside and out. They have framed the structure of our Sentinel culture. Our lives from birth to death. Change, learning new ways is frightening... But I know that we are becoming more and more desperate for an answer as to why the breeding Guides aren't breeding at the same rate as they did in our grandfathers and great grandfather's time. I have to believe it is more than a difference in record keeping. There is a real reason behind it. We have to find the reason. It is vital that we do."

"I agree." The new voice came from the doorway and heads turned to see who it was. William smiled at the slim, blond man standing there. He was pleased to see him.

"My younger son." William offered a short introduction. "Sit, Stephen. We are waiting to hear what you have to offer. Say your piece." Stephen smiled in return and walked towards his father. He bent down and dropped a filial kiss on his father's cheek. William felt himself flush with pleasure at the affectionate and respectful gesture. Stephen moved past to an empty seat, seated himself and then looked around the room.

"It seems to me obvious that our system is broken and needs to be fixed." He gazed around the room again, meeting the sharp eyes fixed on him, the looks a mixture of curious and hostile. Stephen's reputation and his position on Guide Law reform was no secret. We can't go on the way we are. I've been touring the country. The will for change is strong now. The general populace has noticed what we don't want to talk about or admit. The Guides disappearing. The common Sentinel now only rarely is able to have a personal Guide all to himself. They must make do with local public Guides at home or brothel Guides if they are traveling. This state of affairs has not made the common man happy with us. In fact it has made them afraid of us. They fear we will turn to their sons or daughters if Guides are not available."

Stephen ended on that grim note to rumbled displeasure from around the table. The fear of Mundanes, that Sentinels were likely to covet the young men and women of their families, an unfounded rumor, was well known to all. An urban legend that no amount of public service announcements or outright denials had been effective in suppressing.

"We need to give these reforms a chance," William offered more mildly, after the grumbling had died down a little, "before we dismiss them out of hand."

"How do we know these are the right reforms?" Alderman Talbot asked, obviously happy to be off the subject of what Mundanes thought Sentinels capable of. He'd been a silent observer since the meeting began, paying close attention to each person as they put forth their own views. "What if the new Laws only make things worse? What then?"

"How can things get worse? We are in danger of wiping out Guides entirely, soon you may have to go to a museum, perhaps with your grandchildren, to show them a live Guide. The captured wild Guides are consistently more fertile than those raised in the Guide Houses. Why is this true?"
Stephen asked bluntly, his cheeks were flushed as his passion rose.

"Hormones." Dr Braun chimed in, fortuitously interrupting before Stephen could get carried away. "Forced breeding. Castration. I think an argument can be made all of these factors have an influence." He waited for someone else to dispute his words. Then he continued when the men groups around the large table remained silent. "Ruler Ellison's reforms make sense, they are not extreme. I hate to say it but maybe we have been wrong about Guides for the last few hundred years and more. We also need to look at another consideration. Maybe they are human after all?" It wasn't a statement, but rather a question put to the men at the table.

The table exploded in loud conversation, shouts of derision and protest as well as support. William bit the inside of his cheek. It was far too soon to ask that question. One step at at time.

"I certainly wouldn't go that far!" Someone exclaimed. "Reforms, yes, for the good of the Sentinels and Guides but Guides as human? No, I can't see it."

"I can agree with all the reforms except recognizing Guides as human. They are so clearly not human." Keats stared at William who was shaking his head. "Is this the object of this debate? To declare Guides human? I am sorry William. I cannot get behind that kind of talk."

"How can you look at their bodies and call them human?" Senator Miles huffed. He raised several thick fingers counting off points as he made them. "They have six nipples like an animal. They are hermaphrodites. And have you ever seen one of them go into Heat? They go into rut, just like an animal." He snorted, concluding, "they are beasts made to breed."

And we take them to our beds. What does that make us? William thought, but he bit his tongue before the words made it out loud. He hated to hear of Guides spoken of as if they had no more value or feelings than an animal. He was aware his own treatment of his Guide wasn't anything to hold up as an example. And he was aware that as a convert to a new way of thinking, he did tend to be defensive over his new position, perhaps even fanatical. He took a deep, cleansing breath. And interrupted the explosion of rancorous arguments.

"Let's not get sidetracked by the Guide-animal/Guide-human debate now." William said when he had himself under control and the room had quieted. "This is not the forum for that and it is not my purpose or intent to arrive at that kind of conclusion." He stared around the room. "What we can do is we can make the reforms for the preservation our Guides. I intend to do just that. I want you to understand what I am dong and why. It is for the good of the Sentinels of Cascade. That is what I want to have come out of these meetings."

"We don't have to answer the question of them being human." Senator Grover stated firmly. "I refuse to address that idiotic...."

"No we don't." William cut him off abruptly, he could see Stephen set to explode with indignation. But it wasn't the time nor the place to push that far. Not yet. He held up an admonishing finger in the direction of his younger son. Stephen locked his jaw shut. Jim, closer to his father, looked ready to bite through steel, but he also held his tongue.

Senator Grover spoke again, his voice holding a pompousness that was irritating. "Well if just one of them showed the talent or capability of a Sentinel or a Mundane I'd agree with you that we should look at their status again. But I've not met a single one who is capable of anything remarkable. So I say we table that discussion until a time it is actually relevant." He waved a hand.

There was a displeased murmur around the table.
"Gentlemen, Gentleman! Let's start with the most important reform. We need to get the birth rate up, whether Guides are human or not is not important now. Let the philosophers argue that point. I want to outlaw Guide castration. I will outlaw it. It is proven to correlate with reduced Guide fertility and decreased ability to carry pups to term. It is traumatic to the Guide and harmful as the numbers show." William said, his features were set, hard and unflinching.

"I propose a double blind study on the effect of hormone therapy on Guides and their pups." Dr Braun broke in, offering his support. "In fact I'd say without it we are just shooting in the dark for a long term solution. We owe this kind of research to future generations."

William nodded his agreement. "I would also like to take away the "pup" incentive for Vets. They are often paid not monetarily, but by claiming a pup from a litter. This practice gives them reason to over breed Guides. They profit from it. I find that a conflict of interest." He saw the fierce agreement on his younger son's face.

"The pup acquisition is a tradition, I am not sure they'd agree to give it up." Grover argued, but not with any heat. As a concession it was clear he thought it a minor one.

"Well, they don't make the laws now do they?" William Ellison said, a dangerous glint in his eye. He let that sink in for a moment as silence fell around him. Then he relaxed, turning suddenly back into the genial host, smiling at his guests. Bending forward he placed his hands palm down on the table in front of him. He pushed upright, trying to ignore the fatigue in his limbs. It was no longer an easy thing to put in long hours seated at a table. "I think that is all for tonight. We will meet back in the dining room in one hour to give you time to refresh yourselves. I will see you then." Christopher moved to his side, discreetly offering support with a hand under his arm, hidden by the sleeve of William's robe of office.

The twelve men in the room stood with him. William looked around the room, met each pair of eyes for a long moment, then he turned and exited the room with Christopher, followed closely by his elder son Jim, and then his younger son, Stephen.
Chapter 20

Jim sniffed the air. Something wasn't right. Something was off, some skewed smell filled the air, hanging in it like a miasma of wrongness. Like something good gone bad. He frowned trying to pin it down.

Elusive, it slipped past his grasp. He couldn't quite figure it out. It was a chemical smell, irritating, close to some natural smell, but just not quite, making his nerves twitch, his skin ripple in distaste. He dialed his sense of smell way down, so far down he couldn't pick it up it any longer. He was too fatigued, too frustrated to deal with mysterious smells tonight.

He was tired, having sat in what seemed to him endless and useless meetings all day with the contentious Sentinels who fought over every point, over every request. Much less complicated if his father would merely tell them what he was going to do, instead of talking them into it over days and weeks. Wheedling and bullying until the men thought they'd decided it themselves, when really William had told them subtly, but no less firmly, what he'd expected of them.

If they'd just read the research, or better yet, have their staff read it, men more capable of understanding the work, then they might change their tune. Without all the manipulation and the dramatic speeches. As it was, the whole process was taking too long for Jim's taste. Far too long. It was past time to stop talking and start doing. Give it to them hard and fast and see what they'd do about it. If they'd dare disagree with their ruler.

Either way, Jim hated meetings. They were a waste of energy. He'd rather be out working for a goal, sweating for it, not talking about it all day, forced into inactivity, negotiating periods and commas as much as Laws. He had to listen to grown men complain, whine and clamor for attention like school children for two days, and the blasted thing still wasn't over yet.

Shaking his head he walked down the hall towards the nursery. What the hell was that smell? Artificial, it weighed on his already strained nerves. He growled under his breath, forcing down his rising irritation. Dialed scent down even further until the last wisp of the odor disappeared from his awareness. He turned and was in the hall directly outside of the nursery. Four heartbeats filled his ears. He rounded the corner and looked in.

Blair was laying on the thick mattress that had been placed on the floor. All of the babies were there with him, bundled on the coverings in front of the Guide. He was gazing into the eyes of the one who was awake. His face was enraptured and the baby was just as captivated by the sight of Blair. Jim waited where he was, not moving, watching.

They were beautiful, Blair and his children. Blair's long, curly hair had stolen out from under the veil that he had pushed back off of his face. The locks lay like velvet ropes all around him, much longer than had been the case only a few months ago. Deep chestnut brown, lit with a glowing auburn.

Despite the officious company in the compound which necessitated his wearing the veil, Blair was safe in removing it here, revealing his face. No one would be able to get to the nursery. Jim's face darkened at the thought of anyone trying. Extra guards had been placed. Well armed Guardians. And Blair knew not to wander anywhere near the meetings. Anywhere close to the strangers visiting.

Blair was in Heat. Even the civilized veneer of these powerful and well socialized Sentinels stood a strong chance of falling away if they were faced with a Guide in Heat. Of course it also could be the final, convincing factor in William's argument with them. Proving to those who doubted that leaving Blair in his natural state was the right move to enhance his fertility.
But then again, it also might prompt more than a few fights over why Blair hadn't yet been bred again. Or fights between a dozen alpha Sentinels trying to mate with him, with a Guide suffused in the heady scent of Heat. The perfume that invited them to slake their lust, their desire. How many Sentinels ever got the chance any more? To take to their beds a Guide bathed in his natural Heat? It was a rare opportunity, too rare by far.

Fertile Guides were too often taken from their Sentinels now, given to Guide Houses, into the control of Vets who bred them relentlessly until they burned out, their bodies giving up. Bringing to life other Guides fated to live the same lives all over again. And again. Wrong. So wrong. Well, it would not happen to his Guide. It would not happen to Blair.

Jim was trying to give Blair what he sensed his Guide wanted. Time. Blair wanted time to care for his babies. Time between his pregnancies. A few more months wouldn't alter the fate of the world, would it? Jim would see Blair got that time if at all possible before being bred again. If his own need didn't burn him to a crisp while he waited.

Rafe was taking the brunt of that. His need. Lust. Jim wondered if the younger Sentinel regretted it, being the junior of James Ellison, heir to Cascade. If he wished he wasn't the one Jim turned to every time, reaching out and pulling him underneath, spreading him, entering him and taking him with hard, hungry thrusts until his want and desire no longer threatened to rule him.

Soon it would be time. Blair would have to breed again. Jim couldn't stop the instinctive curl of his lip at the thought of acting like a matchmaker, the involuntary baring of teeth the very idea brought out in him. Letting Blair get attached to another male who would have full, sexual access to Blair's body. Jim's Guide's body. He showed his teeth to the empty hall, brutally suppressing the need to growl out loud this close to Blair and the babies.

Jim had Rafe. And that was good. Rafe was his salvation as he waited. He could feel it, see it if he closed his eyes, the long, lean back stretched under him, feel the movement of the muscle beneath him. Every day, each night he was there. Every night, taken, moaning, sweat dewing his shoulders under Jim's grip, his lean hips, full round masculine ass, a haven for Jim's body to enter into. They fucked. Covering each other in fluids, gasping into sensitive ears, tasting with trembling, eager tongues the flavors of lust. All in the effort of giving Blair more time.

He was the one they wanted. Jim stretched his neck, his back stiffening. Rafe wanted Blair every bit as much as he did. Rafe was no naturally submissive beta Sentinel. He was alpha. He was waiting for his chance. Someday when Jim's hand loosened, his hold slipping, Rafe would be alpha, his own man. Now, he was Jim's. Jim's to plunder, to honor, to take. And he would have to watch, with longing when Jim took Blair to his bed. Make do with the little Jim didn't consume. The touches and tastes left over. Such was the lot of the junior Sentinel. Lust unrequited, allowed to love and serve only one other, his senior at his senior's beck and call.

Jim turned his gaze back to Blair. To where he lay, so absorbed in his child that he hadn't noticed Jim standing so near and watching him. He watched Blair reach out, stroke a finger over the soft, downy hair fluffing up over the fragile skull of the baby. Blair was caught up in the way the small child reached out, touched his face with awkward absorption.

And Jim...Jim was equally captivated. Caught in a rush of desire. An urgent wanting. Suddenly it was all too much, hot, bursting. He moved across the carpeting, silent, predatory. Sliding down, dragging his shirt open, baring the hard muscle of his chest and belly, leaving the shirt tails to flap. He wrenched his pants open, not bothering to drag them down, just freeing his erection, hot into the cool air.

Time, time. There was no more of it. No more time.
Blair inhaled their scent, the warm, powdery scent of his children his family, sweet and pure. Watched the lift of their fine hair in the current of his breath, felt it under his hands. Had he ever loved anything, anyone so much?

He startled when Jim moved in behind him, jolting in the suddenness, the heat of Jim's naked chest through his own thin robes. Big hands gripped him, his hips, finding their way under the folds of fabric. Seeking.

Oh, god. This wasn't a Sentinel in control. This wasn't Jim come to share in Blair's adoration of his children. A long hard column pressed against him, intimate against his own wet heat. This was a Sentinel ready to mate. Blair's body went liquid even as he panicked.

He tried to turn, to put his hands up and gain space between their bodies. But his loins melted, lubricated, distended. Wanting just this, no matter how hard he'd fought against it, to postpone it. He wanted it more than anything. Jim's hand came down, cupped him, cupped Blair's erection, wrapping around the organ, stroking.

"Jim." Blair gasped, his head going back, the name no more than a moan. Jim took his hand entwining their fingers, pressing their joined hands to Blair's belly and down. Until they stroked together. "Oh, god." Blair said when he turned his head and looked up into the cool blue eyes. It was too soon. Too soon, wasn't it?

Jim wrapped him up in his arms. Blair's hips lifted, he drew his leg forward, opening himself. And Jim, that easily, slid in.

He was wet when Jim pushed into him. Wet and hot and wanting it more than breath. He groaned dropping his head to the coverlet, feeling the powerful thighs bunching against the back of his own, bracing himself steady, taking in every hard inch. His fists knotted in the comforter. Big handfuls as he pushed back, felt Jim hit deep, all the way. Heard the grunt against his neck, felt the rush of goose flesh standing out all over his body.

Oh, no, it was definitely time.
Chapter 21

Rafe couldn't lose his temper. It was his mother on the phone. He loved her dearly, only not right at the moment. At the moment there were too many things he was trying to deal with. He put a hand to his forehead, cupping it, massaging at the tension building there.

He couldn't find Jim who had disappeared after the meeting broke up and never showed at the dinner table. Rafe was concerned, worried about what his senior was up to. Worried enough to excuse himself unforgivably early in a shocking show of social disgrace. He'd been about to start searching for Jim when this phone call had come in. He'd ducked into one of the better insulated conference rooms and closed the door to take it. He wasn't happy with the subject matter at all.

"Now is not a good time, mother." He kept his voice low and even, while his heart sped up at the topic of conversation she launched into without preamble. The thought of Caleb here, adding fuel to the already unstable mix was not a pleasant one.

"Nonsense, Blue isn't getting any younger. He needs your help to find a good match, dear." Rafe felt his knees go weak. No. No, not now. "You know it isn't easy for him."

"Yes, I know. I'll help him, I'll do everything I can to help, but this is a bad time. Believe me, I won't have any opportunity to show him around Cascade, or find any eligible Sentinels for him to meet. I'll have to interview them, research them."

Rafe contemplated collapsing into a chair, but decided against it, he chose to pace instead.

"Time, schmime. It won't take any time at all. Just introduce him to a few of Jim's friends, eligible Sentinels without partners. Caleb will charm them just by being himself. He is such a nice boy." Rafe nearly groaned aloud. No way. No way in hell.

Brian noticed that his mother didn't say Blue was handsome. Because that would be a lie. He was both striking and terribly average at the same time.

Physically, Caleb was average. Average height. Average weight. Average looks. He had Rafe's brown hair, tan, and oddly grey eyes. A regular face, but for his eyes. Nothing too special. That wasn't the problem. It was something else. Something Blue projected that always turned heads, for good or very, very bad. Rafe couldn't put a name on it, but it was real. And it was the last thing he wanted here at the compound in the midst of all that was going on.

Rafe was positive Jim didn't want the boy here, either. The one time Jim had gone with Rafe to meet his entire extended family Jim had reacted poorly to the skinny teenager. And Caleb had been no better. He had gone quiet, his pale grey eyes locking with Jim's ice blue gaze. In unison they'd hissed, Jim's body seeming to expand in size, massive, every muscle flexing in preparation for a fight. Rafe's aunt, appalled, had pulled her son out of the big Sentinel's immediate reach, Brian's mother helping. Rafe had been terrified, paralyzed with horror. Blue had hissed at the heir of Cascade. Brian's senior of less than half a year.

Blue hadn't wanted to leave the room, he'd wanted to tussle. He watched Jim over his mother's shoulder, his eyes narrowed, looking like an adolescent mountain lion sighting on a rival for its territory. Stupid to challenge the much larger, far more dangerous Ellison. But it wasn't common sense that was ruling the moment. It was pure instinct. Aunt Ruth, no small woman, and her sister, Rafe's mother, had picked Blue up and carried him bodily away.
The confrontation made no sense. Caleb wasn't an alpha, probably never would be. Yet he'd had the balls to hiss at Jim Ellison. What should have happened was that Jim would have taken Caleb down and maybe out. It would have gone that way if Caleb had been of age. But he was too young, a child, a youth. Jim let the two women drag the boy out of the room. Then he let the rest of the family try to make the huge offense up to him, trying to soothe his offended dignity. Trying to keep him from setting Rafe aside for the unforgivable affront. Jim of course hadn't set him aside, but Rafe wasn't sure how real that possibility had been, or how close the call.

"I know that." Rafe said, searching frantically for an argument his mother would listen to. "And I will help him. But next month, not now. There is some important business Jim is taking care of. He won't have time to ask around." And Rafe had to find another place for Caleb to stay, far from Blair, far from Jim. Rafe stubbornly tried to relay the information in a way his mother would understand. You certainly couldn't say she wasn't determined. It was a characteristic of all the women of his family. They looked out for their sons and daughters. "And he isn't too old, he is what, eighteen, nineteen? He's still a kid, mom."

"Brian Rafe! I am surprised at you. So selfish you won't help your own family. Putting on airs. Blue is twenty years old. This is his best chance before he gets older. Right fresh out of college. He is young, he is eager, and he is still flexible enough to adapt to an alpha. You know how hard a time you have had adjusting to Jim. You were only twenty three when you met him. Do you want to put your cousin through that kind of stress?"

"Mom." Brian fought the urge to slam his head against the wall. "You know how Jim and Blue reacted to each other. I can't do this right now. Caleb could get hurt."

"No. You'll protect him, Brian. And Caleb has grown up. He won't do anything like that again." She was so naive. She wouldn't accept that Sentinels weren't just another kind of man. Sentinels were men with the spirit of animals. Driven by instincts. Not as civilized as everyone pretended. The more alpha, the more to worry about.

Jim wasn't an average alpha Sentinel. Jim was stern and at times very traditional. He had taken good care of Rafe, but there had been difficulties. Which wasn't fair of his mom to bring up. "I will be there for Caleb. I will watch out for him. I will talk to Jim's family, and William Ellison about finding him a match." Brian would do it, though it was hard to ask, and even harder to approach the stern, dignified man who was Jim's father and Cascade's ruler. Brian's knees turned to water at the thought of asking for such a favor as this. Interrupting the conference for it, no, not a good idea. "But not now. Please."

She sighed. "Well, it is too late to change the arrangements now. Ruth and I have decided. He's on his way. He'll be arriving soon. We never thought you'd try to refuse." Her tone was wounded. "And don't you dare send him back home."

Rafe tried again. "This week is not good, there is a law conference going on at the compound." He explained carefully. But the significance didn't escape her, predictably she saw it in a whole different light than he did. She let out an excited squeal.

"A Law Conference! Oh! There must be dozens of Sentinels there. Some unbonded ones who aren't already spoken for. Oh, Brian it will be perfect!" She oozed enthusiasm, while he shuddered with the implications she declined to see or consider.

"No." Brian groaned. He hated it when she used that tone. It meant he was going to lose the argument. He already had lost, he was sunk. "Mom. You need to let me talk to Jim first. Ask him. There are too many things going on." He couldn't tell her about Blair being in Heat. He felt his face color. His mother carried Sentinel genes, but she wasn't a Sentinel, she wouldn't get the kind of
drives involved and Brian wasn't going to try to explain. Not to his mother. She was the alpha in their family.

"Call Caleb. Tell him not to come. I'll call him next week and well arrange a time for him to visit." Brian begged, making a last ditch plea.

"Didn't you hear me? He is already on his way. You should listen better." She knew him too well. With his eyes closed he could see her, her smile, her satisfaction, her sense of a job well done. She loved him, he was her son, but she also thought he wasn't always as attentive as he should be to family matters. So, she took steps to keep him involved. This step, Brian thought, might backfire.

Rafe had heard what his mother said, loud and clear, but he'd hoped it was just a case of his mother pushing the issue by pretending it was too late not to do things her way. "Crap." He muttered, realizing from the lengthening, triumphant silence that it really was too late.

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Rafe hung up the phone. He stayed where he was for a frozen moment, staring off into space, wondering what he was going to do. If he could intercept his cousin, get him away, keep him from all contact with Jim until these meetings were concluded.

Jim was in a more volatile mood than usual, not tolerating the smallest affront without an aggressive response. Putting him next to Blue would be akin to throwing gasoline on a blazing fire. Rafe pushed off the table, heading for the conference room door.

He would get word to the Guardians, tell them to get Caleb away, to one of the other residential buildings on the compound and set him up until Rafe could find the time to get there alone and explain the situation and what they were going to do about it.

He grabbed the door knob, twisted it violently, wrenching to door open, jaw clenched. Barreling out into the hall he looked up. And rammed into a solid wall, where there had never been one before. The impact jarred him, and he started to fall, only to be caught and supported by massive hands around his waist.

Head spinning he looked up into Captain Rathe's dilated eyes. The huge Guardian Sentinel looked down at him from an impressive height, hands spreading wide up Rafe's back, practically massaging him. Rafe cringed. He'd always avoided all contact with the man. Not too proud to run from him. Now he was up close and personal, pressed against the hard muscular body.

It was his worst nightmare.

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Jim relaxed, his cheek resting on top of Blair's curls. The Guide was warm, a little sweaty, limp and pliant in his arms. Blair had whimpered out his third orgasm in an hour, and now he was well and truly spent. In front of him, one child had been awake, now all three were. Three sets of eyes stared into Jim's. Wide. Innocent. Entranced.

Jim stared back.

They hardly blinked, those childish eyes, and Jim felt the brush of their immature but powerful minds against his own. Infants, yes, but still Guides, still seeking out a Sentinel's touch, company. He reached out, across the slumbering body that was against his own. Blair stirred, murmuring an exhausted slurred string of sounds, then settled when Jim stilled.
More carefully Jim reached out once more, his hand settling on top of the nearest child's head. So amazingly soft. Jim's thumb brushed over the child's cheek as brown eyes met his. Peace flowed up his arm. The child's joy of being touched. Jim stroked his hand down the curved back.

The baby gurgled, kicking happily. Jim smiled. The sound was good to his ear. The touch was right. The little sound, a cooing, pleasant. Echoed by both of the children he wasn't yet touching. He turned his attention to them, sitting up carefully behind Blair, making sure not to wake him.

"Shhh." The Sentinel murmured. And picked up the furthest child, drawing it into his lap. Then the second. And the third. Warm, wriggling, happy babies. Jim smiled, looking each over, noting tiny hands, pursing lips, blinking, intent gazes.

He bent his head, putting his mouth on one tiny fist, feeling the fingers open and grip his lower lip. The taste of the new skin flooded his mouth. Milky, sweet, salty.

There was only one sense he wasn't using. He dialled up smell. Powder. Baby smell. Blair. And the wrongness slammed into him. Like a mallet to the face, catching him off guard. He drew back as if from a striking snake. Coughed, sneezed, causing all three infants to blink up at him owlishly.

He set them back on the bed, dialling his sense of smell back to zero. He waited until his head cleared. Then fractionally he dialled up again. Until he picked up the stench. Until he figured out it was coming from two places, not one. Both places in this room.

One location was practically in his lap. Blair.

The other was across the room. He got up and moved to the dresser. It took him less than thirty seconds to find the source. Thirty more to believe what he'd found. Then he picked Blair up in his arms, carrying him out into the hall past the nearest Guardian.

"Notify my Companion to go to the nursery." Jim said to the big man, who watched him impassively before nodding once. Then Jim moved past him and continued on towards his own rooms.

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The angry shouting, snapped Rathe's head up. Rafe was distracted by it as well, ceasing attempt wiggle out of the big male's hold. He'd recognize that bellow anywhere. It was his Senior. It was Jim. Enraged as he almost never was. Swearing. Yelling. At Blair?

Rathe dropped him an instant before Rafe would have started to fight his way free. Rafe ran, Rathe passing him in two long, effortless strides and heading down the wide entrance hall. Rafe struggled to keep up. He heard the panicked response of Blair's voice. Far more distantly he heard the babies crying.


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"What the hell?" William asked aloud. Every Sentinel around the table could hear the commotion. Only William dared stand. Cristopher hurried to stand with him. No one met anyone elses eyes.

The phone blared. Or sounded as if it did. Every Sentinel had his hearing dialled all the way up to maximum. They all winced in unison, slapping hands up over their ravaged ears.

"Ellison." William snarled into the receiver. He listened. Then with exaggerated care he reseated the
handset. He bit his lip, inhaling in and out for a count of twenty. Then he reached down and ripped the phone out of the wall, throwing it across the room.
Chapter 22

One perfect hour, that's what Blair had had with his Sentinel. He still felt the shadow of that touch now. Jim had held him, taken him, loved him, and it had been so right. He remembered every caress, every stroke and thrust. Blair had fallen asleep in Jim's arms.

Then had followed ten days of hell. The first hour of that hell, Jim had made demands that Blair reveal who had given him the tablets, then once William had told Jim just who had provided them, a frosty distance had started between Guide and Sentinel. That was worse than all the yelling and rage.

Blair had heard part of the Sentinels’ debate before he was moved out of the main building. Outraged Sentinels demanded an explanation, accusing William and Jim of being law-breakers. Were they above the Laws? Did they think they were? Blair shuddered as he recalled the accusations.

Even during the worst of it Blair had not been alone. He was afraid, but not the bone deep, physical fear that he'd felt when the pirates had taken him. Always at his side, huge and forbidding was a Guardian Sentinel, Captain Rathe or one of his men. And if any looked ready to approach or question Blair, the Guardian had discouraged them.

Blair wiped at his brimming eyes. He had not been permitted to nurse his children since that day. Jim called his milk poison and wouldn't allow it. Blair hung his head. He was permitted to see them, hold them, but not to nurse them. He was watched at all times when he sat with them.

The fear was the worst. Not that Jim would hit him. Though the Sentinel had had his fists clenched, his face going red, and his entire body shaking with rage, not once did Blair think he was going to be hit. Rathe had been there only minutes after the shouting began. Between Jim and Blair. He didn't interfere in any other way other than being there. After a time Jim changed, he grew quiet, cold. The fear that possessed Blair was that he had lost Jim.

Blair understood Jim's distance; he had been betrayed, his trust in his Guide had been violated and shaken. Blair's desperate act had cut him deeply. He'd looked at Blair in utter disbelief and then he turned away, and for a week Blair hadn't seen him at all.

Rafe was around from time to time. Watching, helping him care for the babies. But they exchanged few words and fewer touches. The incident, as Blair thought of it, though it was so much more, seemed to have shocked his system to the point he was numb. All but for the ache that never went away, lodged deep in his chest. Blair wanted nothing, no sex, no touches, no love, nothing but the safety of his children. He refused to entertain the dreams that woke him, dreams he savagely repressed; dreams that had him back in Jim's arms, held and loved.

Rathe had come to stand between him and Jim, and foolishly, Blair had begged for his help. His protection. And now, here he was, in an out-building on the campus of William Ellison's compound, his children nearby, in a new nursery, being bottle-fed. With Guardians Blair's only companions day in and day out, but for the short visits of Rafe and thrice, William Ellison himself.

Blair was covered head to foot, heavy robes and heavy veil insulating him from the outside world as much as his new living situation. He had wrapped bands of cloth around his chest to catch the dripping milk; he could hardly wait for the flow to stop. He kept hearing Jim's words.

"Poison. Not fit for any child. You will not nurse them. Or I will take them from your care. If you want to keep them...."
Blair couldn't blame Jim for the threats. He had no reason to trust Blair's promises any longer.

William came the second day with the news that Dr. Miller had been arrested and confined under guard. They were unable to put her in prison once the nature of her crime had been made public. She was kept alone, isolated, not even in the prison proper, but in a location that was undisclosed. In prison any Sentinel who could have reached her would have killed her for her crime.

"Why, Blair?" William had asked. "Can you imagine any violation greater? Jim supported you; he fought for you, why didn't you tell him what you needed? That you needed more time instead of resorting to...this?" William looked years older. His face was sad. Ravaged. His mouth was tense and Blair couldn't miss the distaste in his eyes. William, too, had lost faith in him.

Blair stayed silent. He had no answer for the pain he saw in William's eyes.

The reforms William had battled so hard for came close to collapsing when the news of what Blair had done became known. William redoubled his efforts, refusing to accept the defeat that seemed inevitable. He would not gracefully surrender. He made a point to denounce the actions taken both by Dr. Miller and Blair. Through sheer force of personality the ruler of Cascade kept the talks going and he was relieved to earn a weak vote of support from enough of the attendees to move forward. But it wasn't a rousing endorsement, not the success it had looked to be only ten days ago.

Blair wanted to explain but there was no one who was willing to listen. Looking back on his decision he wasn't sure why he'd made the choice. If he'd known these were to be the consequences he wouldn't have. Not if he'd foreseen all of this, the loss of his Sentinel, all the pain he'd caused, perhaps, even the failure of laws to protect other Guides.

Dr Miller was arrested on an anonymous tip she was providing birth control to Guides. Blair had no idea how that had been discovered. He'd kept his word and never named her. He prayed she knew he had not been the source of her being found out and arrested.

Rafe when he visited was mostly silent, their only exchanges about the babies. Handling the infants with loving care, his face as sad as William's. His body was stiff when he moved, and Blair felt his distress. He smelled of Jim. As if Jim wouldn't permit him to wash his scent off. He wanted the world to know Rafe was his. Blair had no longer had such a mark of ownership on him. No scent of a Sentinel. Jim no longer came to wash him. No longer came to see the babies.

Blair waited, day in and day out. Caring for the needs of his small family. Waiting for some decision to be made, for something to give. He longed for the chance to fall on his knees and tell Jim he was sorry. He needed to tell Jim why. He wanted to make him understand, make him believe it would never happen again.

Blair hung his head, tears running down his face and dripping off the tip of his nose. He wiped them with a corner of his veil. He would wait as long as he had to. He would make Jim understand. The alternative was unthinkable.

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Rathe stood in the meeting, the first Guardian to attend. He had been able to hear all that was being said from the more promising beginning to now, the last day. When grievances and concerns were to be aired one last time in the wake of the vote.

William was seated at the head of the table. Jim to his right. Christian to his left. A new thing, putting Christian at the table instead of behind William. Under the table their knees touched, stayed in contact. William needing the support. To Jim's right sat Rafe. And they too touched, more blatantly
than William and Christian. Rafe's hand resting on Jim's wrist, fingers curled over the thick muscle and bone.

Rathe had stepped into the room before the doors were closed, and no one had challenged him. They flowed to their seats, a grim bunch of men, drained of energy, each feeling the trial of the last few days. The whole story had come out. And not one had taken it well.

The first to stand and speak was not William. The ruler of Cascade held his head up, but his mouth remained closed, the gaunt, pale face stoic, his lips a bloodless line. It was William's son, Stephen, who stood. Stephen who spoke, a hand resting on the shoulder of his own, atypically quiet junior.

"My fellow Sentinels. We are doing the right thing. Reform is needed, we need new laws. And the events of the last few days only underline that need." He paused, looking around. No one nodded, no one smiled, no one responded. They only listened, faces grim, hard and humorless. "Let me tell you my thoughts." Stephen took a moment, then resumed. "A Guide was faced with a choice that we forced on him. By Law he couldn't seek the kind of help he felt he had to have. There was no legal means he might use. So he was left with the tragic choice that has caused all of this." Stephen waved his hand around the room, palm up. Not a murmur sounded. "What should he have done? Not this surely. We all agree on that. But should there have been an alternative available for him? One not so drastic? His body was ready to breed before his mind could cope. Do we righteously ignore that fact? Say he is Guide and thus his feelings on the matter are not important. Should he have no say?"

"He is no Guide." Someone muttered. Stephen lifted his chin.

"No, you are wrong. He is an extraordinary Guide." The blond man waited to have that challenged. Another silence.

"The fate of Sentinels rests on the number of Guides born." Jim's rock hard voice broke in, minutes later. He looked past his brother, meeting no one's eyes. "Interfering with the birth of Guides is a crime and has been for as long as any here can remember. For all of the recorded history we are taught growing up."

At last Jim's eyes met Stephen's. "My Guide chose to take that poison into his body to rob future generations of Sentinels of the Guides that he could conceive. He made a decision that was not his to make. It is the right of the Sentinel, the responsibility of the Sentinel to sense, to know when the time to breed is ripe. He was in Heat. He had received no chemicals, no false fertility drugs to make him come into his Heat early. Nature determined it was his time. And he fought it. He committed a crime. And only because he is a Guide is he not under arrest awaiting prosecution. He broke one of our most fundamental and sacred Laws."

Stephen stared right back. "I know your pain. I feel it. I have spoken for years of Guide rights. You know I am considered by many to be too far out on the fringe. But never think I don't know your pain. We all long for a time when Guides are not scarce. When we won't have the worry that our children will have fewer even than we do to chose from. If my own Guide, who I love did this? What would I do? I would feel anger. I would feel betrayed. I would feel ill. I wouldn't want to believe he could do it." Stephen shook his head. "Even so I hold to my position. This is not the result of Laws that are too lax. It is a result of Laws that are too restrictive. A Guide is not a farm animal to breed without thought to the emotional and social impact. The Laws that permit fertility drugs and castration, but deny the right to other drugs to space out conception and promote healthier mothers and healthier babies, those Laws are wrong. Those laws caused this."

The resultant shouting could be heard all throughout the compound.

Rathe smiled, not at all unhappy with the way things were progressing. No one noticed the unusual
expression on his normally impassive face.

"My Guide stole from all of us, from me. He stole his fertility from us. In so doing he stole the future. I don't think it was maliciously done. He never meant for any harm." Jim said into the brief pause that followed all the noise. This time there were shouts of agreement. "What he did require was a strong Sentinel. I made the mistake, it was not his. I dealt with him as I would have with any Sentinel, any mundane man I trusted or respected. I trusted him. I forgot he was a Guide. I was too permissive. He needed me to make the decision for him, and I didn't. I failed him. The fault for all of this debacle is mine and mine alone." Jim now met all the eyes that were fastened on him. His jaw was hard, rigid as if hewn from a granite slab. "I am aware of the accusations from our detractors that the Ellisons consider themselves above the law. We are not. We never have been and never will be. The Law rules us all. For that reason I will send Blair to a Guide House tomorrow morning. Where he will remain until he is impregnated. Until his place as a Guide of this house, of my family is redeemed."

Stephen's voice was heard. Raised above the loud approval from around the table. Fists pounded down. Mugs rattled. "I think you are making a grave error, brother. Your Guide may see that as a rejection. Is it your intention to surrender your Guide to breeding in a Guide House? To remove his children from his care?"

"No." Jim spat out. "I do not surrender him. I do not gift him to any House but my own. But, as his body sees fit, it is time for him to carry again, and so, he will."

William spoke, weary to the bone. "I hear you and we will respect your decision. Is this your final word on the subject?"

Jim nodded sharply.

"Then it will be so. This meeting is at an end. If anyone else has more to say, send it to me in writing and it will be added to the meetings minutes, unchanged. I thank you for your attendance." William rose from his seat, signalling the end of the conference.

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Rathe was first out of the room as he'd been closest to the door. Ellison's statement that he was sending Blair to the Guide House for breeding had been the final straw for him. The Guardians had long objected to the manner of breeding that the modern facilities employed. Strangers, men who did not know the Guides being put to breed with them. As if no Guide had feelings, or might have reason to object.

He made his way to his temporary quarters and lifted his phone from it's cradle. He dialled. Once he heard the voice of the head of the Guardians answer he began to speak. "Rathe here. The meeting has adjourned. The reforms will be put through, but the actions of the Ellison Guide, Blair has stirred up far more controversy. He is to be put to breed at a Guide House...immediately."

The muted roar coming across the phone line would have deafened him if Rathe didn't know the man well enough to dial down his hearing before making his statement. He listened. Listened some more. "Yes, sir." He agreed. "Yes, sir. It is time. I agree. Do you wish me to request time with Ruler Ellison?"

"NO. I will call him. He can't put me off like he can you." The man's voice had modulated to a dull rumble. "You will remain with the Guide. And for the sake of all that is holy, keep that odious man, that interfering Veterinarian away from the House Guide Ellison is sent to. He has caused enough trouble, it is time he had trouble himself. Subpoena him and have someone keep him busy. We need
information for the case we will be presenting to ruler Ellison. Have Jannis get it for me. Under no circumstances do I want that man to get his hands on the Guide."

"Sir."

Rathe replied in the affirmative. But he was talking to a dial tone. He put the second call through. Spoke to Lieutenant Piers Jannis. Laid out his instructions. By the time he hung up, this time the first to do so, the plan was in action. Blair could not be taken to a House until the morning. Rathe had to keep an eye on him until then. The men he had with him at the Ruler's compound would keep the Guide in sight at all times. The last thing James Joseph Ellison would dare to do was be alone with his Guide. Rathe smiled a little sadly. Ellison was now aware of the power Blair held over him, and he was afraid of it. Afraid of the attachment he had formed.

Rathe stepped out of his quarters. The moon had risen high in the sky already. It looked down on him, shrouded in the clouds that rarely deserted Cascade. The night was both quiet, no men were outside, and loud, crickets and bugs chirped and whirred in the air. The temperature was cool, but not cold. Rathe headed across the compound towards Blair's residence. The scent of flowers, of fresh greenery, of dirt newly turned filled the air. It was pleasant, being above the city. Mist dewed on the exposed skin of his hands and face, his throat.

A small sound alerted him to the fact he was not alone out in the gardens. He shifted his direction, focusing his senses in the direction from which the sound had come. He automatically eliminated the sounds of insects, of mice scurrying, of a single feline stalking her prey in the underbrush. He was left with the sound of a human heart beating. The sound of breathing less than a hundred feet away. He dialled in scent on his target, too many trees and shrubs between him and the target to use sight yet. The scent was alluring. Intoxicating. He inhaled. Exhaled. Inhaled. Licked his lips to catch the molecules of scent on his tongue and taste them.

Then he started to stalk his prey, unwilling to stop himself. He had to reach that heart beat, that scent before any rival did. He padded towards the unsuspecting prey, one soundless step after another.
Chapter 23

Chapter by Joan963z

Chapter Notes

Neichan is the primary writer of this story. I am co writer of chapters from 17 on. I just posted some chapters to the sight.

Rafe followed Jim across the night-dark lawn heading on a bee-line for the building sitting away from all the others; the building that now housed Blair and the new nursery. Jim's posture was tight, stiff, his manner tense, even the bristle cut of his hair seemed to gleam ever sharper in the moonlight.

Rafe couldn't blame him, couldn't grudge him his upset. He was on his way to tell Blair the plans. Plans Blair was not going to be happy about. Plans Rafe disagreed with. Plans to breed the Guide.

The two Sentinels reached the heavy entrance door, finding another tall, straight backed Guardian inside, quiet and alert, moving like a ghost in the shadows to intercept them, intimidating, quiet as death if they had not been welcome here, the big man would have made short work of both. Jim held up his hand. The man paused, regarding them with narrowed eyes as he sniffed them, prowling close. A second man was as quickly there, looming behind them. A beat, two, and then as if the Guardians had picked up some hidden signal or sign, they both stepped back, and Jim and Brian were free to pass.

Rafe inched past, happy to see that neither man was the massive Captain Rathe. But both men still looked him over with interest, eyes covering him head to toe, chins lifting and falling in little sniffing motions. He shivered, but made it past without being touched, sticking close to Jim's back.

Jim stopped, turned to Rafe, putting a hand in the center of the shorter Sentinel's chest. "You don't have to do this with me. I will go in alone if you wish to remain here." He said, an offer Rafe dearly wished he could take, he didn't want to do this, didn't want to tell Blair what was going to be done. But the pain hidden deep in Ellison's eyes made staying outside, letting Jim go in alone, an impossible choice. Brian shook his head.

"I'm going in." He said in return. Jim's hand slipped down to his bicep, gripped there, an unspoken thank you. "With you." Rafe added, wanting to say, with Blair, too. Knowing that would be pushing it he stayed silent, but kept Blair's name on the tip of his tongue. He waited for the verdict, and Jim nodded, once, jerkily, as if a marionette, moved by strings. They went inside.

Blair was there standing silhouetted against the night glow of the moon, his profile visible through the gauzy veil. It took a moment before he realized he wasn't alone. He was outlined in silver light, the tail ends of his hair showing from under the veil, black in the unlit room. When he came to know he wasn't alone any longer, his hands rose up to his chest, one hand clenched the other partially raised, until he saw who it was. Then his head inclined back down, he looked at the floor, a faint color rising on his cheeks, Rafe dialling up sight to see the flush through the thin veil.

Blair smelled of shame, of fear. There was nothing Rafe wanted more than to be able to go to him, to hold him and comfort him. But he did what he had to, remained behind Jim and waited. Jim moved closer.
Blair's eyes grew wider, his heart racing, speeding up with each step bringing his Sentinel nearer to him. His mouth was white, bloodless, his breathing, sharp rasps. Blair expected the worst, and Rafe wished he could beg his Senior to change his mind. To give the Guide any news but that which was coming to him.

"You're going to a Guide House, you will be bred." Jim said without preamble, forcing out the grim, clipped sentence. His anger and pain over Blair's betrayal still evident in his voice, as emotionless on the surface as it was twisted with grief down deep. After that, he had no more to say to his Guide. It was simple and to the point, he turned to leave, his jaw locked down tight against the hurt of it.

Rafe watched as Jim, usually the bravest of men, turned to flee.

The whimper of total despair that came out of Blair was otherworldly; he crumpled to the floor, his robes puddling around him, a new flood of salty tears running down his face, a stinging tang in the air. The sound, the scent together stopped Jim in his tracks, he stood trembling, quivering head to foot. Rafe felt his own body respond to the cry. Anguish. Every Sentinel sense each man had was focused, taut, aware of a Guide in distress. Their Guide.

Rafe couldn't move. Leaving the room and Blair in it was out of the question.

Jim tried to take another step closer to the door and the exit, his foot dragging with reluctance. Rafe watched him. Waited. Torn. Jim's head drooped, his body shook, his fist trembled against his side. He looked up, fast and filled with desperation, as his eyes met Brian's.

Rafe moved. Two steps and he was there, barely a millimeter between him and Jim. So close their scents mingled. So close he could feel the tremor in the cushion of air between them. They stood, not touching, nearly touching. Their fingers wove together. Jim sagging against Brian. Rafe held him upright, put an arm around his Senior's shoulders.

"Please," Blair begged from behind Jim, his voice tiny, broken, "let me apologize. I'm sorry, I didn't mean to hurt you. Please don't go yet."

There was movement on the air currents behind Rafe; Jim raised his head, looked at the Guardian who came to stand in the door behind Rafe. The large Sentinel's nostrils dilated, checking out the confusion of scents now filling the room, restless, watching. Jim scowled, Guardians were Blair's constant companions since his Guide had begged Rathe for protection. Since Blair had not trusted Jim with his safety, his body. Since the discovery of the birth control pills.

"Leave us," Jim said to the Guardian's bright observant gaze, his voice had lost none of power despite the low volume, and now it held overwhelming anger. Anger at being seen like this. Anger at being watched. None of which affected the man who observed from the door, who didn't move away. Jim growled his frustration, then wrenched himself around, turning his back on the Guardian.

Brian's arm remained around his shoulders. Ignoring the eavesdropping Guardian, Jim looked at his Guide who sat on the mattress, curling his legs under himself, shaking, imploring, with every ounce of his heart. "Please? Please? I didn't mean to hurt you."

"Hurt me?" Softly spoken, words and emotion like arrows finding tender flesh, sinking fast, wounding. "You have dishonored me, betrayed me. Why should I listen to your apologies?" He raised a shaking finger pointed at the window and beyond it. "Out there are the men who I will one day rule. You have made me look a lovesick fool in their eyes." And that was part of the problem, but not the biggest part. Rafe knew Jim wouldn't voice the way he had felt, the slap in the face when he learned his Guide didn't trust him. Jim was too proud to say it. And Rafe, though he knew it to be
true, couldn't reveal it.

"I just want you to know how sorry I am." Blair murmured from under his veil, wiping the tears from his eyes. "I only wanted to wait a few months more before becoming pregnant again. I never thought this...."

"You should have come to me. I am your Sentinel." Snapped, hard. There it was, the rush of anger, harsh and hard, vibrating in each word. Blair curled even tighter. "You trusted the doctor above me. Do you understand Guide? It was I you should have turned to, you should have trusted me!" Jim hissed the last. Before going silent, lips closing on even more painful words, wanting to lash out at the miserable crouched figure on the bed. Holding back those last, most terrible words.

Blair's voice broke as he spoke, it was a whisper, a gasp full of regret, "I didn't know I could."

Another blow. Rafe inhaled, reared back from Blair's honesty. Oh, god, not the right thing to say at all. Truth or not.

Jim's stopped breathing mid breath. Time seemed to stop, frozen with a realization that stabbed his psyche. His mind spun. Was it possible? His Guide did not know he could trust his Sentinel? His mind raced over the time since Blair had come to live with him and Rafe. He remembered feeding Blair the peach and the pears, bathing him, wiping his brow during labor, tending to the babies since then. Loving them. Protecting them. Leaving Rafe with Blair, rather than keeping his Junior at his side, to be sure all the Guide's needs were met. Yet even with the care he'd taken, Blair didn't believe in him. Didn't trust him. Doubted him. Never loved him.

"It changes nothing, what more could I have done to convince you?" Jim said, but this time his voice was less harsh, though more pain filled. "What's done is done. Tomorrow you leave for the Guide House and you will stay until you are impregnated." Once more the Sentinel turned on stilted, stiff legs to leave the room. Once more he was stopped.

This time by Blair's low howl of hopeless despair. His hand, bare, outstretched, the lush, bright green of his robe falling away from the wrist, the vibrant color so at odds with the stark despair of his bent fingers, digging into his palm, his hand thumping onto the bed. "No." Begging. Jim was on his knees and next to Blair in the blink of an eye, meeting Rafe there, Rafe no more able to ignore that call of distress than the alpha Sentinel. Jim pulled Blair into his arms. Holding him, rocking him, only a half second faster than Rafe who added to the embrace, his own two arms.


Rafe's arms engulfed him, not enough. Rafe rocked them all. He would have given anything to go back one month. To start again, knowing what he knew now. To talk to Blair, let him know he wasn't alone. To find an alternative to this. He swallowed hard against the squeeze of tears spasming his throat. Too late.

Jim's arm shot out, met Rafe's wrist, pushed him gently out of the way. Rafe loosed his hold, backed away, found a spot next to the mattress and knelt.

Jim, hardly paying attention, gave all his attention to Blair, lowering the Guide down, onto his back. Jim held the small body. He kissed Blair's forehead. Licked his cheek. His arms not giving way. He tugged the veil all the way off, parted the front of Blair's robe so the bindings were revealed, white
and startling against olive skin, the much softer colors in the room. An extended claw took care of
the wrapped cloth, it fell away.

Jim's hand was filled with the soft roundness of a breast, the warmth and dampness, against him, the
dark nipple, plump and impossible to resist. The scent of the milk once again pure, the smell of the
artificial hormones gone. Jim lowered his face to Blair's chest. His mouth found the nipple, the
closest, latched on, licked, suckled and savored it, as Blair arched into the nuzzling, drinking touch.

At that act, the Guardian in the doorway left, vanishing back out of sight into the dark hall. Giving
them what privacy he could as the rest of Blair's robe was taken away, leaving him naked in the dim
room with Jim over him, hands searching, finding Blair wet, ready, fingers petting into wetness.

A lift of hips, widening of thighs, a slide of flesh. Jim entered him and Blair let out a moan. It was
deepest. Blair's body wanted it. Curved up to accept it, feet hooking over the small of the Sentinel's
back, digging in. Jim let out a groan, picked up Blair's hips, cupping them in strong hands, tilting
him, drawing him even closer, going in, deeper, hotter.

Licking.

Rafe crept up, lay on the bed beside them, pressing himself against the length of the Guide and the
Sentinel buried inside the Guide. He purred soothing sounds for both his Senior and his Guide. He
took one of Blair's hands and lifted it to his mouth. Kissing the fingers, licking the sensitive fingertip
and then sucking them into his mouth. Trying with each lick, each stroke, and each purr to let the
Guide know he was vital, loved, revered, desired.

On and on. Then the climax. Jim crying out. Blair even wetter, drenched, limp, clinging. Praying. If
there was a god, goddess, anyone, anything, please, Blair prayed. He closed his eyes tight and
prayed.

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The scream blasted against his eardrums, but he smiled anyway. Best way to get a Sentinel out of a zone. Bite him. The young man, now awake and aware, skittered backwards frantically on all fours, across wet grass and wetter mud.

"Who the hell are you?" It was a shriek, the bright grey eyes were wide and panicked, the thick swathe of amber brown hair falling into the fascinating eyes before being tossed back to clear sight.

"Who do you think I am?" Rathe asked seating himself on the wall, intent on making himself far less of a threat in the boy's eyes. It worked. The young Sentinel stopped scooting backwards. He sat, tense. Then he must have felt something, he looked down, grimaced and gained his feet. He examined the muddied bottom of his jeans.

"Great." He wiped his palms against the now soiled jeans. "That wasn't funny, you know. Biting me. Why did you do it?" It was close to a scolding tone. Rathe's brows shot up towards his hairline. Not many people talked like that to a Guardian. He wondered if it were courage or stupidity. He admired the first, deplored the second.

"You were in a zone." He answered the query patiently, his deep voice as quiet and neutral as he could make it. He stole another little whiff of scent, savored it, before dialling smell down very low. He looked at the boy, evaluated him. There was an irresistible pull to this one.

"You did this time." Rathe assured him. The kid looked shocked.

"But, how? Why? Even the instructors couldn't make me zone in school." He exclaimed. Rathe shrugged, of course they couldn't. The youth looked unhappy, as if he'd expected Rathe to share the answer.

"You have graduated from your program?" Rathe asked a minute later. Perhaps the boy was more man than child if that was the case. If so, he could dial his sense of smell back up without the least sense of guilt and enjoy the toe curlingly sweet scent of him.

"Yes." Defiantly. "I am not a kid or something. I'm twenty years old," he said. Indignant. Rathe felt pleasure bloom in his chest. Not a kid. So. That was good if it were true. But still, he needed to be careful, cautious. Alert.

"I am glad to hear that. Do you have an alpha?" He got right to the point. He'd love to know if he had a rival around. Not that a rival would take much time to eliminate. Rathe would eliminate him, for this prize.

"No. That is why I am here. Mom thought I'd never find one at home, so she and Auntie Beth sent me here, to find one."

He tugged at his forelock, pushed it up and away from his face with long, slender fingers. Not a bad face. Not beautiful, but fine, a face to grow into, someday this one would be a handsome man. Now, it was the eyes that stuck in Rathe's mind. And the heavy, silken hair, with the puff of scent released each time it was handled, or flicked out of his eyes. The surge of possessiveness was instantaneous when the boy talked of alphas. Rathe bared his fangs, felt the creaking extension of his claws. The Sentinel was his. His.

"Oh." Surprised, the boy insanely stepped forward not back, his eyes were fastened on the much longer than normal length of Rathe's fangs. At least double any common Sentinel's. "You aren't like
the rest...your teeth are, jeez, I've never seen teeth that fucking long. What are you?"

Rathe frowned at the profanity, disapproved, but let it go.

"Who are you promised to?" Rathe managed to growl, asking the important question. The words understandable but barely. He ignored the boy's question.

"No one! Not yet." The young man exclaimed, defensively, then mumbled. "Alphas...they don't always like me. Or they like me too much. Mom thought...." He bit his lip and Rathe's heart sped up. "It isn't my fault."

Rathe's snarl interrupted again, his eyes taking on an unholy glow. "They've touched you? Are you pure?" He asked, getting to his feet, towering. Prowling closer.

The young man's huge grey eyes were staring up at him. Astonished at his size. "Oh my God. You...you...what are you?" Breathed the boy. "I've never seen..."

"Pure?" Rathe asked again, guttural, deep.

"Wha...no! I mean yes. It's all I have. I'm not rich. But I am...uh...you know. Pure." His skin shone with his blush. A potent bargaining chip for a poor boy, certainly. But pure or not, Rathe wanted him. Would have him.

Rathe slowed his motion forward, forced the rage down and away. His face went to neutral, or as close as he could get. The young Sentinel was playing havoc with his control. He wanted to get closer. To push right up against that lanky, coltish body and stroke his hands over all of it. Every precious inch, in his grasp. Safe. His.

"Never been away from home." Rathe said when he could form the words, inching closer. So innocent. The young man was rooted to the spot, still staring, making no attempt to escape. Then he blinked and his own eyes took on a glare, his hands planted themselves on his hips.

"Hey! I have too been away from home. I went to school."

"A mile from your childhood home." Rathe guessed his voice warm and rich as melted butter.

"No!" The Sentinel protested. Then ducking his head. "Ten miles." He muttered.

Rathe couldn't help it. He threw back his head and laughed.

"Hey! It's not that funny! Anyway, I'm here and I'm going to find an alpha. Cousin Rafe is going to help me." He looked determined and oh so young. Naive.

"No." Rathe said, thinking it made such sense that Rafe was this one's kin. "No alpha." He wouldn't allow it.

"What's that supposed to mean? I have to! I can do it. Sometimes they follow me. Right down the street." He lifted his chin. "Some of them want me. Not all of them hate me." His voice quavered for a second before steadying.

"No." Rathe repeated, not bothering to moderate the growl that emerged. "They are not for you." No more pandering to the all mighty alphas. They had done enough harm. They would not take this one from where he truly belonged.

"You don't get it. I ~have~ to. My family needs me to. Rafe helps out, but he can't do it all. I have to
do my part, too." There was a note of fatalism mixed with rising anxiety, agitation. No different than a thousand young Sentinels each year, to help his family, he would sell himself to the wealthiest alpha he could find.


The grey eyes raised. The thin face turned up. "Why?" There was pain and uncertainty in the question. As if it wasn't the first time he'd wondered, needed to know if the awful lack was in himself.

"Because, you already belong elsewhere. You were born for other things. Not for a common Sentinel." Rathe made a shooing motion with his hand as if he were flicking something off his fingertips. "Think. When they touch you, how does it make you feel?"

Rathe could see the wave of revulsion as it washed over the young man head to foot. He could sense the skin prickling, hair standing on end. The grimace wasn't possible to miss. He smelled the whiff of acrid sweat as the boy remembered grasping hands. Rathe bit down on his own tongue to keep from asking again, if there was a Sentinel out there who needed to be tracked down and punished for taking too many liberties. The young man had denied rape. Rathe had to accept his word.

"You see." Rathe said, instead. "You aren't for them." He took another step forward, now he could reach out and put his hands on those bony shoulders, shoulders that still needed growing into, but promised to be wide and strong when the growing was done. He gentled his touch, made it careful, welcoming. Transmitting to the youth that he belonged.

"What is your name?" Rathe asked.

"Caleb Ezekiel Henny. My family calls me Blue."

"Blue." Rathe rolled it over his tongue, liked it. "I am Captain Michael Rathe. Of the Sentinel/Guide Protectorate."

Much smaller hands shot up, hovered, then floated down to rest on Rathe's chest. Not pushing him away. A good beginning. But...Rathe went down on one knee, putting himself down to the other's level.

"They will not have you." He said. "You are mine."

The young man nodded. "Yes," he said.
Chapter 24

Chapter by Joan963z

Rafe frowned, lifting his head higher, taking a sniff. The white Guide robe Jim had sent him for was forgotten in his hands. He stopped stock still on the crushed rock pathway. That smell....the hair raised up along his spine as he drew it into his lungs.

He left the path and rapidly headed out over the still damp grass. A crumpled bit of blue, wet and covered in mud caught his eye. Rafe headed for it, something creeping coldly up the back of his neck, telling him all was not right.

He reached the spot where the blue fabric lay, and was greeted with more signs of trouble. He poked at the cloth, then picked it up. It was a pair of Levi's button front jeans. Waist 30, inseam 34. Caleb's jeans. Oh shit. The ritual Guide robe fell out of his ands, dropping to the lawn. Rafe spun, eyes searching, reached out and plucked a white-ish grey T-shirt off a branch. Mud was plastered up the back and side, smeared and beginning to dry around the edges. The flannel shirt under the bush was in worse shape, shredded as if by claws and caked with ground-in soil. There were footprints all around the discarded clothing, the grass squashed flat. Huge ones and some much smaller. Boots and running shoes. The latter even smaller than Rafe's own. Ten feet away was the first ravaged sneaker. Another ten feet and Rafe found the second shoe. Then both socks, mere threads of white left. Amidst a half dozen large shod prints, one of the smaller prints was there, perfectly defined, untrampled, pressed into the wet grass. This time the print was of a bare foot.

Rafe knelt, ran fingertips over the print, raised them to his nose. Caleb. His blood turned to ice. Caleb's briefs were a soggy lump a few feet further on, as if tossed aside and trampled on unnoticed, the seams ruptured, torn or sliced off. Rafe could see it in his mind's eye, as it had occurred. Caleb stripped, one item of clothing at a time, ripped from him, thrown aside. No blood...but...Rafe recoiled. Semen, he could smell semen. And it certainly didn't smell like Blue's. Clutching the T-shirt he let his senses draw him along.

Heart hammering in his throat, Rafe paced after the faint trail of ominous scent and the footprints that bore deeply into the soft earth. Big feet, shod in assault boots. Size seventeen at least. There was one group residing on the compound grounds now who were that big. The Guardians.

Bile rose in Rafe's throat, as he realized what the evidence meant. A Guardian had found Caleb in the gardens and stripped him of his clothes. In prelude to what? Rafe tried to focus. His mind kept bringing him back to the the salient fact that Caleb would be helpless against one of them. The looks the Guardians had always shot Rafe's way, hot and interested were impossible to dismiss. He had no reason to trust them to be any less interested or predatory when it came to Caleb simply because the boy was young and innocent. The tracks led directly to the Guardian Barracks. They were precise and unswerving and each step telegraphed to Rafe the impatience and determination of the one who had taken Blue.

Rafe felt a whining terror rise in his throat. "Oh, Blue." What had he let happen? He'd failed to protect his cousin. Failed to keep him safe. Rafe burst up the steps and in through the doors.

Movement came at him from both right and left. He tried to dodge the converging shadows, slipped under one set of grasping arms, feeling the whisper of a blow sailing past, only to feel the greater impact of a body hitting his. He attempted to bounce off and bolt down the corridor, toward the stronger scent of his cousin, but he was caught up in iron hard arms, stopped, held tight, unable to
"Blue!" Rafe shouted, writhing to get a good angle, trying to kick free. "Blue!

Rafe kicked out, harder, swung wildly, helpless. His legs were restrained by a second set of arms, he felt the flex of enormous power against his thighs. He squirmed. Shouted out again. "If you've hurt him...!" He choked on the thought. Couldn't get a threat of sufficient gravity out. He screamed letting rage take over.

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Rathe lay awake in the disordered bed, holding his companion and breathing in his sweet smell. He nuzzled his into the sweat damp neck, feeling Caleb let out a sigh, then stretch his neck. Rathe took advantage of the stretch. He suckled the tender length, lapping at it, biting gently.

Caleb's unique scent drove Rathe to distraction. Stole his discipline away as if he'd never had any. He cupped a big hand around the jut of the young man's hip. Pulling them closer. Caleb let out an exhausted, incredulous moan, his leg rising, lifting to fit around the Guardian's body. He was limp, pliant, tired but so willing. Rathe grinned. Perfect.

A good companion, one he'd searched and waited for. Thought never to find. There had been no few lovers taken to Rathe's bed all in hopes of finding this young man. It explained to him the powerful draw he'd felt towards Ellison's junior Sentinel, Brian Rafe. Rafe shared blood with this delicious one. Rathe buried his sensitive nose in the thick silk of sex-warmed hair behind Caleb's ear and breathed in.

Linens were scattered all over the room, tossed aside in the urgency he'd felt to claim his young Sentinel. Now, with the first claiming done, he was far more contented, at peace. But he wanted Caleb, again. He wanted to mark him, to take him and cover his lithe young body with his own. To make Caleb cry out his name. Blue sighed, let out a quiet giggle as Rathe licked the rim of his ear, tightening the skin all over his body in a rush of gooseflesh. His arms lifted with what little energy remained in his limbs, and wound around the big man's neck.

"Do it again." He suggested, throatily.

Then they heard the call. A strangled shout, sounds of fighting, struggle and the word that really mattered, screamed out. Caleb stiffened, going absolutely still, listening.

"Blue!"

Rathe sat up, no doubt as to who was calling, interfering with his mating. He growled sub-vocally, putting a possessive hand on the center of Caleb's back, securing his companion in place. Caleb let out a grunt as he was pressed down into the mattress and held there. The young Sentinel beside Rathe squirmed and pushing the larger man's hand off his back and sat up in bed. Rathe scowled but made no move to push him back down, though the thought had great appeal.

"Rafe," Caleb said, confused at why his cousin would be within the Guardian's barracks, and calling so urgently for him. "That's Rafe, I have to go to him." Caleb looked around the room frantic for something to put on, hopping up and out of Rathe's reach.

"I am your Senior," Rathe said as the sounds coming from the hallway escalated. Caleb was not going to put on a display for any other eyes. "I will deal with this." He swung himself to his feet, stepping over the tangle on the floor and pulled on his pants after retrieving them from a chair back. From the sounds in the hallway there was no time for shirt or boots.
Rathe was at the door in four long strides, he pulled it open and stepped into the hallway. Behind him he could hear Caleb swearing, then drawers sliding open with a crash as the young man pawed through them. The thought of Caleb trying to wear his clothing brought a rush of amused warmth to the Guardian as he closed the door behind him.

Blue's scent intensified, spine curlingly strong, when a door partway down the hall opened. Rafe stopped struggling with the two Guardians and looked toward the open door, hanging in their grasp. His nose twitched madly, he arched his back to better see who was exiting the room.

"You!" He said, seeing a shirtless, shoeless Rathe emerging. The look on the big man's face was pleased, like a cat got into the cream. Rafe felt rage flood him all over again. "What have you done with my cousin?" He hissed. "Don't lie to me, I know he's here I can smell him. I can smell him ~on~ you."

The man standing nonchalantly alert in the hall was huge, appearing even more massive partially clothed than he did in his impeccable black uniform. Rafe stared. Oh, god, what had he done to Caleb? Blue had stood no chance. None at all.

"Let him go," Rathe said to his men and just that quickly the four arms that were restraining Rafe were gone. Rafe tumbled to the floor, striking the wood on all fours and bounding upright as if on loaded springs. As soon as he was upright he shot towards his target, eyes glowing, claws extended, displaying his fangs, still clutching Caleb's muddied shirt.

"If you've hurt him, so help me…" His voice was throaty, primitive, filled with a fierce power.

Rafe found the situation all together stimulating. Yes, the fire ran hot in the veins of this family, his companion's blood kin. That was a good thing indeed.

"Sentinel, mind what you say to me," Rathe growled. His words slowed the approaching man. Rafe blinked at the tone of command. Every bit as powerful a command as his own Senior could issue. Rafe slowed, padding in an arc in front of the Guardian, instinct for self preservation finally kicking in. Warily the smaller Sentinel looked for a weakness or an opening to exploit. Rathe let him look, he would find none.

"I am a Captain of the Guardians, your words offer me an insult I do not deserve." Rathe said, his tone mild in the circumstances. This was Caleb's kin, he reminded himself. He might be forgiven if he trounced him roundly, but not if he did any serious or permanent harm.

"He's my cousin, an innocent, you have no right to take him." Rafe shouted, his frustration winning free again. "No right to steal his virtue!"

The door behind the captain opened and Caleb stood clothed in a huge, blazingly white, button-down shirt, its buttons hastily and crookedly fastened, so one side hung lower than the other, revealing a slim shoulder. Rathe thought his heart would melt. The hem of the shirt ended irregularly below his slightly knobby knees. It was obvious he wore nothing underneath. Rafe let out a distressed moan.

"Stop it, Rafe," Caleb said, his face flushed pink. "He's done nothing against my will." He drew himself up with all the dignity he could muster. "This is what I want. No one forced me. I swear it."

"I know it was wrong," Rafe growled, his face flushed, his eyes filled with anguish, "Do you know what you've done? You've ruined your chances for a good match. I would have found you the best I could."

Rafe could see it was too late, the passion marks, made by an eager, hungry mouth ringed the
younger man's throat. His lips were swollen from kisses. The scent of sex was heavy. The way Blue stood, moved...Rafe despaired, he had walked that way himself after Jim's very pointed attentions. No longer virgin.

"Ruined...." He said, stricken. "No Alpha will want you."

Rathe roared and slammed Rafe against the wall, a rock hard forearm across his chest; his eyes glowed with fire, his fangs and claws extended, a display even more impressive than Rafe's own. They hissed at each other.

"No Alpha will take what is mine from me!" Rathe growled, his claws drawing deep pricks of blood from the smaller man's neck, pinning him to the wood paneling. "I have Claimed him, he wears my scent and he will wear no other as long as I live."

Blue was suddenly beside them, pulling the clawed hand away from his cousin's neck. "Don't! He is my family! Please, let him go, he only wants what is best for me." Caleb's voice dropped to a shy whisper, his silvery grey eyes shone like polished jewels as they met Rathe's green ones. "He doesn't know how much I want you, too."

Rathe pulled in his claws and let go of his Companion's cousin. He would do much to hear those words again, and over and over. He stroked a hand through the thick wash of tangled hair, pushing it back off Caleb's face. He turned to Rafe, standing up against the wall, staring at his disheveled and tumble-haired cousin.

"You heard." Rathe didn't try to keep the note of pride from his voice. "He is mine by consent. As soon as the hall of records opens our bond will be registered.

"I want a promise from both of you that you will not hurt each other," Caleb said. He sounded stern, as if he dared scold.

Rathe let out a snort. but his hand caressed his Companion, running all the way down the slim back. "He can not hurt me. And I will not hurt him. You are my family, and as such he is family also." Rathe replied, grudgingly, but said in a tone that Caleb believed.

Caleb turned to the quivering form of his cousin. "Rafe? Please don't be mad. You know how it has always been. The chance of me finding an Alpha when...when it makes me sick to be touched by one. I could never go with an Alpha, never be happy with one. I'm sorry I didn't tell you. I didn't want to disappoint anyone. But you were there." He held out his hand entreatingly. "You saw... me and Jim."

Rathe growled a warning as Blue's hand nearly touched the other Sentinel. Caleb withdrew the limb. But his eyes implored Rafe for his understanding. It was too soon in their bonding to allow Caleb the liberty to touch others, even a blood relative. Later. Much later, it would be permitted.

"Go now, attend to your Guide," the Guardian said.

Rafe watched in silence as the Guardian turned, picked up his cousin, who exclaimed in surprise, then melted into the embrace. The thin white shirt molded to his body, stretched taut, outlining his savory rump...Rafe averted his eyes.

Rathe carried Caleb into his room, kicking the door closed behind him. A murmur rippled through the throng of Guardians at Rafe's back. He spun, hands up in case he needed to defend himself, his claws were fully extended and formidable, if only half the length of a Guardian's, they could still do damage. It was not only Rathe who had looked at him with heated eyes. But this time it was a
Jim stood in the doorway of the barracks. He held a wadded mass of soft fabric once very white. Now streaks of green and muddy brown marred the robe. The Guardians stood aside for him, recognizing the heir of Cascade.

"What the hell is going on?" Jim asked, his tone hard.

Rafe hung his head.

"What happened?" Jim asked when Rafe made it to his side. He pushed Rafe out of the building ahead of him, wary, not trusting the unpredictable whims of the Guardians. Any one of the men would take Rafe if he was on offer, unclaimed. Each one would snatch him up if they were able. Jim saw it in their eyes. He hurried to get Rafe to safer territory. Rafe had been very foolish to dare go inside the barracks. These barracks were not Ellison territory now.

"I smell blood," Jim said once they were safely inside Blair's building, "and this is what is left of the robe I asked you to get for Blair. What the hell, Brian?" Jim put his fingers beneath Rafe's chin and lifted his head to examine the claw marks.

"It's all right," Rafe said snapping his chin out of Jim's hand and hanging his head. "I deserved it." And he had. Caleb was....

"For what?" Jim asked, mildly, taking Rafe's chin back into his hand. It would be a true measure of Rafe's upset if he denied the touch a second time. Rafe seemed to gather himself, though and held still for the examination. Jim prodded him. "Should you be punished for dropping a Guide robe?"

"I have failed," Rafe moaned, "My family and Caleb."

"There has been no failure," Jim said, choosing his words carefully.

The Claw marks were not as deep as they easily could have been and none were in lethal areas. Rathe had been careful, it would have been frighteningly easy for the big man to rip out a carotid. And then Brian would be gone. Jim muttered unhappily, burying his nose in the thick hair behind his companion's ear. He inhaled until he felt a measure of calm, reassured Rafe was OK. Then he pulled back.

"I was supposed to find him an Alpha, and now..." Rafe moaned, letting Jim handle him, leaning into the touches.

Jim stared at his Companion is disbelief. Did he not know? Was he that naïve?

"No," Jim said. "Caleb would never have found an Alpha worth his salt. Any Alpha who was strong enough to make a match would have run from him. Caleb is...different. If you had asked before bringing him here, I would have told you."

"My family sent him without telling me until he was on the way," Rafe said. "I thought it best just to keep him away from you. Is that what you mean by different? Because Alphas don't like him?"

Jim smoothed a thumb over the tear tracks running down his companion's face and then he put his thumb in his mouth tasting Rafe, tasting sadness and grief, as if some great tragedy had taken place. He fought not to roll his eyes, this had gone far enough.
"Rafe," Jim snapped. "You are not making any sense blaming yourself. I say again it is not your fault. We have to get Blair to the Guide House; there is no time for this…display, Sentinel. You have done no wrong by your cousin!"

"What? What are you saying?" Rafe was confused. "I was supposed to find him an Alpha, I failed."

"No," Jim said with great patience. "You aren't to blame. It is the best he could hope for. In times past he would have been hunted and killed if he didn't bond to a Guardian very young. The only reason he made it through his studies without being taken down is because I let it be known he became part of the Ellison family. That is probably the only thing that saved him. But if the wrong Alpha had stumbled across him he'd be dead. Only a Guardian can truly protect him."

"What are you saying? Why would anyone want to kill Blue?"

"Think! He is a beta Sentinel who will not bow to an Alpha. Any Alpha. Not even to the heir of Cascade. It was all I could do not to kill him the first time I met him. I let him live for you because he is your blood."

"Jim?" Rafe asked, aghast. His Senior had wanted to kill his cousin? Little Blue? "How could I have been so stupid?" He asked himself. Rumors had always circulated of such things. Hunting parties of Sentinels tracking down….Rafe swallowed hard. "And I let them send him here."

"Hell yes, and good thing you did! Your cousin has been claimed by a Captain of the Guardians, one who will, no doubt be promoted to Admiral one day, if not by my father then by me. I would not call that a failure." Jim ran a hand up the back of Rafe's neck. "You did good, Companion. Bonding with Rathe saved his life."

"You mean it's a good match?" Rafe asked hopefully.

"Very prestigious. The Guardians will not take just any Sentinel for a Companion. He has to have a good heart, be brave, honest, intelligent and loyal. There will be no Guide for Rathe, only Caleb." Jim smiled. "Rathe will tithe your family well. Don't worry." Oh yes, Rathe would heap money and prestige on Rafe's family. Guardians always did. The Rafe/Henny family would be very happy indeed.

"But how would he know about him? Blue just got here yesterday!" Rafe was confused still. Jim ruffled his messy hair. Sniffed him, allowing himself to put his nose back behind Brian's ear, luxuriating in the powerful scent that was there. True, he needed to wash. All the sweat, the smell of distress. It wouldn't do. But over it all was the smell of his Companion. And that was as scent Jim valued.

"We can sense it. His kind." The deep rumble turned both of their heads. Rafe shuddered. He hated how the Guardians could do that. Sneak up on him. And from the expression in Jim's eyes, the Alpha didn't like it either.

Captain Rathe and Caleb stood in the doorway. Caleb was dressed in a Guardian uniform, about half the size of the one Rathe was wearing, and a far better fit that the over sized shirt he'd barely been wearing earlier. He was blushing furiously, but kept his chin up, his eyes challenging.

"I have come to apologize for the injury to your Companion," Rathe continued, his gaze raking slowly over Rafe's throat. Rafe felt his nipples tighten involuntarily, as if the look had been an actual touch. He fought the impulse to step behind Jim for an instant, then he gave in and put his Senior between himself and Rathe, feeling instantly better.
"And I apologize for the rash actions of my companion in approaching you, unannounced." Jim said, relieved that the Captain was not there to issue a challenge. He noted it when Rafe slid in behind him. Good. He wanted no more dramatics. Rafe would stay there. He flicked the command with his fingers, knowing Rafe would see it. And obey it.

"Perhaps it is best that all involved forgive and forget," the Captain said.

Jim offered his hand. "Done," he said. "Welcome to our family. I hope you will allow the family to host a reception for you and your mate."

"An unexpected honor, I accept," Rathe said. It was good to have the support of a mate's kin. "I suggest you get your Guide to the Guide House as soon as possible. The Protectorate has made arrangements to keep the Vet who falsely accused you of Guide abuse…” the Captain's smile was predatory and bristling with teeth as he spoke the next words, "...otherwise occupied. We have seen to it that another qualified Vet will examine your Guide, one sympathetic with the Guide reforms. I will send men with you as further insurance that all will go smoothly. My companion and I will depart now to register our bond. Good day to you all."
"Please don't make me do this.... I can't. I just can't. Please," Blair had asked over and over, each time sounding a little more panicked, more desperate, as Jim layered on the Guide robes.

"Guide. This is what has to be done." The Sentinel's tone was comforting, even if his words were not.

"Not a stranger, not again." Blair said. His fists balled tightly.

Jim clucked his tongue, impatient. They had been over this, too many times. "Blair, there is no way around it." Jim said when Blair turned his deep blue gaze beseechingly up to him, eyes swimming with tears threatening to spill over at any moment. "It will be done with quickly."

Blair could only see and hear his memories of strange men straining into his body, grunting, sweating on him. The mess of ejaculations, unwanted, repellent. "No." He shook his head, trying to deny the memories as much as what Jim proposed. "I can't." Rafe knelt down next to him, took his hand.

"Guide." Jim's voice held an edge of anger. "Your body is in Heat. You are ready to carry children again. It will happen."

It was Rafe who looked up at his Senior. "You can order artificial insemination only," he said. "It needn't be a matter of Blair enduring matings until he conceives. Please, Senior, consider it."

Jim made an indecipherable sound and reached for the last layer of the robe he was putting Blair into. It wasn't the robe he'd first chosen, that one had been specially made for Blair. This one was old. Very old, and steeped in the family traditions of the Ellison Clan. More than a few Guides had worn this robe to ceremonies of significant import. Now Blair would wear it as well. It flared and shimmered around him.

Rafe spoke again, persistent. "I know your feelings about it, but after what Blair has been through at the hands of the pirates it makes sense he would not want to lay with a stranger. He is bound to us."

Rafe rarely talked to his Senior as an equal but the Guide's distress steeled his courage. "Don't punish him this way."

"Punishment? You think of this as punishment?" Jim spun on his heel and asked the one word question through clenched teeth. "The Guide's actions have brought this on. It is not done for punishment, it is done out of necessity. I could have made other arrangements...done this more slowly, but his actions pushed us into a corner, don't the two of you understand that? We stand ready to lose everything we are fighting for. All the reforms. There is no choice."

"There are options available," Rafe insisted, stubborn. "Artificial insemination for example. He will be just as pregnant if you will allow him to have the insemination as if he lays with a stud."

Blair shuddered, leaning in closer to Rafe. Rafe responded as any Sentinel would, murmuring comfort, letting the Guide rest against him.

"It is the use of artificial means that has caused Guides to lose their fertility," Jim argued. "The new laws will overturn those practices. It will no longer be an ~alternative~ soon."

"Yes, castration and hormones that force a Guide into Heat, but this… Think! Can you tolerate seeing a man mate Blair? Can you really say you will not snap the neck of any man who lays with him, the way you snapped the neck of the pirate who was raping him when we found him? You
didn't know him then, he wasn't your Guide then. Now he is. And he is mine," Rafe endured the glare Jim shot his way. "Through you, he is mine." He asserted, again. "How can you think of letting that happen to him again? I can not bear the thought."

Jim gave a low growl at the memory of the filthy storefront and the rapist whose neck he'd broken. His hands flexed. No, he did not wish to see Blair taken, mounted, and mated. Yet...it was the way he had always believed these things should be done. The natural way. No pills, no procedures, no surgeries. Should he change his view now, for the sake of his Guide? Merely because he was a jealous, possessive man? He sighed.

"I'll order it, but if he fails to conceive...There will be no other choice." Jim said at last. "If he does not quicken within the month he will be put to matings." No matter how much he, Rafe, or Blair disliked the idea.

Rafe turned to Blair and licked away his tears. It was all he could expect, and he'd gained it with far less argument than he'd thought it would take. "Shhh, now Guide. It is the best we can do. For you and for us."

Jim observed the cuddling and soothing, feeling a singular thrill to see the wet tongue of his Junior clean away the salt of Blair's tears. It tightened things low in his body that there was no time to indulge. He held the last pieces of the formal robes in his hands waiting to tie them in place. It was time to go. Yet, he stood and waited and watched.

When the last tear had been licked away Jim gently elbowed Rafe aside and lowered the multi layered veil over his Guide's face, letting it fall around Blair's shoulders, he tied it snugly under Blair's chin, meeting his eyes once more. The Senior Sentinel stood, his jaw locked, he was determined not to succumb further to his Guide's distress. Already he had bent his stance. It was enough. Perhaps too much.

He had allowed Rafe to offer their Guide physical comfort, rather than risk any delay in doing what needed to be done. He was heir to the ruler of Cascade. He could not allow his Guide to distract him outside the personal arena. In the realm of politics, or ruling, Blair could not affect his judgement or his decisions. He must remain unclouded and sure. He did not have the luxury of acting on his emotions. He had to be strong and be the ruler who represented the interests of all the Sentinels of Cascade. Or he wouldn't be worthy of the title. There was no more time to dally, Jim lifted his Guide to his feet.

Blair forced himself to calm as he was helped to his feet, the twenty pounds of robe dragging at him. He made a conscious choice, to go into himself, to breathe, just breathe.

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It was a simple matter of placing one foot in front of the other. A step at a time. No more than that. Blair knew he could do it. He concentrated on the act of lifting his left foot off the ground, moving it forward, replacing it on the ground. Then it was time to lift his right foot. Step by step he continued, making his slow way up the stairs leading to the Guide House. There was no one coming out. No one going in, no one but Blair, Rafe, Jim and their Guardians. Two big men, menacing shadows drifting ahead, outlines barely visible through the veil.

Jim was there, a hand on Blair's elbow, guiding him, a necessary thing as Blair in these heavy, traditional robes, liberally embroidered with seed pearls in the shape of the Ellison family crest, was blind as a bat. The robe and the veil were so thickly embellished with the pearls it clicked with every motion, and it was impossible to see through the layers, even if Blair had had his glasses on underneath.
Blair had only to go forward, unseeing, one little step at a time. It hardly mattered if he could see where he was headed. It wasn't necessary to see, he knew where they were going. Sheehan Guide House, the one that served the Royal House of Cascade. The one where the Vet's accusations had brought him to before. Now he was on the way there again. Jim on the one side, Rafe on the other were all the eyes he needed. Ahead of Blair was the deliberate, regular stamp of the Guardians' footfalls, purposely loud, to alert all of their coming. Giving all the others time to get out of the way.

Up the stairs they went, their shoes scuffing on the marble steps, polished to smoothness by generations of men, Sentinels and Guides who had gone this way. There was no grit, only cool, slick stone under Blair feet. Before they'd reached the Guide House, Blair had been carried. Now he had been set on his own two, bare feet, made to walk into the building that held his fate.


There was the briefest of pauses. Blair put all his mind to sensing the floor beneath his feet. Wood, warmer than the stone had been. Just as polished and smooth. Then they were in motion again. One step, one foot in front of the other.

Voices, eddying around him without his comprehension. It gave him time to think. Of love. Of attachment. Funny that. He had endeavored to form an attachment with his Sentinels, and he had. He had hoped for affection, perhaps love. And he had something like it, but he hadn't expected to be the one who loved as well. Not so much. He had sought love as protection, as a shield. And it had not proven effective weaponry. No protection against...this.

Blair felt himself lifted. He drew in a breath, measured, slow, even. Hands guided him to lay back, his robes arranged around him. Unexpectedly his arm was taken, a rubber tourniquet tied tightly around it, he felt the sting of the needle, but only distantly as he prepared to float up and away, away from what was being done to him. What was still to come. The grey fog beckoned with the promise of insulating numbness. Peace. Detachment.

All he had to do was breathe. In and out. In and out. Feel the rush and ebb of air. In and out. Concentrate. Let the feeling take him. Float away....and he wasn't there.

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Jim's sharp vision bisected the entrance to the Guide House. There was no movement, the doors at the top of the stairs were closed. No threat seen, he followed the lead of the Guardians, who had begun to stamp their feet with each step, announcing to all that Guardians that they approached. He kept his own steps quiet, stealthy. If any enemy made it through them, they would face him, and next to him, Rafe, with as little warning as Jim could manage.

They made it up the stairs, to the doors without incident. A fist applied to the wood, two booming knocks, and there was a sound of well oiled bolts sliding. Jim held Blair against his side, snug, tight, as the Guardians stood before them, a wall of living steel between them and the door that opened, Rafe behind, watching the street beyond.

It was deemed safe, Jim extending his hearing, catching the murmur of a voice welcoming them, asking who they were, who they brought with them. It was one of the Guardians, the one who wore the higher rank of the insignia of the S/GP who answered the ritual question.

"We bring to this House, the Heir of Cascade, James Joseph Ellison, who protects the Territory of Cascade. We bring his Sentinel Companion in life, Brian Rafe, who stands by his side and who
bears his shield. We bring the Guide Blair of the House of Ellison, who is ripe and fertile."


Jim felt the current of air shift as the man bowed deeply, opening the door all the way, having moved aside on hearing the dispassionate voice of the Guardian announce who they were. The heavy, deliberate tread of the Guardians sounded again. The door shut behind them, once more the bolts slid, engaging, locking the world away. Locking them in. Jim could feel Blair twitch.

"Please, Senior Sentinel Ellison, follow me." The man walked ahead of them, his hands at his sides, in plain view.

Jim watched him like a hawk. His gaze roamed the halls, sighting on any who were there. Those few who were stopped and stood against the wall, waiting for the troupe to pass. The slap and aural sting of the Guardians steps were loudest of sounds. Rhythmic. Regular. Easy to tune out so Jim might extend his hearing beyond this one hallway.

They turned a corner. Entered a room where a man stood, a Sentinel, wearing the emblem on his crisp, white jacket that announced he was a certified Guide Veterinarian. He waited, making no move. His dark eyes watched as the two huge Guardians were first to come into the room, stationing themselves beside the door. Then came Ellison, and his Guide. Then the Companion. The Vet waited.

Jim assessed the room. Blair left standing between the big men of the S/GP and with Rafe in front of him. Blocking the Vet's vision until his Senior gave approval, if he did. Jim prowled the unfamiliar territory. The man who's office it was waited, hands folded across his belly. Unmoving. Done with the room at last, Jim's tactics changed. Aggressively he advanced on the unknown Sentinel Veterinarian. He bumped into the man, jostling him, threatening him, growling. The man bowed his head. Jim bumped him again, testing. Jim snapped his jaws shut with a loud click, teeth meeting a millimeter distant from the doctor's jugular in a clash. Telegraphing how easily the Heir could rip out his throat. Jim growled.

The Vet moved slowly, not making any movement that might be interpreted as dominant or sudden. He sank to the floor, ending on his knees. Jim crouched, batting at him with hands that showed partially extended claws. The vet submitted further. Flattening himself on the tiles. Triumphant, arrogant, Jim mounted him from behind, establishing his superiority, shoving his erection, apparent even through both sets of their clothes, up hard against the man's buttocks. The Vet stayed as he was held, accepting. It was never easy for an Alpha Sentinel to being in his Guide for breeding. These dominance displays were merely necessary, valuable tools to set the referring Sentinel at ease. When the Sentinel was satisfied that his superior position was recognized, established, he would stand. The Vet waited to feel the weight lift from his back. The lifting of the weight came slowly. Hands that had pushed hard, eased. The intrusive nose of the Alpha shifted back, the teeth at his nape withdrew. The Vet waited. Then he was free to stand. He kept his gaze down as he gained his feet and introduced himself.

The Senior Sentinel of Cascade ignored him, going to his Guide and running examining hands over the robed figure from head to foot. Assuring himself that his Guide had not been harmed in the few minutes he'd been away from his side.

Jim felt the muscles of his face contract. Fought to keep his expression neutral as the technician slipped the needle into Blair's vein. It was well the man, perhaps a vet student, did it gently, because
Jim was itching for a fight. Adrenaline rushed through him at the sight of the sharp point slicing into unguarded flesh. And then the spurt of crimson blood, filling the vacuum tubes, one, two, three.

"Sentinel." An irritant, a buzzing in his head. Jim cocked his head, shaking it. Laser sharp vision focused on the hands that were touching his Guide. Other hands were at his shoulders, trying to get him seated. He smelled Rafe, turned his head, rumbled.

"Sentinel Ellison." More insistent, though no louder.

He frowned, growling low under his breath at the interruption. He could smell Rafe very close arms wrapped around him, accompanied by the scent of upset. He sat then, and turned towards his Junior, momentarily distracted, pushing his nose into Rafe's hair. Clean, fresh, right. His. He inhaled. Petted his Companion, comforted him with a purr.

"Sentinel. Heir Ellison?" More words.

Jim lifted his head from Rafe's throat, letting his steel blue eyes meet those of the Veterinarian who stood before him, head fractionally lowered in the posture of utmost respect. He felt a wave of satisfaction at the submissive posture. Not a challenge. Not trying to take his Guide.

"Drink this." A kindly, patient voice.

A cup pressed into his hand. He sniffed it suspiciously. It tingled though his sinuses, good, pleasant smell. Herbs and earth. Natural. He drank. Held out the cup, made Rafe drink, understanding what the cup was for. It washed over him. Soothing. Calming. Until... Movement at Blair's side. Jim's attention snapped back. He watched with fierce concentration as the technician withdrew the needle that had pierced Jim's Guide's flesh. Carefully, without sudden movements. The man was not unfamiliar with Sentinels under duress, stressed, pushed into acting as feral, territorial creatures. He inched back, stepped back further. Stepped back. And was gone.

Jim let him go, though an unhappy whine was stuck in his throat. The man carried with him something that smelled strongly of Blair. It was instinct that called to Jim to grab it back, to grasp the tubes of blood against his chest, and not let them be taken away. But a half dozen very cautious steps, and the tech and the blood he held was gone.

The other man, the Vet was speaking again. "...not necessary for you to stay...." Then in an aside, a whisper, "Bring another cup."

Jim let out the warning snarl that had been itching to get free. The Vet lowered his head. Everyone froze. Jim vibrated in his chair, Rafe draped bonelessly over his left side, dark amber-brown eyes dopey, huge. He blinked at Jim. Jim stroked his face, then turned and showed his teeth to the Vet, who wisely backed away, bowed.

"As you wish, Sentinel. This is merely an exam of your Guide. To assure he is healthy, and well. I will not hurt him in anyway. May I proceed?" They waited all of them for Jim to consider. Jim examining the man for any sign of deceit, of trickery. Any intention to invade and possess the territory that was most emphatically that of James Joseph Ellison. His lips rippled. Everyone waited.

"Yes." Jim said. "Proceed." His voice wasn't recognizable to him. Thick and harsh, choked with animal distrust, wariness and threat.
Guide Veterinary Specialist Graves hit the front doors of the Sheehan Guide House in a regular fury. He slammed inside not trying to keep the door from impacting loudly against the wall and headed for his office, tearing off his suit jacket and then his tie.

He'd been kept waiting like a schoolboy outside the headmaster's office. Cooling his heels. The wait itself had the feel of a punishment. And that pissed him off royally. He'd done the Sentinel/Guide Protectorate a favor. His actions had saved Guides from undergoing hormone treatments that would retard their fertility. Sentinels around the city should be grateful for his actions. He'd turned in Miller before she could wreak havoc on the future supply of the Guides in Cascade.

But instead of thanks he'd been all but reprimanded and treated like a criminal himself, interrogated, warned off. All of his morning appointments had to be redistributed. No possibility of rescheduling such appointments, not with Alpha Sentinels involved. The reserve Vets had taken the assignments over. It would play havoc with his month's earnings.

The morning had cost him dearly. He finished pulling on his soft cotton shirt, buttoning it with jerky movements, fury interfering with motor control, and closed the door to his closet after retrieving his lab coat. He shrugged into it and strode over to the assignment board.

As he feared, he'd missed two potential breeding cases. He'd lost the possibility of earning a pup from one of them if the Guide was one of the rare few who could give birth to multiples. At the very least a lot of money might have come his way. Damn.

Of course the names of the clients weren't posted. They never were on the display copy. Only on the private ones kept in the book for the eyes of the Vets themselves. He reached for his book, flipping it open and skimming his finger down to the notations he was looking for. Three morning appointments lost.

He gaped, doing a double take. No. It couldn't be. Surely it wasn't possible. But the name didn't change when he blinked and scrubbed his hand over his burning eyes. Looked again. Ellison. He felt his blood begin to boil.

The rage he felt nearly blinded him. He forced himself to take a deep breath, gently closing the book and putting back into place with exaggerated care. He'd waited. He'd schemed. He'd bargained. He'd done scut work. He'd earned the chance at the Ellison Guide. The Guide was his. And he'd been dragged away to sit on a wooden bench at the S/GP instead. Waiting all day, while that idiot, that free thinking shit Ashley got the ticket. The golden egg.

Doctor Graves lifted his hand to his twitching right eye and tried to calm it's involuntary strobing. His pulse pounded in his brain. His blood pressure had to be dangerously high. He flung himself out of the office and strode down the corridor towards the formal Guide examination rooms.
He sniffed the air. He could smell the Guide now that he concentrated. He could smell his skin, and he smelled Ellison and that too pretty, too pushy Companion of his. He headed towards them. His heels rang like gunshots on the tiles, sharp and abrupt. His headache grew worse.

He saw the two giant Guardians outside the room that was his destination and spun on his heel. He'd go in through the Vet's entrance. Surely there wouldn't be a guard in his way there. He ground his teeth, feeling the flawless white veneers on the verge of cracking. No way was he letting this insult pass by. He was going in and he was telling Ashley to get his mitts off this particular Guide. Blair Ellison belonged to him. And he wasn't letting the chance at one of Blair's pups pass him by. The thought of Ashley cashing in where ~he~ was owed was appalling.

He made his way through the back hall and didn't even bother with knocking on the door so great was his anger. He burst into the room seeing the Guide stretched out flat on its back, covered head to foot with a pearl encrusted formal robe, not a single inch of skin showing. But it was Blair. Dr Graves could taste him on the air.

Three heads turned towards him as he entered. Ashely's face was comical, his mouth hanging open, his eyes huge as marbles about to fall out of their sockets. Ellison's eyes were a bit foggy, a greyish, cloudy blue, his companion's were mere slits of brown. Drugged. Graves smirked. Perfect. They'd be open to his suggestions, easy to manipulate. There was no time to waste. Ashely was saying something to him, but he ignored it.

He opened his mouth. "Get out." He hissed at Ashley, the little wimp hadn't even gotten off his knees in front of Ellison. What was he going to do, give the man a blow job?

Dr Wayne Ashley frowned. He looked over at the two Sentinels draped over each other, sedated, resting on the bench in a jumble of arms and legs. The one, the younger of the two, Brian Rafe, Companion to James Ellison, was stirring a bit, the medicinal tea wearing off enough that he was marginally mobile. The other Sentinel, the heir of Cascade, was awake, blinking, a little disoriented but recovering faster for the most part.

The Vet went over the words he needed to say very carefully in his mind. Then he cleared his throat to get their full attention. Rafe muttered something, and burrowed his face into the side of his Senior. The Alpha wasn't so distracted as he patted his companion.

Pale blue eyes snapped instantly over to the Vet who had cleared his throat. The Sentinel then looked at his Guide who was immobile on top of the exam table, once more covered from head to foot with the pearl encrusted robes. Not the smallest patch of skin showed. Even so the dominant Sentinel's expression turned thunderous and he was on his feet. His Companion sagged down on to his side on the bench, landing with a thump, then sat up groggily.

"Senior Sentinel Ellison." Dr Ashley began, keeping his voice low. The tea had an unfortunate tendency to interfere with the control of a Sentinel's senses for a few hours after ingestion. He didn't want to cause the Sentinel pain or make his senses spike and cause a crisis.

Ellison met his eyes, his gaze sharpening, clearing more by the second. Truly an impressive feat for even a pure Alpha, considering the vast quantity of tea he had ingested to help him get through his Guide's examination. "Yes." Ellison said.

Good, the speech centers were back up and functioning. The Vet nodded, taking the opportunity to soothe the other man by bowing his head. He counted to three then lifted his eyes again. The Senior appeared mollified to a degree by the submissive behavior.
"You say that your Guide is in Heat." Ashley began cautiously. "When did his symptoms begin?"

Jim cleared his throat, blinked. He shook his head as if trying to clear it, then suddenly sat back down on the bench, his legs giving out. OK, so not as recovered as it had seemed. Dr Ashely waited, watching as Ellison elbowed his companion. Who rolled onto his back and mewed, then giggled.

"Sentinel Ellison?" Ashley tried again. "How long ago was your Guide in Heat?"

Ellison seemed to hear this question more clearly than he'd heard the last. He turned his cool eyes onto the doctor and stared at him asslessly. Ashely watched as the fuzziness leached away and the sharp Sentinel senses locked onto him. Threat assessed him. He stayed absolutely still.

"Was?" The big man rumbled a moment later. Ashely took a cautious breath. There was a note of retribution in the deep voice.

"Yes, Senior Sentinel Ellison. He is no longer in Heat, I am afraid. There are no remaining signs of it at all. Add to that his uterus has softened just a bit. I am still waiting for his blood tests to come back, but I am most certain he is already pregnant." Ashley delivered the news and immediately lowered his eyes for another long three count.

The Senior Sentinel growled. Ashley felt his hair stand on end. Oh, shit, this had the potential of going very badly indeed. Without raising his gaze at all he hastily abased himself, going down on his knees in front of the seated Sentinel, eyes fixed on the floor. There was silence but for the harsh breath of the agitated Sentinel.

Then the door crashed open behind him and Ashley reflexively swung his head around to see what idiot had such a lack of self preservation that he'd come right into a breeding exam room without asking leave. Ashley stayed on his knees even though he looked around. No way was he drawing attention to himself by getting up off the floor now. Not with Ellison escalating. His eyes popped wide as he saw who it was. Oh, fuck.

It was Graves. The pompous fool who headed the Vets working at this Guide House. A scent that took less than a tenth of a second to decipher cut through the air. Fear, terror. The scent of a Guide in distress. Blair moaned, shifting on the table. The Guide was sensitive. The impact of Graves' enraged mind was no doubt frightening him. God, it was the worst thing that could happen right now.

"Get down." Ashley hissed at his co-worker feeling the adrenaline rip through his own body, just as the man snarled back at him to, "Get out!" And then it was too late. Both Sentinels, the Alpha and his Companion were up and moving through air teeming with the sharp stinging odor of Guide fear. Ashley flattened himself onto the floor face down, ducking his head under both arms.

Ashley felt the rake of extended claws rip along the back of his body, through his clothing, scratching his skin. If he'd remained on his knees no doubt he'd be injured severely right now. Perhaps eviscerated. The contact was brief, gone as the Alpha Sentinel moved on with the speed and intent of a hunting cat.

There was a meaty sound. An impact. A grunting cry of shock and surprise. A rain of warm droplets filling the air pelting down on the bare skin of the doctor's exposed back.

'Well,' he thought. That's done it.
Blue cuddled in against Rathe, molding his body against the big sentinel with a contented sigh. He lapped lazily at the salty trickle of sweat running down one huge bicep. It tasted of his lover, was pure ambrosia on his tongue. "I never thought I could feel this good. I knew I had to find a strong Sentinel, but the stronger they were, the worse I reacted. We went to town once and the Alphas started following me. I was ten years old. We had to run back to the car. We barely got away. I didn't have any control as a kid. I'm a lot better now."

"Safe to let out in public?" Rathe teased and ran his fingers through his mate's hair. He was content to have the small, taut body lying along his own. Sentinel hot. Skin smooth as cream. Scent a fragrant lure. Young but no child. Rathe knew he'd have waited for the boy if he'd been too young. Waited for years if need be. But the timing of their meeting could not have been better. No need for either of them to bite the bullet and suppress the compulsive force that drew them together.

The registration of their bond had gone well. The return to the Ellison compound was accomplished as quickly as possible, the need to be together and alone scorching hotly in both of them. And once back in the compound, safe in the Guardian's House on the Ellison grounds, more bonding with his mate was sweet.

Blue was always saying overtly loving things, unsolicited, whether they were in private or not which only made them all the more wonderful. Rathe put up with the displays with his usual outwardly stoic expression when they were not alone. But each endearment made his heart sing. The young one had no idea how the words seemed to turn his insides to mush. "I never thought I would feel so loved," he told Blue, lifting the young sentinel's chin with his huge hand and planting a kiss on his forehead.

Blue let his neck be stretched out into a delicious curve that begged for Rathe's tongue, and squinted up at his lover, "Why would you feel that way? You're magnificent. You must have had many lovers."

Rathe smiled at his companion, so young and so naive. "It is not easy for a Guardian to find a suitable mate, my love. Lovers are not few, but real mates are. Most, like your cousin Rafe, are taken as companions by Alphas. I contemplated challenging Ellison for him every time we were in proximity. If not for meeting you...who knows what might have happened in the future. Those like you rarely survive to the age of claiming, the Guardians resent that Ellison has taken one who should rightly be ours. But we honor his bond. So far. But if it had been you who was taken, the Alpha who had so presumed would now be dead. When we find those who can be our mates, we bond to them while they are still young, to protect them."

"Protect them from what?" Blue asked, wiggling up to a sitting position. "How young are we talking?"

"Alphas, they would kill a beta like you," Rathe said, gracefully sitting up so he could better hold his mate.

Caleb found his eyes riveted to the muscles that contracted in a perfect six pack across Rathe's belly. His mouth was suddenly dry. He almost missed the next part of his mate's speech.

"A beta that will not bow to them. It is a miracle that you made it through your training."

"They kept me in a private room, an attic," Blue said, in a quiet voice, hanging his head, ashamed.
that he had been isolated. "I didn't sleep in the barracks with the others and I was never in a class with Alphas." He repeated his second question. "How young?"

"Ellison's doing, I've no doubt." Rathe said thoughtfully as he pulled Blue closer to his side. "I owe him. As to how young...if I had seen you when you were ten I would have taken you into my protection. I would have put my scent on you, my mark. NO sentinel, Alpha or not, would have dared harm you, or threaten you."

"Ten?" He seemed suddenly ill at ease. "Ten?" Blue asked again, his eyes rising to meet Rathe's, their depths a haunted grey. Rathe correctly interpreted the look and set about to ease his mate.

"I would not have done ~this~ to you. I wouldn't have taken you as I take you now. No sex between us if you were a child. But safety. Security. Knowing you belonged and that you had us to turn to no matter what you faced. I would have waited for as long as you needed to claim you. Ten years, fifteen. I would never have forced you before you were ready." Rathe stroked Caleb's face. "I wasn't there, and I apologize for it. I owe Ellison a great debt for his protection of you as you grew."

"But why would he do that?" Blue asked, confusion showing on his face. "Why keep me safe? When Jim came to the house I...I tried to attack him. I spat at him and growled, tried to claw him. So why would he bother protecting me?"

"You are family, little one. A cousin to his own mate. His Junior. Ellison is an honorable man." Rathe said with a smile and a kiss. "Failure to protect family would be dishonorable."

"But he could have told the Guardians about me. Then they would have protected me. You would have." It was said with a certainty Rathe found satisfying. His mate knew it was the truth. The Guardians protected their own. Each and every one of the precious few.

"The Ellisons are good men, good rulers. They would not pass off a family obligation. Until a Guardian found you and bonded with you, or you completed your training and a mating was arranged, you and your family were their responsibility." Rathe explained, purring as Caleb relaxed against him, Blue's nose making contact with his neck.

"I didn't know Guardians existed," Blue said, leaning his head on the big man's shoulder. "I never saw one, before you."

"We only work for the protectorate. If there were no Guide houses or protectorate offices near your home you would not have seen us."

"But why only work for the protectorate? You are bigger and stronger than the Alphas, so why don't others hire Guardians? Why Sentinels instead of you?"

"It is what we are and what we choose to do. Someone has to protect the Guides and make sure the laws are obeyed. The Alphas need to know they must answer to the law. We are capable of making them do that." Rathe made a low growling sound. "We have not been happy with the laws as they are written for a long time. But we saw to it every one was enforced to its fullest extent. We protected our mothers as we could."

"I don't understand," Blue said with a shake of his head. "What do you mean it's what you are? Why do all the Guardians choose to do it, only work for the protectorate? Who is your mother?"

"All Guides are our mothers." Rathe said, not expecting Blue to understand it yet. "We are born to do what we do. We are tied to our mothers throughout our entire lives. Every Guide represents the one who gives us life, who gave birth to us. They must be protected."
"Your mothers… But you're a Sentinel…how can a Guide be your mother?"

"When an Alpha Sentinel impregnates his Guide a Guardian can be born. As infants, we look like any other mundane child. We have no value as Guides and the Alphas deny paternity so we are adopted out, to be raised by mundanes. It is not known until puberty that we are Guardian Sentinels. Our adopted families usually assume we are just big mundanes. Normal but for our size."

"How can the Alphas deny their own blood? Do you know who your father is?" Caleb fired the question at his mate, the stress in his voice apparent.

"Yes, I know who was my father. I have known for years though he will not acknowledge me. I have scented him. I have stood next to him and knew." Rathe said. There was no anger left in him. The father's importance was nothing compared to that of the mother. He was a Guardian. It was a truth built deep into his bones.

Blue blinked, sitting up once more and looking down at the man who lay in bed next to him. "You know who he is because you have smelled him? Are you sure?" It sounded far fetched.

"Yes." Was the simple one word answer. Certain.

Blue licked his lips. "Well, OK then. Have you talked to him? Does he know who you are?"

"I've spoken to him. Many times. I have not told him he is my father. There is no point. My mother is my parent and my mother died long ago." Rathe let the mourning fill his voice, a distant loss that still cut him.

"What of the family who raised you? How do you feel about them?" Caleb said, his eyes growing watery. He hated knowing Rathe was hurt. He hated knowing he had no father to turn to, no mother. Hadn't had in a very long time. He wound his arms as far around the huge man as he could, hugged him.

"I am grateful, though when they found out what I was they could not be blamed for being afraid and wanting to get rid of me as quickly as possible." Rathe said, and there was no feeling in the words, they were just words. Blue stared at him. Meeting emerald eyes that were as empty as glass. He shivered.

"The official word handed down to the Alphas is that it is not possible for them to impregnate a Guide. They want it to be true. The Alphas believe it because it is in their best interest to believe that Guides are not human and to keep the Guide population enslaved. They could not justify knowingly enslaving their own blood, their sons and daughters. The Veterinarians who try to tell the truth are taken out of practice. Those who want to keep their work lie or simply do not look for the truth because the Guide trade gives them money and prestige. Those who try to speak up and make life better for the Guides are ridiculed. It is an immoral system."

"Why don't the Guardians just tell the Alphas and the Vets that they are the result of a Guide and Sentinel mating?" Caleb asked. "Why do they let it go on like this?"

Rathe smiled. "We are not scientists, we have no definitive proof, only anecdotal evidence and coincidence. We can tell the Alphas that we can smell our family, but the Alphas believe they are the top of the evolutionary chain, not us. They can not scent their fathers and mothers with surety, only familial ties if they are among the most sensitive, why should they believe we can? If it was widely known, we fear that the vets would slit the throats of the newborns that appear mundane and our race of Guardian Sentinels would come to an end."
"But don't they wonder where you come from? You told me that Guardians don't mate with guides or females, you have to come from somewhere." Caleb argued.

"We are believed to be mutants. It is rare but Guardians are occasionally born to mundanes. We have made an effort to trace our bloodlines but they always end in adoption within three generations, but most of us were adopted, not born and raised by our biological parents. When a guide child appears mundane and is given for adoption the records of parentage are not simply sealed, but destroyed. No mundane would adopt a Guide's child, they would not be considered human. We believe the bloodlines hold true and when mated to each other can produce a Guardian. The means to trace our bloodlines now exist and when the time is right the proof of who we are and where we come from, will be brought to the Alpha rulers. These things are secret, my love. I am showing you great trust by speaking of them with you. You cannot mention what I have told you to anyone, not even your cousin or mother. We move at our own pace. And the first step is not to reveal all about ourselves. The first step is to protect our Mothers."

"I'm glad that you've trusted me, I want to know everything about you," Blue said looking into his lover's eyes. "I won't talk of it, I promise." He frowned, his brow furrowing. "What are you going to do about the Guides?"

A harsh ring shattered the air before he could answer and Rathe growled as he picked up the phone. He was on bonding leave and had left orders not to be disturbed for anything except life or death circumstances. "Captain Rathe, here," he barked, making it clear that he was not happy about being called.

The Guardian on the other end of the phone wasted no time with niceties. "The Vet Graves is dead, killed at the Sheehan Guide house by the Heir Ellison and his companion. An investigation will need to be conducted. Will you conduct it?"

The news was unexpected, but it took only seconds for the Captain to process the information. "I can't head an investigation involving the Ellison's," he answered in a clipped voice. "I'm family now, my bond was registered a few hours ago. I will call the Admiral. Stay at your post and see to it that the scene is undisturbed until a new team arrives to reinforce you."

"Will do, Captain," and the young Guardian hung up the phone.

"What happened?" Blue asked, as his lover dialed the phone. The Guardian held up one finger, indicating that Blue should be quiet, as he spoke into the phone. "Captain Michael Rathe here, I need to talk to the Admiral, it's urgent."

The front doors to the exam room crashed open, one massive Guardian entered warily, hand at his waist resting on the butt of his gun, followed by the second hulking man. The expressions on their faces were intent, their eyes slitted as they took in the carnage. They moved with slow deliberation once they noted the crisis was past. One went to the downed Dr. Ashley, winding a huge fist in the back of his ruined shirt and lifted him bodily to his feet, examining him quickly and finding him in no danger. The Vet let out a very small, distressed noise, swallowed hard and tried not to look in the direction of his former colleague's grisly remains.

"Prepare another room. The Sentinels and their Guide will need to wash somewhere else, away from this contamination." The Guardian, who looked far too young to be this calm, ordered the veterinarian.

Dr. Ashely tried to regroup, his gaze falling against his will on the pile of shredded meat lying near
the back door to the room. He gagged and spun on his heel, putting out a hand and grasping the arm of the Guardian to keep from falling. An arm went around him, holding him upright. He heard a sniff against the top of his head, and picked up the quiet, soothing purr the man let out. Grateful, he rested his head against the massive body.

He heard the second Guardian speaking into his throat microphone, calling to the protectore, asking for reinforcements, detailing the scene. Dr. Ashley dialed his hearing down, then focused, until all he could hear was the deep boom of the young Guardian's pulse thundering in his chest. He wished he could listen to it forever, stay just as they were.

The Guardian Ashely was clutching allowed the other man to rest against him long enough to steady him, then spoke in a implacable if gentle tone. "Quickly. A clean room. The Alpha Senior will want to evacuate his Guide soon." He ordered, holding onto Ashely's arms, looking into his face. His eyes were a dark slate grey tinged with green lights. Ashley stared, captivated, recognizing distantly that he was in shock. "Can you do this?" The Guardian asked.

"Two doors down." The Vet gasped, fingers curling into the uniform sleeves of the big man, not willing to let go yet. "That room is free. Yes. Yes." He wanted out of the room badly. He wanted to run. He took a first shaking step, his grip no looser, wanting selfishly to drag the man with him. Disappointingly the Guardian didn't budge. Instead he reached down and released his sleeves from Wayne Ashley's spasming fingers.

The Guardian nodded encouragingly freeing himself from the hold. "Go to it. Prepare it. Now. Clean yourself. There are scratches on your back." The deep rumble had the physician shivering, nodding and then hurrying out. He couldn't get away fast enough. "There is blood on your clothing." Was the Guardian's parting shot.

Gagging again, skin crawling, Ashely staggered out of the destroyed front doors tearing at his clothing. Stumbling into the hall, he managed to get out of his shirt and tie, throwing them as far from himself as possible. Far down the hall, at a very cautious distance, he saw other Vets and attendants trying to see what had occurred without getting too close. Without a care of being observed, he kicked off his shoes and stripped out of his pants, his underwear was clean, he thanked the gods, and he left them on. Regaining some equilibrium even as he flushed uncomfortably, unused to being nearly naked in front of his co-workers, he made it to the new, unsoiled room two dozen strides down the hall and opened the door.

His first impulse was to grab at the lab coat hanging on the wall hook and wrap it around himself, but he stopped, seeing the condition his hands were in, bloody, with gobbets that didn't bear looking too closely at, though he couldn't let himself consider just how they'd gotten that way. He must have left streaks all over the Guardian's black sleeves. Instead he forced himself to go directly to the sink, he grabbed at the stack of wash cloths there and he pumped a generous quantity of liquid soap on a doubled one. Then he began to scrub. His hands, his face, his neck, and most distressingly, his hair where it was saturated with blood and other things. He scrubbed frantically, trying not to feel the jelly-like bits he encountered during his ablutions.

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Blair was sitting up on the exam table, clawing at the veil that kept him virtually blind. Only he couldn't get his hands free of the voluminous sleeves. Finally he managed to drag the veil from his head and shove it aside. It fell with a heavy plop to the floor. It was covered with blood and gore. He let out a horrified cry that rose higher when he looked down and saw that the front of the heirloom Ellison family robes were no less spattered with red.

Blair ripped at the robes, wanting them off, wanting them out of his sight, far away, anywhere but on
his body. Rafe showed up in front of him, a vision drenched in scarlet. Blair recoiled. Jim was next, even more covered in things Blair didn't want anywhere near him. He cringed, scooting back on the bed to the very edge, too far. He fell backward, right into the arms of the Guardian who had stepped up. The Guardian picked him up, worked him rapidly out of the ruined over robe and whisked him out of the room to the hall, Blair clinging to him like a limpet.

"Go!" The Guardian growled at the onlookers, who, once they saw the bundled Guide unveiled, wearing only under robes who the Guardian carried, vanished like smoke. Even before noting the pursuing Sentinels behind him. Blair had once again started clinging and crying, making choking sounds. The Guardian was only just faster than the pursuing Sentinels behind him.

Jim had Blair barely an instant after his feet touched the tiles in the hallway outside the new room. He lifted him and glanced around, still feral, still bloody. The Guardian calmly pointed to the single open door outside of which the other placid faced Guardian now waited. Jim headed straight for the opening, wanting to get his Guide out the sight of others. The drying blood on his body was beginning to crack and itch and it stank of the man his Guide had despised. Jim wanted it off.
Chapter 28

Rathe took the clean, pale yellow guide robes from the car and handed them to Blue. The young man accepted the bundle, feeling the cool, silky folds slide against the bare skin of his wrists. He was dressed in a formal uniform, jet black with silvered buttons running in two rows up the jacket front framing his chest, down to the snow white gloves on his hands. Only the thin line between glove and sleeve and of course his face, showed skin. If he looked half as good in his own uniform as Rathe did, Caleb was pleased. Because his beloved, his Guardian, was immense, handsome, fierce and intimidating as he stood on the sidewalk in front of the Guide House with Blue at his side.

Caleb looked up into the sculptured, lean face as Rathe put a hand on his shoulder. He met the intent green gaze, serious, oh so very serious this time as they looked into his own. He swallowed. Rathe moved his thumb to caress the side of Blue's neck above the buttoned collar. Caleb felt his knees go weak at the touch. How could he be like this? It was a miracle, this feeling. He'd had no idea. Now the stories, the histories made sense. Now he understood what men were willing to sacrifice for. Now he knew why love and desire were so dangerous, why even strong men were brought to their knees. Rathe didn't smile, but Blue was sure Rathe was able to read every feeling, every emotion that floated across his face. But Rathe said nothing about that, only his eyes showed he was pleased.

"Touch no one, talk and make eye contact with no one," Rathe told his newly claimed consort as he pulled a bulging suit bag from the back seat of the car, draping it over one arm. "I am showing you great trust by bringing you here so early in our bond. Most will think it a sign we are not tightly bound, you and I, and that I am willing to take the chance of losing you, or negotiate a trade. But, I will not give you up. Understand? If you make eye contact with another Guardian he may feel he has your permission to challenge me for your hand, that you are interested in him. And I will have to kill him for it. A brother Guardian." His expression was very serious.

"I won't disappoint you, I'll be careful," Blue said, letting the pride he felt at his mate's trust show in his voice. His eyes were huge. Rathe, he had no doubt would kill to protect and to keep him. Caleb didn't want that, though, he would give no one any chance to think differently. He didn't think it romantic to have others fight over him. He belonged with Captain Michael Rathe. No one else. Ever. He would go to his death touched by only one man, one lover, he swore to himself. He hoped Rathe knew that. He stepped in nearer, looked up into the glittering green eyes.

"Only you." He whispered, swearimg it. "There will only ever be you." Just loud enough for the other man to hear. The hand on his shoulder squeezed him gently, and Rathe let the smile show in his eyes if not on his lips. He nodded, then turned and led the way towards the massive, closed doors of Sheehan House. Guardians stood on the steps in front of the doors looking competent, prepared to be ruthless. Blue lowered his gaze before he and Rathe got close, taking no chance of catching someone's eye.

"Stay one step behind me and to the right as we walk," Rathe ordered as they climbed the stairs to the Guide House door. Blue did so as they mounted the steps, their pace slow and measured, confident. No one tried to keep Rathe from reaching the door. The men watching the House stepped aside smoothly, making way for him and for Blue behind him, then closed ranks around them, close but not touching.

The Guardian Captain's knock was answered quickly by a deep voice that rang through the door's thick wood. "Who requests entrance to this House?" Any one with any sense hearing that tone would be off, down the stairs and away, Blue thought. But he locked his knees and stood fast, his eyes on Rathe's wide back. He looked neither right or left, nor up or down.
"Captain Rathe of the Sentinel/Guide Protectorate with his claimed mate, Caleb," Rathe answered in a deeply resonating voice that penetrated into the House beyond. Caleb shivered. Oh, what that voice did to him!

The door opened immediately. "What is your business, Captain Rathe?" And Caleb was sure he heard curiosity in the question this time. The man, a middle aged sergeant in an impeccable uniform looked out. He did not block the door, but Rathe waited, he didn't try to enter yet. He stood outside and spoke.

"I come as a member of the Ellison clan to act as advocate and to bring a clean robe for Mother Guide Blair Ellison and clean uniforms for the Guide's two Sentinels." Rathe informed the man standing in the doorway. The man nodded to him. But still didn't step aside to give them free entry. He spoke again, looking directly at Rathe, never even glancing Blue's way. But what he said showed he knew Caleb was there, behind the Captain.

"You are newly bonded, Captain Rathe. If you wish I will call another Guardian to bring the clothing to Sentinel Ellison's party." The cautionary tone said it all. Laid out the chances for disaster without saying a word of it.

"That will not be necessary," the Captain said. "I have attended Mother Guide Blair's needs in the past and as an Ellison clan member I wish to do so now." He made no mention of Caleb.

The man he was talking to didn't look over at Blue. Caleb waited. The door opened wider.

"As you wish, Sir." The guard bowed to the Captain as he opened the door for the pair to enter. He wondered if the consort understood the honor that had been bestowed upon him by allowing him to carry the Mother Guide's gown instead of the Sentinel uniforms. He couldn't ask the young man, the bond was too new, and even if he was not looking for a bond of his own, he could feel the tug at his belly when Blue passed him: his body flushed with blood, filled to hardness at the promise held in that scent. Captain Rathe would have noted his reaction in the way his scent changed. The sergeant stepped back further, giving the Captain and his consort a wide path to pass him, so he had no prayer of reaching out towards temptation, finding his own ruin.

"They are in exam room five, Captain," he said as they passed, eyes fixed on the distant wall. He took the opportunity to sniff the consort, an act of appreciation, not a killing offense. The Captain heard the soft sound and gave a warning growl. The Sergeant didn't react, the growl was obligatory, a warning to all who were within hearing that no encroachment would be tolerated. Caleb, true to his word, did not turn his head to look at the guard. The Sergeant approved.

They continued walking down the rank smelling hallway. Blue wrinkled his nose, but he didn't open his mouth to divert the scent, because if he did, he would taste the blood on his tongue, smelling was far better than tasting.

By the odor of blood, vital organs and entrails, Rathe knew the two Sentinels had shredded the vet and that there was likely very little left on his skeleton. A killing offense then. One that had been bad enough to provoke an extreme response, not an accidentally fatal one. Despite the instincts that drove many Alphas, they usually showed admirable restraint in all matters not tied to Guides, yet add a Guide to the mix and all bets were off. And Ellison certainly had a powerful will, if any Alpha could be trusted to control himself in a given situation, Ellison would be that one.

A Guardian was planted in front of the door to room 5. "Captain Rathe," the guard said in a perfectly controlled tone, "I was told you would not preside over the investigation. Captain Howard has arrived and is in room 3 reconstructing the event." The Guardians would not assume the killing was a crime until they understood exactly what happened. Rathe nodded.
"I have not come to investigate, Corporal Jensen," the Captain said, his gaze bisecting the young man's uniform and finding no fault. That pleased him as Jensen was one of his own recruits, one under his own chain of command he had confidence would do well. "Please request that I be allowed entrance." Rathe asked formally, taking care to respect Howard's authority here, and not take the stability of the Sentinels in the room beyond for granted.

The young Guardian knocked at the door, while he triggered his radio. "Captain Howard will be over shortly, he gives his leave for you to enter if the Alphas will permit it." Jensen informed his superior as they waited for the less predictable response from inside the room. Blue was ignored entirely. The young Jensen would never dream of treading on the claimed territory of his superior, he acted as though Caleb wasn't even there.

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Jim and Rafe finished showering off the gloppy remains of their attack on the Vet from themselves and their Guide. Water cascaded off the two men's bodies in sheets as they stepped out onto the absorbent rug, bringing Blair with them. They were alone in the exam room but for the Vet, Dr. Ashley, who was sitting as close to the door as he could get, hunched over, his arms wrapped around himself. He was trying very hard to pretend he was alone.

Blair clung to Jim as Rafe did his best to dry him and wrap him in towels. He kept hiding his face against Jim's body, and Jim had given up trying to do any of the drying himself. He held Blair and stroked his hands up and down the slim back as Rafe gathered up the long, chestnut locks cascading down the Guide's back and squeezed them dry.

Being close to Blair had the predictable result, both Jim and Brian were powerfully aroused as they handled his naked body, their own bodies making an obvious display of it. Blair was oblivious. Sex and mating was the furthest thing from his mind following the day's horrors. He held on for dear life. He could smell the slaughter, even after the long shower. It was embedded in his imagination, though it seemed real enough. Jim was solid in his arms, in an odd way, even after the bloody event that had only recently occurred, he represented safety, the only safety Blair had.

Jim heard the Guardian Captain in the hallway and answered the request in a soothing voice; a voice calculated not to further upset his Guide but that was well within the hearing range of a Guardian Sentinel. The words were soft, but held a core of steel.

"Why do you request entrance, Captain Rathe?" The heir of Cascade asked as he finger combed Blair's wet hair, his sense of hearing dialled in, waiting for Rathe's reply. Brian made haste to wrap another layer of towels around Blair, even if Rathe was a Guardian, even if Dr. Ashley was facing away from the shower enclosure, he and Ellison wanted their Guide covered, protected from unwelcome eyes.

"I come as a member of, and advocate to the Ellison clan," Rathe answered the question with his own even tone, voiced as well not to further alarm either Blair or his Sentinels. Utterly neutral. "I have brought clean robes for Blair and clean uniforms for you and your junior." He put it out there, as if to sweeten the pot.

"I come as a member of, and advocate to the Ellison clan," Rathe answered the question with his own even tone, voiced as well not to further alarm either Blair or his Sentinels. Utterly neutral. "I have brought clean robes for Blair and clean uniforms for you and your junior." He put it out there, as if to sweeten the pot.

Blair's reaction was immediate. "Guardian." He said, and his voice was urgent, he did not want to be naked, or forced to wear towels as his only alternative. He clutched the the terry cloth, holding it closed at his throat. He wanted clothes, even robes would do if he couldn't have jeans and a flannel shirt. He still held on to Jim but his attention was now divided, his gaze zeroed in on the door.

"Please, let him in." Blair said.

Dr. Ashely got stiffly to his feet to do just that. Jim growled. The Doctor froze.
"Let him in." Blair said again. "Guardian, come in." He called out raising his voice, for the first time ignoring Jim's clear disagreement. He wanted clothes. Now.

The door swung open and Rathe stepped in, going no further than far enough to see the Guide and the Sentinels. He moved slowly, not threatening, despite his great size. So relaxed. Jim was up on his feet, Blair put firmly behind him. Even nude the Sentinel was a formidable sight, muscles flexed, posture loose and deadly. Blair reached forward, grasped his wrist, as Rathe came further into the space.

"Why do you enter?" Jim asked. "I have not bid you enter." Unhappy.

"A Guide has called for a Guardian." Rathe said, flatly. "It is not a call I can ignore, no matter what the consequence. I offer you no threat." His hand kept Caleb in the hall, until he could assess the safety of the situation. the Guardian outside had come nearer in case the Captain needed back up.

Ellison stretched his neck relieving some of the tension building there, hearing and feeling the crackle of his vertebrae, trying to lower the urge to do battle, the singing instinct that demanded he fight off this uninvited intruder. Protect the Guide.

Rafe was at his shoulder. Together they formed a wall between Blair and Rathe. Rathe looked at them, waiting, taking in their half aroused state and Blair, shivering and shaky with nerves seated on the bench behind their united front.

Jim sniffed, his eyes narrowing, his fists balled, opened, balled. "You are not alone. Who is with you?" He looked suspiciously at the door, which Rathe was holding open.

"I bring my new mate rather than leave him behind unattended, Sentinel. He is also of your family."

Rathe waited as Jim considered that. The boy, Rafe's cousin, Jim recognized the scent now, and it cleared away some of the fog in his brain. Family scent, his own mate's blood family. It was a good smell, not Alpha, a lesser Sentinel, no threat. Then Ellison shrugged, seeming to come to a decision, the tension left him in a rush.

"Come." Jim said, giving his permission, and turned his back on them deliberately. A sign he accepted Rathe as not being a risk. He turned all his attention back to Blair, stepping up to his Guide and putting searching hands on him. Blair leaned into him again, without hesitation. He remembered the vet saying...he was pregnant, again. Blair let the shock ripple through him, then forced it aside. A pregnant Guide needed support, a way to keep a Sentinel near, for protection. His eyes lifted and met Rathe's green ones, sharing a look of complete understanding with the huge man.

Rathe allowed Caleb to step into the room once Ellison had turned his back and closed the door. But he took the robes from his mate and put them on a bench, not letting Caleb do it. Not letting his mate get nearer to the claws and unpredictability of an Alpha so recently driven to violence as gruesome and bloody as the smells were telling him this attack had been.

It was Rafe who came forward and scooped up the armful of robes, taking them back to Blair just as Jim finished braiding the long dark hair. Almost immediately the unruly locks began working their way free in little curls around Blair's face. Then without hesitation Jim removed the layers of toweling. Caleb fought the desire to look directly at the unclothed Guide. He had never seen one not fully dressed. Not pictures. Not even a sketch. His curiosity almost defeated his will. He moved to block his vision behind Rathe's wide body, let out his indrawn breath. Better. Blair was lovingly, carefully dressed in all three layers with the palest yellow next to his skin, and the deeper shades on the outside, the folds smoothed down, twitched into place. But when Brian moved to place the veil, Blair put up his hand, no longer sitting docilely, letting himself be dressed as his Sentinels wished.
The robes he wanted, the veil he did not.

"No. I cannot see with it on." Blair said. He looked directly into his Sentinel's eyes. "I will not wear it." He added simply. It made no sense to him, to acquiesce to be essentially blinded by the veil. It made no sense at all to have to be led from place to place, all so none could see his face.

Brian looked to his Senior. Jim frowned, but nodded. Rathe defused some of the tension by holding out the suits he had brought, still in the plastic from the Sentinel approved dry cleaners. Rafe lay the veil aside and advanced to accept them, bringing them to Jim's side.

The man standing still as a statue next to the door finally moved, shifting to ease cramped muscles. Jim's head lifted, as did Rafe's, Caleb turned, stepping to the other side of Rathe away from the man, and Rathe put out his arm.

"Doctor." He said, watching how the thin man stiffened, not pleased to be the center of attention.

"Ashley." The man said, his voice a little raw, his throat as dry as a bone. "Wayne Ashley."

"Doctor Ashley." Rathe repeated. "Come closer."

The man obeyed, moving to stand next to Caleb, who took a page from the other Guardians' book and didn't look at him.

"Your assessment of the Guide?" Rathe asked him, his voice normal, as if they spoke alone.

"Pregnant. Traumatized. But otherwise healthy, I haven't seen a Guide this robust in a long while. He needs to be taken to a place of safety, where he feels comfortable. Time will tell, but he may keep the pregnancy if he is not further stressed. Or it may already be too late. Again, time will tell." The monotone delivery made his own stress quite plain. Rathe grunted.

"Should he be under the constant care of a physician?" The Guardian asked, his eyes finding Jim and Rafe adjusting their clothing. Just about done. Handsome, as were many Sentinels, deadly and unstable. Again as were many Alpha Sentinels. Unpredictable. He sighed inwardly. He would have to handle them with kid gloves.

The Vet nodded, his gaze turning professional as he glanced out of the corner of his eye at the shaky figure covered in yellow robes but unveiled. "Yes. I will put together his file and send it with you so his doctor can...."

Rathe shook his head. "His Doctor is no longer attending him. Dr Miller was his doctor." Rathe saw the comprehension flood over the other man's face before he dropped his gaze. "I think it best if you pack a bag and I will send a car for you. In say..." He checked his watch. "One hour? Make your arrangements so you can stay at the Ellison Compound."

The Vet looked as if he couldn't think of anything that appealed to him less but he gave a short sharp nod, keeping his gaze lowered.

"I want to go home." Blair said into the silence that followed, exhaustion filling his words. "I want my babies, I don't want to be here." His hand was resting on his robes over his belly, cupping the tiny lives growing there.
Blair had only one destination in mind when he was set down in the hallway of the main building at the Ellison Compound. The nursery. The tile of the entry way was cool on his bared feet, the light dim and there was no crowd of strangers as there had been when he had been carried out of the Guide House. He felt the fractional release of tension begin along the tight muscles of his shoulders. He shook himself. He left Jim and Brian behind without a word and they watched him take off. The two Sentinels stared after him, shared a look, and then followed his rapidly disappearing back, his robes swirling around his feet and ankles, still without the veil he'd refused back at the Guide House, his long braid hanging down his back, the pink flash of his feet visible under the hem of his robe.

Blair arrived outside the nursery, seeing a man, big and reassuring at the door to the room, wearing body-hugging black with red piping, not a formal uniform, but clearly a Guardian as promised, standing watch over his children. A slight loosening of the knot in his chest made it easier for him to breathe. Another figure stepped out of the nursery room, turned and looked at him, a second Guardian similarly attired. Both stood and watched the Guide coming quickly down the hall.

Blair heard the noise behind him, a pattering of shoes on tile, knowing that he was being followed. He hurried faster. He was not going to be stopped or delayed. His hands moved once more to his belly, touched, held on, fingers clutching. His children came first.

At last he was there, at the nursery, he slipped in between the two big guards without a word and felt them shift, almost closing ranks behind him. If it was any but the Heir of Cascade coming behind him Blair knew they would stop the pursuer. But William or Jim would not be stopped.

Blair slipped into the nursery into the nap time of his babies. It was quiet, peaceful. The clean, welcome scent of his children, of powder and babies was in the air. He made his way to the crib and gazed down at three safe bundles. He lifted the nearest carefully, looked around the room, then got onto his knees. He crawled under the high, sturdy crib and deposited the bundle on the thick carpet there. Then he went back for the second. When all three were under the bed he joined them, tugging blankets and pillows in after him setting up a comfortable sleeping pile. He looked out, seeing a puzzled, inquiring face staring at him. Then another appeared beside it, astonished eyes wide. Blair ignored them. He set about unwrapping the babies, drawing them in close to his body, wanting to feel the heat of their tiny bodies against his own, keeping a wary eye out in case anyone would try to get under the crib and take one of them, or try to join them. He loosened his gown, opening it along the front and for the first time in far too long, put the babe he held to his breast. Drowsily the infant latched on, suckling at the weak flow of milk.

Jimmy and Rafe hurried down the hall after Blair. They kept their pace fast but did not run. The scent of their Guide's fear and apprehension filled the air leaving them in a quandry over what to do. They knew Blair was hurrying to his children, they saw him go through the nursery room door, but when they entered after him he was nowhere to be seen. Only the two big Guardians were visible standing next to the stripped crib. If it hadn't been for the heartbeats Jim could hear he'd have felt panic begin to build, shot back to the weird deja vu of the last time Blair and his infants had vanished. But the room was filled with heartbeats, many more than he could see bodies for.

Jim gave an inquiring look to the Guardians. They gave a slight nod and their gazes shifted to floor beneath the crib. Jim frowned and got down on hands and knees. Rafe walked to the crib and crouched down, looking under he moved a pillow and blanket aside a few inches and saw their Guide clutching his babies to his bare chest. The tiny mouths busy working at his nipples.
Blair saw the blue eyes and the brown, their gazes filled with concern mixed with confusion and curiosity. He clutched his babies closer to him and scooted closer to the wall.

"NO!" he said, his voice as close to a warning growl as a Guide could get and only whisper. "Go away."

Jim gaped. Rafe backed away and sat on the carpet a few feet further back giving Blair the distance he wanted. He kept Blair, and the two Guardians in view but made no attempt to get to his Guide. He considered what to do next.

"Senior Sentinel Ellison, may I speak to you on matters of family?" The deep voice rumbled behind him. Jim stood up and turned, not surprised to see Captain Rathe still in full dress uniform with his young Companion by his side.

"Please do, Michael." Jim kept his voice even by a force of will. He was not pleased his Guide was hiding from him. He wanted to hold him and examine him now that they were in the safety of the Compound. Being unable to do so made him itch all over his body.

The Vet had made it clear that there was a chance Blair would lose the litter he was carrying, and Jim knew that any such event, whether or not Blair had wanted to get pregnant, would be devastating to the Guide. Now that Blair was pregnant, he wanted to stay that way. Such was the psychology of a Guide, Jim was beginning to understand how Blair's mind worked. Very different from his own. And yet not so different after all.

Jim wanted to monitor Blair's health. He was frustrated the new Vet he had selected to care for Blair needed time to gather his supplies and hadn't come with them. Jim himself felt an overwhelming need to touch his Guide despite having only set him down a few minutes past. He never should have set him down, but he had not considered that Blair would dart off to the nursery so quickly. Now he was hiding under the crib and Jim felt anxious. Blair was not letting him touch him, not permitting his Sentinels to touch and map him, an act that was as much to calm Jim as to examine the health of his Guide.

Rafe crouched inside the room as far away from the two Guardians as he could get and still monitor Blair; watching cautiously, very aware that they also watched him. He felt the weight of their eyes, their interest in him. He looked up as Rathe entered and spoke to Jim. He saw a split-second look of surprise pass between the other Guardians when Jim addressed the Captain as Michael, and then it was gone replaced by their usual stoic mien.

Rafe was content to stay where he was, waiting for Blair to come out on his own. It didn't mean he liked Blair being out of reach, but he understood the Guide needed to be away from them, away from Sentinels. To re-connect with his children. He started planning in his mind. Blair would need food, drink. His Guide had not eaten in hours. Had only been given juice laced with drugs to calm him.

Rafe muttered unhappily under his breath. He measured the distance to himself and the Guardians, to Rathe and Caleb. He eyed the door. He could get past them, get what Blair needed and be back in less than ten minutes. He inched towards the door, then hesitated looking at Blair, seeing huge blue eyes watching him intently. He saw Blair licking his dry lips. That was all Rafe needed to goad him into action. He was up, out the door, headed towards the kitchen.

The Captain turned to the two Guardians. "Sentinel Ellison and I must speak in private, please take up your posts outside the door." He said and the men moved to their positions. A Senior Sentinel such as Jim Ellison was not used to being instructed in anything in front of others. Matters to do with Guides were especially sensitive, and Rathe was wise enough to know it. Privacy was most
important. The two Guardians left the nursery and closed the door quietly behind them. Rathe suspected Rafe would return and wouldn't take no for an answer when he did. So he got right to the point.

"Mother Blair is nesting with his babies," Rathe began softly, his voice modulated for an agitated Sentinel's hearing. "He has suffered great stress today, his pregnancy along with the drugs he was given for the exam made him even more empathically sensitive to the incident at the Guide House and to the violence he witnessed. He needs time and the understanding of his Sentinels to recover. In my work I have seen other Guides suffering from post traumatic stress lose their pregnancies because of well meaning Sentinels. Blair is healthy and strong. He may keep this pregnancy, it is my hope that he will. It is because of my experience with Guides and my concern for Blair that I respectfully make the suggestion that you and your Companion rest beside him in this room when you wish to sleep, but don't try to make him come out. Let Blair come to you when he is ready."

Jim cast a glance at the crib, at the edge of yellow robes he could see. The shape of Blair's leg was apparent under the fabric. He itched to go and grasp the leg, to slide his hand up the flesh beneath the robe and bond with his Guide. Yet he knew with certainly that wasn't what Blair wanted. Not yet. He growled in frustration knowing that this Guardian, that he trusted above all other Guardians, was right.

"I know it is a difficult thing, what you do for your Guide..." Rathe began. The deep voice of a Guardian from outside the door interrupted. "You may not enter."

"I have a message for Sentinel Ellison, from his father." It was the voice of Christopher, William's Companion. The Companion held enough position and power that it was on the edge of propriety that he had been stopped from entering. Rathe moved quickly forward to defuse the situation.

Jim didn't know whether to be grateful for the interruption or annoyed. He walked to the nursery room door and opened it beating Rathe by only a few steps. When he spoke his tone was irritated. "My Guide is in distress, Christopher. I need to attend to his needs. Please tell my father I am not available to attend any reform meetings today."

"I think you need to come to this one, Jim. Admiral Bellingham from the Protectorate is here."

Jim turned and looked at Michael. "Do you know what this is about?"

"It is too soon for a decision to have been made about the incident at the guide house," Michael said, seeing the concerned look on Jim's face. "But, yes, I believe I know what it is about."

"Incident? What incident?" Christopher asked, interrupting when Jim was about to demand Rathe tell him what was going on.

Rafe came hurrying down the hallway with a tray heavy with fruit, bread, cheese and juice for Blair. "Let me pass," he said, his voice more commanding than Jim had ever heard before. "My Guide is thirsty and he needs to eat or he will loose the remainder of his milk." The wall of bodies parted and Rafe hurried through.

"Don't go under the crib," Jim commanded as Rafe started to walk toward Blair's nest. "Put the food and drink within his reach. But do not force him to do anything."

"Jim," Rathe said quietly, "Your father should hear about what has happened from you. Your consort can see to Mother Blair's needs while you are gone. Trust his instincts. He is your Companion, he knows what is right."
Jim stood torn between his Guide and his duty. He watched as Rafe gently pushed a glass of watered juice under the crib and began to cut fruit for their Guide with quick, efficient movements. "I'll return as soon as possible, Rafe." Jim said having made his reluctant decision. He would go, tell William he was required elsewhere, and return here as soon as possible. "We will stay in here tonight. Have a mattress and blankets brought." Jim turned to Captain Rathe, "Come with me, Rathe. You deserve to be there when I tell my father you acted on the family's behalf at the Guide House."

Blue was full of pride and curiosity as he walked beside his mate to the Ruler of Cascade's library. Rathe hand rested on his far shoulder holding him in a half embrace, as close as any Guardian would come to a public display of affection and possession.

Blue was full of questions, his mind racing with them, but he made himself keep his peace. There would be time later, in their bed, for all his questions. He was about to meet the most powerful Alpha Sentinel living in Cascade. He wondered how he'd react to the man, considering his history with Alphas. A little stab of anxiety poked at him, he hoped he wouldn't embarrass Rathe.

William was surprised to see the group that entered the library. He had expected only his Companion and his son to return. "Captain Rathe, congratulations are in order I hear. Both on the event of your mating, and on your entrance into our family." He said, his tone slightly less formal than it had been in the past. "I am surprised to see you so soon after bonding, and this must be your mate Caleb."

William looked directly at the young man, who was partly hidden behind the Guardian. The boy's grey eyes were a little surprised when William didn't glance immediately away. William met Caleb's eyes and smiled. A quick-witted one, this young man. A good choice for a match, quite as good as his son's choice of Rafe. William had approved of that selection almost at once after meeting Rafe.

Caleb went very still beside Rathe hoping that the visual inspection would not cause any increase in tension. He did not want Michael, his Guardian, to think he had desired William Ellison's attention. While every other Sentinel in Cascade might look away, William Ellison would not. He ruled here. Even the Guardians acknowledged that. At least that was what Caleb supposed.

Caleb blushed at the intensity of the examination he had been subject to. The gaze as potent as touch. William Ellison made no apology and didn't try to meet the standards other Sentinels were held to. He looked his fill, then nodded as if satisfied with what he'd found.

"Please everyone have a seat," William said, with a wave of his arm.

Rathe bowed his head to William before choosing a small sofa for Blue to sit on, taking his own place next to his mate. It was an honor rarely given by a Guardian to an Alpha, but this Alpha was also head of a family that he now claimed as his own. "I thank you for your welcome Ruler Ellison, this is my bond mate, Caleb; I wish the introduction could have been made under happier circumstances."

"What has happened?" William asked, curious, he was unaware of any unhappy circumstances.

"There has been an incident at the Guide House, father," Jim said, his jaw not softening one iota. His tone was barely more than a semi-civilized snarl. "We can speak of it in private, later. Why have you summoned me?"

William looked surprised and not entirely pleased with the tone. His lips compressed, his eyes meeting those of his defiant son and heir. "I am within my rights to call you here, and I have done so. For whatever reason I chose. Or or no reason at all." He reminded not only his son but every person
in the room.

Jim's eyes narrowed but he made no protest. The statement was true. He was subject to his father's will and whatever formal orders might be issued.

"However," William continued, "you know I am not given to using power like a club, or at a whim. No. The Guardians have requested this meeting, not I. I am aware that with your Guide being in Heat you wish to remain at his side. This is important enough to all of us, as Sentinels, I felt it necessary you be here. I hope our business can be concluded quickly and you can return to Blair." He turned his head in the direction of the older Guardian, a massive man with shoulders like boulders and a craggy, serious face out of which dark eyes blazed with far more animation than the rank and file Guardian ever showed. "Admiral, the floor is yours."

"I've never been one to beat around the bush." The big man said. "The Guardians have come to the conclusion that it is time for change in the Guide Laws and the management of the Guide Houses. We are willing to work with you, Ruler Ellison, to draft and implement the new Laws by mutual agreement. But there are points we can not negotiate on." He glared around the room, and found the eyes of every person in the room fixed on him. As they should be. Satisfied he had their full attention, he dropped his bombshell.

The group sat, stunned after the announcement was concluded. The Admiral's demeanor did not give the impression any of his statement was flexible. It was the way things were going to be. William rubbed his forehead, trying to stop the headache building there. Christopher looked over at him, stood and moved closer and bent down to set his hand on the older man's shoulder asking silent permission to help. William gave a slight shake of his head. Christopher straightened remaining at William's back, but no longer touching him.

Jim was not so lacking in something to say. "My Guide." Jim growled. "Will remain my Guide."

William took a deep breath. "You can see in my son's words and his response to your proposal what the reaction would be to any Guardian interference with an established bond. Multiply that by hundreds just here in Cascade, hundreds of thousands nationwide, there would be war and a near certainty that all possibility of Guide reforms will be shut down. The Guides will be the ones that will suffer if such a war comes to pass."

"These points are not negotiable," the Admiral said firmly.

"Many of the points you mentioned I am willing to concede with no hesitation on my part," William said not willing to give up, raising his hand in a gesture asking the other man to hear him out. "The only sticking points are declaring the Guides human and allowing them to break an established bond. By all means, bring any Sentinels guilty of Guide abuse under the new laws to trial. That will remain one of your duties to our culture and to the Guides. Your kind has always seen to the well being of Guides, I don't dispute that point. I am a practical man. I believe we can declare the Guides sentient and stop the slave trade, that will give them the rights that they deserve. I hope you will believe when I say that I want the Guides declared fully human as soon as possible, but it can not be done now. We must take small steps forward to avoid taking giant steps backward."

William held his breath as the Guardian considered for a long while. Finally, when he was busy trying to think of any other argument that might sway the Admiral from disaster, he was rewarded with a nod.
After hearing about the incident at the Guide House, William sent Jim to check on Blair and change into a full dress uniform. He also gave Captain Rathe and Caleb leave, but instructed all three to be back within the hour. He wanted them on the podium when he made the announcement so there would be no doubt that there was support for the changes he was about to announce. He wanted it perfectly clear that in this matter the Guardians and the Ruling House of Ellison were in lock step. For, while any who objected strenuously to the reforms might move violently against one, they would hesitate to move against both.

The two Senior Sentinels spent the next hour working out the details of the announcement via a news conference. Now that the Admiral realized that Ruler Ellison was as committed to Guide reforms as the Guardians, he became far more amiable and the discussions of how to present the new laws so they would be received with a minimum of negative fallout became a less contentious and stressful undertaking and *almost* enjoyable for William. He liked working with a man who made no bones about his impatience with unnecessary posturing and argument for the sake of hearing oneself talk. Bellingham was refreshingly blunt.

The Admiral was highly intelligent and had knowledge of Guides that could not be found in any book. The vastness and completeness of his information was astounding. Many of his points, like those that Dr. Miller had presented, startled William in their contradiction to accepted canon on the care and feeding of Guides. So much so, that the ruler of Cascade had to remind himself that there was no reason for the Admiral to be pulling his leg or misleading him. They moved on with their discussion, ticking off item after item.

"Well then," William said at last, "I suggest we set up a task force of trusted researchers to prove what you know to be correct. It may be the fastest way we have of getting the Guides declared human. And of course establishing what truly is true. I am loath to take anything on faith any longer. How many years have we believed in the false truths the Vets and tradition have told us?" He cast his eye over to the burly Guardian at the table. "Of course I am referring to my kind, not yours. You seem to have been less easy to mislead. I am disappointed with myself and the Sentinels like me. In the matter of the Guides, our Guides, we have been willing to be blind."

"I wouldn't waste time on it now, there are always things we regret, the best action is to correct what can be corrected as soon as can be done. The Guides have suffered. It is past time to end that. We are of like feeling on that. Great minds think alike, Ruler Ellison," the Admiral said with a broad, rare, smile. "It has been my plan all along to bring all branches of culture and investigation to bear, not merely enact laws. Frivolous laws are ignored. Only Laws based on full disclosure and fact have a chance of being followed."

William nodded his head and raised his glass to the other man. He couldn't agree more. It had taken most of a lifetime to open his eyes. Enlightenment in the form of one Guide, whose brilliant mind had not been possible to deny. The writings and research of Dr. Blair Sandburg had turned him around. He hoped their release into the open light would change more minds than his own, that Blair would have a part in the making of his own miracle.

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Jim, Michael and Caleb left the Library. They walked shoulder to shoulder, an imposing trio to the few people they passed in the hallways, not in part for the serious expressions they all wore.

"Michael," Jim said quietly. "There is something I want to tell you. Something I think you should
know. I wasn't aware that Caleb's family sent him here. Had I known of his arrival, I would have made formal introductions, you were my first choice for a good match, for his future. It was obvious what he was, even as a child. I am very glad that it was you who found him in the garden. I need you to know there was no intention to slight you or to keep Caleb from finding a Guardian mate." His sincerity was irrefutable. Rathe nodded his acceptance.

"Thank you," the large Guardian said. "Caleb explained to me you did not know he was coming, so the lack of a proper introduction, I take no insult from it. However I was not aware that I was your first choice for a match; that means more than I can express in words, to say that I am grateful is woefully inadequate."

They exchanged a long look. Michael again spoke, selecting his words with care. "There has been concern since you chose your own Companion. Rafe could easily have been taken as a mate to one of us. He'd have been happy, well treated. Satisfied. There was worry in the ranks that perhaps the House of Ellison forgot that we must work in harmony to maintain the good of society."

Jim fought to suppress the surge of resentment and defensiveness that rose. Rafe was his. No one had the right to take him while Jim lived. Rathe raised a hand. "Don't misunderstand me. He is pleased to be yours and happy enough. Especially now that he has a Guide to care for, and a Guide's children. Caleb has proved to me that you do not seek to take those who should belong to us. It has calmed many concerns."

"Yes, you are right," Jim said pushing down his emotions. "Brian is happier since we found Blair and the children came. He takes to their care without reservation, as if it is instinct for him." And it was. A Companion's role was to care for the needs of the Senior's Guide every bit as much as the needs of Senior himself. Jim paused in thought for a moment and when he spoke there was no anger in his voice, only a tone of firm conviction. "As for the other, I am Heir to Cascade, I can't afford to settle for anything but the best in a Companion. My Companion must be my strength. I was drawn to him, there was never any doubt in my mind he was meant to be mine." His smile was wry. "If I hadn't claimed Rafe you would not have met Caleb and his family line would remain unknown to the Guardians. I have no regrets, and even now, knowing what I know about his family, I will not give him up."

"I would not ask you to." Rathe said in perfect understanding. He knew what would occur should any other Sentinel appear laying claim to Blue. He bared eager teeth. It would be a short and bloody battle. Jim did not flinch from the display, knowing it was not meant for him. As they came to the garden. Jim went right toward his quarters and the nursery. Rathe and Blue turned left toward the Captain's quarters and the Guardian barracks.

@@@ There is a link between you and Jim, I can feel it," Blue said looking up at his bond mate. "The way you treat each other is…"

"You are perceptive, but now is not the time to talk of it. Say no more," Rathe commanded, his voice modulated so that Blue would obey.

Blue's mouth clamped shut, he blinked wondering how it was that his mate could control him so easily. No one else in his life could do that, not even his mother or his aunt. He swallowed. "I was nervous about meeting Ruler Ellison," he said quietly and looking down watching himself put one foot in front of the other as he walked. "I didn't feel like I wanted to attack him and I didn't feel nauseous when he looked at me."

"Those feeling are less now because of our bond," Michael said. "You are in the place you are meant
"Well," Blue said, the command to remain quiet forgotten. "The feelings are controllable anyway. I
don't want to kill every Alpha I meet but I don't want to bow to them either. But if these Guide
reforms cause a war I will fight beside you."

"There will be no war," the Captain said, his mouth softening into a smile as he looked down on his
fierce and devoted mate. "The Alphas have had months to get used to the idea of Guide reforms. The
information has been carefully leaked, and whatever else they are, Sentinels are curious beings. They
want to learn more. To know. Many of the laws that the Ruler will announce today have already
been proposed and accepted by the Alphas. Ruler Ellison will present the reforms in a way that they
will welcome."

"But sentence," Blue said. "I don't know if they are going to find that acceptable."

"All that they will see is that Guides continue to be available to bond, now they no longer have to
buy them, those Sentinels that could not afford a personal Guide will be able to claim one. The
public houses will no longer be needed and the Guides' lives will improve. Guides long for the bond
and the touch of a Sentinel as much as Sentinels desire the touch of a Guide. The greatest fears of a
Sentinel, their nightmare to end all nightmares, is to be Guideless. To never have one of their own, or
to have one taken from them. Many will work all of their lives to earn enough to buy one. Young,
old, fertile or barren, it doesn't matter. A Sentinel longs for a Guide."

Caleb thought about that. He looked over at his large mate brushing the black coat of his uniform. He
could understand feeling like that. A need that overrode all other things.

Jim went directly to the nursery; he found Rafe busy putting sheets on a mattress that covered the
floor between the crib and the door to the room. Anyone entering the room would have to get past a
mattress full of sleeping Sentinels to reach Blair and the children. Jim heartily approved.

Rafe looked up when he entered. "The babies will need to be changed soon," he said as he stood to
talk to Jim. "I put a tray with supplies next to the crib. I thought that would be best for now." His
unhappiness at not being allowed to help rang clear.

Jim put out a hand and stroked it down his mate's dark hair. His palm cupped the back of Rafe's
warm neck. "Yes, your instincts were right, for now Blair needs to be left to his own devices as
much as possible. We will see he has what he needs and not interfere." Jim said, and then he lowered
his voice so only Rafe could hear. "Michael has had experience with this kind of behavior. He said
that forcing Blair to come out could cause him stress. The litter he carries is Ellison blood. I do not
want to loose my children because I could not be patient." He felt a thrill admitting it out loud. Blair
carried his children. He wanted to shout it from the rooftops so that every Sentinel in Cascade would
know it.

Rafe nodded. "Blair is strong," he whispered. "I think the pregnancy will hold." He couldn't explain
his certainty, but he was sure, so sure that in another eight months there would be a new litter to care
for.

"When the Vet arrives make sure he is housed close-by, he should have some privacy, but be
available in moments if he is needed. A room without access to the outside, and he will be under
watch while he is here, day and night." Jim said. He would not permit another incident like the one
with Dr. Miller. She had gone against his authority, his right and obligation to protect his Guide. Jim
would not let such a thing happen to Blair again. "Watch Blair closely, if there is any sign he may lose the pregnancy get the Vet here immediately." He knew there was not always a way to stop miscarriage, but if there was any chance, he would make sure Blair had the help he required.

"You're not staying?" Rafe asked, leaning into the touch as Jim's hand massaged the back of his neck and his tight shoulders. It felt good, the touch. Jim had been preoccupied of late, not prone to taking the time for other pleasures. Brian had missed it, the touch of his Senior. Jim stepped closer so their bodies touched, pressed firmly against each other. The kiss was gentle. Rafe tilted his head to accept it, feeling the heat of Jim's tongue slip along his lips in a small caress, tasting him. He leaned into the bigger body, letting Jim take this as far as he wanted, transmitting his willingness, his hunger for it. Jim's hand cupped the back of his head, his fingers wide, threaded through the thick silk of his hair. Rafe let out a little moan, too low to be heard out in the corridor where the Guardians waited. But audible to his Senior. Jim smiled against his mouth. One of his hands slid down Rafe's side, came to rest on the curve of his hip. "I am hungry for you." The older Sentinel said.

Rafe moaned again, letting Jim guide him down onto the freshly made bed, their fingers entwined. It was only moments later that Rafe wrapped his bare legs around Jim and gave into what they both needed.

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will go a lifetime without a bond before they would settle for less than someone like you.” Jim looked into his Consort’s dark eyes. He needed to know Rafe understood. Somehow, the events of the day made it important the Rafe knew how much having his consort by his side meant.

Rafe lay quietly looking up at Jim. He felt something inside of him shift, a perception of who he was and what he was. "I used to think that you were the best thing and the worst thing that could ever happen to me," he said with a quiet confidence he never had before. "The best because I was claimed by you, the Heir, and the worst because I could never be good enough, I could never give you what you needed in a Companion. Now I know I am good enough, I've always been good enough. Thank you for choosing me, for choosing my family to be yours."

Jim saw the shift take place within Rafe. He could hear it in his mate's voice and he smiled. He knew by instinct that Rafe would never again hide behind him for protection. From this day on they would stand shoulder-to-shoulder, true partners. He kissed the damp brow of the man whose body he had just claimed, tasting the salt of their exertions. "I have to go now and get ready for the news conference," Jim said. "I'll be back as soon as I can. Watch our Guides, keep them safe." Jim got to his feet. He needed a hot shower before he could get up on stage in front of a thousand rabid reporters sniffing for a story.

The six Sentinels, in their respective full dress uniforms, medals gleaming in the florescent light, were an impressive sight as they made their way to the news conference room in the basement of the main house on the Ellison compound. Those that they passed in the corridor stopped going about their business and pressed their backs against the wall as the group hurried by. A full contingent of Guardians followed in their wake.

William was surprised to see the conference room packed shoulder to shoulder with the top reporters from all the major news networks. The din of voices suddenly became silent when they noticed the impressive group led by the Ruler of Cascade approach the raised stage with Admiral Bellingham of The Sentinel/Guide Protectorate at his side.

"Everything is ready, Sir," a young Sentinel, responsible for setting up the microphones that would enable the Mundanes to hear the announcement as well as the Sentinels could, whispered as he backed away giving the Ruler unhindered access to the podium.

William wasted no time approaching the microphones; he scanned the room, his face stern as he began to talk. His raised hand drew every eye. "I have called the news conference today to make a very important announcement regarding Guide reforms. Effective immediately The Sentinel/Guide Protectorate will have full responsibility and jurisdiction over the running of all government Guide institutions in the territorial kingdom of Cascade. This includes the training facilities, public houses, fertility houses and daycare centers. All staff, including veterinarians, in all public Guide institutions will now be employed by, and answerable to The Protectorate. The incentive program of claiming a Guide infant and finders fees for fertile Guides are revoked immediately."

"Licenses for private facilities will be issued or revoked by the Protectorate. Privately owned facilities will be subject to inspection at the Guardian’s request, without prior notice or search warrant, no report of abuse will be required for inspection. The well being of the Guides are too important to wait on the word of a Judge or for a warrant to be issued. In addition, the slave trade in Guides is outlawed. Effective immediately I am declaring Guides to be sentient, intelligent, beings."

"It is now illegal to whip a Guide. A Guide can no longer be castrated, pierced, tattooed or branded, without the written permission of the Guide and the Protectorate. Insemination or being put to stud..."
will be done only with both a Sentinel and Guide's mutual agreement. If the Guide feels the need, the Protectorate will supply legal counsel and advice in making the decision. All sale of Guides will stop and the Protectorate will share, with the government, the responsibility of tracking down and bringing black marketers of Guides to justice. Any wild Guides living among the general population will no longer be forced into servitude. No established bond will be interfered with unless abuse is proven. All future Sentinel/Guide bonds will be by mutual consent. Sentinels seeking a Guide bond will be introduced to un-bonded Guides through the Guardians as was the custom for thousands of years. The Sentinel/Guide Protectorate recognizes the need that Guides and Sentinels have for each other. The intent of these laws is to bring Guides back to full health and fertility. We are in a crisis situation Ladies and Gentlemen. Difficult times require difficult solutions." He looked around at the stunned crowd. "I am now open to questions from the floor."

It was hard not to smirk at the expressions most of the men and women wore. But as he knew they were a resilient lot, and they recovered quickly and began to call out questions. Once one broke the ice they all shouted. Then the noise died away as they recalled this was a conference of Sentinels. Raised hands waved emphatically. They all knew from experience that yelling for attention would only get them expelled from the room. William nodded at one of reporters he recognized and called him by name. "Robert."

"Thank you, Ruler Ellison," the middle aged Mundane said his pen poised over a notebook ready to write. "You have declared the Guides sentient and intelligent beings, by that do you mean human? " He asked.

"I mean they are not farm animals and should not be treated as such. I have done extensive research and closely observed and spoken with Guides. They are aware of their surroundings, our culture, the past, present and future; last and the most important test of sentience is they are aware of their own mortality. As such they are too intelligent to be treated as property and bartered without consent. Next question," William said pointing to another correspondent.

"When you say the Protectorate will share responsibility for tracking down black marketers, do you mean that Alphas and Guardians will work side by side the next time a sweep is made of the marketing district or that Alphas and Guardians will take turns making sweeps?" The astonishment in the man’s voice was not surprising. Alpha Sentinels were not known for cooperating with any but other Alpha Sentinels.

"There will be at least one Guardian present in every planned sweep we make." William answered. "It has come to my attention that the presence of a Guardian greatly soothes a traumatized Guide. For this reason alone a Guardian should be present." William looked around the room and chose another correspondent. "Chet."

"Ruler Ellison," the well-seasoned Sentinel reporter said bowing his head briefly in respect. "Aren't you spreading the Protectorate a little thin with all of this? The Guardian's are not Vets, wouldn't it be best to leave the Vets in charge of the fertility houses as medical professionals?"

The Admiral looked at William. "Ruler Ellison, may I address this question?" He rumbled, his voice filling the room even without the aid of the microphones.

William stepped back from the microphone lifting his hand in a gesture of invitation.

The Admiral stepped up to the mic. "The Guardians are under utilized. We have no shortage of manpower to implement these changes. As to the question of Veterinarians being left in charge of the insemination clinics…seventy five years ago the responsibility for the clinics was taken away from us, the Guardians, under the pretext that medical specialists would better serve the medical needs of Guides. Since that time the birthrate of Guides has plummeted. Guides are over bred to the point of
becoming infertile, their natural sexuality interfered with by routine castrations. Infants are stillborn or born unable to live more than a few hours due to their mother's poor health. Veterinarians have been aware of this trend for more than twenty years and have hid it from Alphas, using higher and higher doses of fertility drugs and hormones to manipulate the birth rate. Now the Guide population is at crisis level. The Veterinarians can no longer hide behind laws that do not work. Changes must be implemented, or our culture, our way of life will die. I will not stand by and let that happen. I will not stand by and let the extinction of Guides advance on my watch. Ruler Ellison has done extensive research into what is needed to preserve the life we want for our families. The Protectorate stands firmly at his side in support of the proposed Guide reforms."

"Admiral, I have a question for you," a woman reporter burst out before being recognized. "Isn't it true that turning the Guide institutions over to the Protectorate is a bribe from Ruler Ellison to find his son innocent of any wrongdoing in the murder of Dr. Graves at the Guide house today?"

Caleb's muscles tensed as he heard both his mate and the Heir to Cascade give a low growl at the accusation.

"It is not true," the Admiral answered flatly. "These agreements were made before either of us had any knowledge of the incident. It is not the Protectorate's way to leak any information about an ongoing investigation, but this case closed only minutes before coming to this room so I will tell you our findings. Veterinarian Graves was under investigation by the Protectorate for nearly six months. When he could not convince Heir Ellison to sell his Guide to a Guide House where the doctor worked there by allowing the doctor to collect a finder's fee, he made a second attempt to procure a Guide infant by falsely accusing Sentinel Ellison of Guide abuse. During our investigation of the accusations Veterinarian Graves removed the Guide from his room with out permission of Sentinel Ellison or the Protectorate, and took him to an operating room with the intention of performing a castration and administering fertility drugs despite the clear evidence the the Guide was fertile and required no such procedures or drugs. Veterinarian Graves was sanctioned, by the Protectorate, for his behavior. But even that did not stop him. We have now uncovered strong evidence proving that Veterinarian Graves framed Dr. Miller and then accused her of administering contraceptives to Guides. This was done in an attempt to destroy public support for the much needed Guide reforms. It has been reported by a witness to the incident at the Guide house that Veterinarian Graves entered the exam room in an agitated state, without permission, frightening the incubating Guide, and declaring that the Guide was his. This was a direct challenge to the Alpha Sentinel and his Consort who claim the Guide as their own. They were well within their rights as bonded Sentinels to accept the challenge. Veterinarian Graves has proven himself to be without honor and his death was an execution, prompted by his own misguided and illegal challenge, not a murder. In addition the Protectorate will release Dr. Miller from custody and restore her license to practice Guide medicine."

A murmur spread through the group of reporters as the Admiral stepped back.

"Are you proposing that birth control will be permitted to Guides?" Another reporter asked, licking his lips, eager for a controversial scoop beyond the Guide reforms.

"No. Contraceptives will remain illegal. There is no research that backs the need for them at this time." It was a dicey thing, but William and Bellingham had agreed on the point. Promoting contraception at this time would only generate protest and opposition. Later, when the Guide population was stabilized the idea could be presented in a more friendly atmosphere. But the time was not now. A middle-aged reporter, thick around the belly and with a receding hairline, waved in an attempt to get the elder sentinel's attention.

"Harry," William said.
"Ruler Ellison, there has been a lot of talk about the research you have done to support these Guide reforms. Will this research be made public?"

"Yes, Harry." William began. "All the research is currently being printed up and will be made available for distribution within the next month."

Christopher walked up to the Microphone. "Last question," he informed the group. William nodded in the direction of a female reporter whose name he did not know.

"Sharon Summers, World News Today," she said supplying William with her identification. "Regarding your research. I believe that it relies to a great extent on the writings of a Dr. Blair Sandburg, who disappeared, without a trace, approximately two years ago. As you know there is a great deal of interest in talking to Dr. Sandburg. Is there any truth to the rumor that he disappeared because it was discovered that he is a Guide?"

"I have not heard that rumor," William said crisply, hiding his shock at her knowledge of the situation. William stepped back and began to leave the stage.

"Please Ruler Ellison, just a quick follow-up on my question. I have, on my own, tried to locate Dr. Sandburg. I've gone to the college that his writings say he graduated from and there is no record of his ever having attended. All his publications have been removed from public libraries and available only in private collections. There is no birth certificate, no school records anywhere in the country. I did however find a college nurse that claims Dr. Sandburg was on staff there as stated in the jacket of his last book. He came into the clinic and she claims to have reported him as a wild Guide and never saw him again. Would you care to comment on that?"

"Please give that information to my Consort and we will follow up on this rumor. In addition, if it turns out to be true that Dr. Sandburg is a Guide his academic credentials will be fully restored to him under the new laws." William knew his own son would fight him on this, not wanting Blair to be a public figure again. But the Laws had to apply equally or they would not be respected. Jim would have to let Blair be "rediscovered".

Christopher stepped up to the mic. "Thank you for your attendance," he said before turning and following the group off the stage and back to the main living quarters.

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"The Protectorate will track down this rumor," the Admiral said as they walked away from the news conference. "Your Companion can give me the information and we should have an answer for you within days. This may be just what we need to have Guides declared human." The Admiral heard a low growl from Jim and turned to look over his shoulder.

"We will discuss this in private, Admiral," William said, keeping his voice low. The easy friendship that they had established while working out the new laws had disappeared from the Ruler's voice. Admiral Bellingham looked at him, his eyes narrowing. No one had ever accused the Admiral of being slow. It took him five seconds to add up the facts in evidence. Guide Blair and Dr. Blair Sandburg were one and the same. Jim's warning growl along with the Ruler's reaction to the offer to investigate Dr Sandburg's disappearance were all the proof he needed. Dr. Blair Sandburg was not "lost", perhaps he never had been.

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As soon as the door to the library closed the Admiral turned to Jim. "Guide Blair and Dr. Sandburg are one and the same I take it?"
"Yes," was all Jim said, his manner anything but friendly.

Bellingham turned to William. "And you didn't see fit to tell me this?"

"The Guide is mine, not my father's." Jim said letting his anger show. "This information will not be made public."

"As your father just announced," the Admiral said, "Guides are no longer property. This information if vital to Guide reforms and proof that Guides are human. Why should the common Sentinel follow Laws if their Rulers themselves do not?"

Michael stepped forward, "Admiral, Jim is correct in his statement that this information can not be made public at this time. Mother Blair has been traumatized by the events at the Guide house. He is nesting with his triplets and must be allowed time to recover."

"This has nothing to do with treating Blair as property," Jim said, angry at the Admiral's accusation. Blair is pregnant, by my seed, I will not risk losing my children. When the danger to his pregnancy is past I will stand beside you and let you make the announcement, but not one minute before all the danger has passed."

"Pregnant, by you," the Admiral said. He turned to Michael. "Did you know this Captain?" His tone was cool.

"Yes," Rathe said. "I found out when I went to the Guide House to act a family advocate."

"Then you've told them who you are and what you are. That would account for why you are welcomed so warmly into the Ellison clan, even to the point of being invited to stand with family on the podium." the Admiral said. "You know how important this pregnancy is to the Protectorate, yet you failed to report it."

"When has there been time?" Rathe responded, meeting his superior's eyes.

"Wait a minute," Ruler Ellison said looking from the Admiral to Michael and wondering why the conversation had suddenly changed from a discussion of Blair to accusation against the Captain. "Clearly I am missing a piece of vital information here. Who you are is Captain Michael Rathe and what you are is a Guardian."

"He's more than that," Blue interrupted before William could say more.

"Blue," Rathe cautioned him sternly. "It is not your place to speak."

Caleb lowered his head, his jaw out thrust stubbornly. "Then you tell them," Blue said, eyes on the floor. "The Vets aren't in charge of the Guide houses any more. There is no reason for you to fear that they will kill the babies. It is time to let everyone know all the secrets. Secrets are why all of this happened to the Guides. Don't let it happen to the Guardians as well."

Bellingham looked at the small man who vibrated with emotion where he stood next to the Captain. Curious.

"Sit down, all of you!" Ruler Ellison said, his head spinning, his instincts warning him that all of it, all the "secrets" needed to be revealed now. "I want a full report of what is going on. Michael, you start."

"The Guardians have no scientific proof," Michael began looking down at his hands folded neatly in his lap, "but we have known for some time that we are the off-spring of an Alpha and a Guide. We
have the ability to identify, by scent, our mother and our father. My mother was a Guide at a public Guide house. She is now passed away. At birth the Rathe family adopted me. Shortly after I joined the Protectorate I met my Alpha father. I never told him I was his son. I was sure he would deny me. Since my birth he had taken a wife and had a family of his own." Michael looked up his face full of pride. "Since that time I have learned of the strength of the blood I come from and I have learned that my father is an honorable man. I am proud of the Guide blood and the Alpha blood that runs through my veins. I am proud of you, Father. Especially for what you have done this day."

"My son," William gasped, he felt as if he had been punched in the stomach "You're ~my~ son? I didn't know, I swear Michael I didn't know. Are there others, brothers sisters?"

"I have never met any," Michael said. "But they could exist. They could have been adopted out away from Cascade or they could be Guides bonded to a Sentinel."

Christopher walked over to William touching him, giving what comfort he could. "You didn't know. You would have done something if you had known." He soothed. William looked up at his taller Companion.

"I should have listened," William said, a terrible emotional ache filled his body. "Steven tried to tell me and I wouldn't listen. I was an arrogant bastard and I wouldn't listen. What other things have I done that I should be ashamed of? What things besides the way I have treated my Guide? The way I raised my sons? The way I have kept you from all sexual love?"

Christopher colored at the mention of sex, but didn't move away from William. "What we did, we did with the best of intentions." He said.

"But you did listen," The Admiral said, interrupting the tableau between the ruler and his Companion. "You faced your mistakes and you have made changes. Your Guardian son is proud of you and because of you no other Alpha will have to suffer the pain you feel today. Your Alpha son will be able to claim all his children as Ellisons, whether Alpha, Guardian, Guide or Mundane. Yesterday he would have had to give up a Guide child into slavery, today he does not. The Alphas are as much victims of the lies that were told to us as the Guardians and the Guides."

"This explains my feelings about you, Michael," Jim said. "I have always felt you were different. I would watch the Guardians. All were honest, honorable, and more than competent. There was no action, no behavior that separated you from the others, yet I always felt you were different. Do you remember we talked about it, father? We both agreed that when an opening became available Captain Rathe would be promoted to Admiral."

"I remember," William said, nodding abstractedly, his fingers gripping Christopher's tightly. "But now there is something else we need to deal with. Michael is my oldest son and thus he should be Heir to Cascade." There was confusion in his voice.

"No," Captain Rathe said. "When the time comes I will accept a promotion to the Admiralty but I have no desire to rule Cascade, that remains my brother's birthright. I wish only to serve in the Protectorate."
Chapter 31

The moment they were inside the Guardian Building, Rathe swept Blue up in his arms and over his shoulder. Blue couldn't quite hold back his shriek of delighted laughter. Michael responded with his own deep bass rumble and patted the deliciously round buttocks resting temptingly near to his head. He delivered a smacking kiss to the nearest cheek through the covering wool. Rathe was moving quickly down the hall, unimpeded by others, most of whom were in their own rooms or out about their business on the Ellison Compound grounds. He whisked them into their quarters, and swung the giggling Blue to the floor setting him lightly on his feet.

"Undressed, now." He ordered and set about freeing himself from the thick layers of his uniform.

Caleb attacked his own clothes with equal enthusiasm. Sure the suit was gorgeous in its precise tailoring and fit, but no one could deny that as handsome as Rathe was in his suit, he was devastating out of it. Blue didn't plan on wasting any time getting his hands on the other man. Blue took off his uniform jacket shaking out the creases and reaching for a hanger. Rathe's hand caught his when he was attacking the buttons of his shirt, folding around his wrists. He kept his hold until Blue stilled. Then his big hands came up and stopped Blue's fumbling attempts to remove the shirt.

Very slowly Rathe popped the buttons free, taking the time to stroke the flesh that was revealed after each. Blue leaned back, feeling Michael all along his back, the naked, muscular curves, heat seeping into his body, he rolled his head on the broad chest so he could look upwards and make eye contact. His Guardian's eyes burned with emerald fire.

"I don't like having you out in the world so soon." Michael murmured, moving his hand up to grip the back of Caleb's neck in a quick caress. "It makes me crazy to know others are looking at you, sniffing you, tasting your scent on their tongues. They want to eat you alive, but you are mine, aren't you, beautiful one?"

"Yours." Caleb managed to gasp as the pads of skillful fingers next found his nipples, skimming over them, fingertip callouses more stimulating than smooth, pampered skin would have been.

Michael bent down, setting his teeth into the flesh where neck met shoulder, he bit down gently into the tender juncture. Caleb moaned, his head lolling on his neck, putty in his beloved's hands. Then he was suddenly free.

Michael smacked his bottom lightly and turned him towards the bathroom. "Hurry." Caleb was told, and he did.

He fairly leapt into the connecting bathroom and brushed his teeth, washed and dried his face then sprang back out into the bedroom they shared, bare and slippery as a fish as he ran towards the big bed. Rathe was right behind him, gaze roaming over his body in a way that made a heady heat rise to Blue's cheeks. He was caught, held, embraced, tumbled down onto the sheets, rolled until he ended up on top of Rathe where he was held securely.

Michael reached up and ran his fingers through the thick swathe of hair that hung like a dark wing across Caleb's forehead. It slid like threads of silk across his skin, heavy, smooth, sleek. Caleb watched him, grey eyes wide, lips slightly parted, sweetly pink. Michael leaned forward and softly touched his own mouth to Blue's, their lips clinging.

Caleb felt the light touch and opened to it, deepening the kiss, his tongue slipping out to make contact with Rathe's. A rush of feeling, emotions washed over him. Love, possession, need, desire so
strong it scorched his breath away, and peace, utter contentment. Michael's hands cupped his
buttocks, and Caleb let his knees slide down to straddle his lover's hips. He bit his lip, gasped, and
shivered, shimmying his pelvis as the thick, heated length slid, warm and damp between his buttocks.

"What will happen now? To the Guides?" Blue asked when he'd recovered his breath and lay half-
dreaming on top of the bigger man, arms and legs akimbo. Rathe grunted at him, cracking open one
brilliant eye.

"Shouldn't you be sleeping?" He asked. "Or am I losing my touch so soon?" He lamented, teasing.
Caleb blushed. No, Michael was not losing his touch, not one little bit, Blue's head was still spinning,
his heart pounding, and he didn't think he'd be capable of another erection for at least a month,
maybe a year. He giggle-groaned and rubbed his face over Rathe's collarbone. Michael patted his
rump with satisfaction. Caleb fell silent for a few more minutes, then piped up again without
breaking out of his sated sprawl.

"It's just...well the public houses, I mean. The Sentinels expect the Guides to have sex with them,
what will happen to the ones without a Guide when the Guardians close down the public houses?"
Blue murmured almost too relaxed to pose the question, curiosity only just strong enough to prod
him to it. It was Rathe's turn to groan.

"We can not close the Houses. They serve the needs of the Guides and the Sentinels." Rathe said.
"But we can keep them from forcing sexual intercourse. Sentinels need contact with Guides, they
need to fill all their hyperactive senses with them but they do not have to have intercourse. Their
needs and the Guides' need for intimacy and contact can be met with supervised and chaperoned
visits."

"Chaperoned by the Guardians? Sounds a little cold." Blue asked, making a face.

Rathe's thumb was drawing a lazy circle over his lower back down to the crease of his buttocks in a
way that made him shudder most pleasantly.

"Yes, it does sound so." Rathe agreed. "We plan on moving the public Guide Houses to Guardian
compounds where there are gardens for the Sentinels and Guides to walk in. They can enjoy time
together, speak to one another and sit together in the sun or the moonlight. The Sentinels will learn
that Guides are as human as they are, more than just bodies to slake their senses and lust within.
Perhaps they will come to appreciate the deeper bond they have when they don't demand sexual
favors."

"So," Blue said with a lazy, mischievous twinkle in his eye. "We should stop having sex then, to
depthen our bond." He looked up into his mate's narrowed gaze, fluttering his lashes innocently and
was rewarded with a growl.

"Not a chance, My Own," Rathe said, his voice husky and deep, as he captured his mate and rolled
him, squeaking, onto his back.

Blue giggled as his mate's tongue began traveling over his body and his cock got instantly hard. OK,
so maybe it wouldn't take a month to recover after all.

Blue sighed with contentment, his head lay on his lover's shoulder, their second bout of lovemaking
had been slow and sweet and oh so satisfying. But Blue's mind was racing with more questions, this
time personal ones. There would be time enough for sleep later.

"Michael?" He asked as he cuddled against his mate, "Do the Guardians know how Sentinels like me came to exist?"

"We are not sure, there are several theories of evolution each with it's own camp of supporters," Michael said, running his fingers through Blue's thick, silky, hair, contented in their afterglow. "But there is a story, passed down from generation to generation, from Guardian to Guardian. It is told like a fairytale but all such stories have a grain of truth in them."

"Will you tell me the story?" Blue asked, propping himself up on one elbow and looking into Rathe's eyes. "Please," he asked his own eyes pleading with his lover. "I'd like to know."

Rathe pulled his mate to him. "I can not refuse you anything it is in my power to give," he said with a kiss. He stroked Caleb's body as his eyes got a faraway look and when the Guardian spoke his voice was deep and resonant, as if he were a shaman speaking from the ages.

"Millennia ago in a world not so very different from our own there lived an Alpha Sentinel, King Harbin. He was a hard ruler who craved territory in ever more vast ranges, and to that end he loved war. Like his father and his father's father before him he claimed many Guides, until his harem overflowed with nubile flesh. He did not care for their well being or for the sanctity of the bond. He used them for no more than to be the breeders of armies of sons to fight at his side. Many Guardian Sentinels were sent to their death in his family's greed for power and wealth. Many Mother Guides had their throats slit when they could no longer produce children to people his armies. Some were given as gifts to buy ever greater numbers of weapons of war." The neighboring kingdom of Merewood was a beautiful place with thick green forests and a large and lovely blue lake," Michael continued. "The farmland was fertile and King Harbin lusted for it, thinking of how many more soldiers those fields would feed. But King Lotha of Merewood was a strong and kind king who had the support of his people and the other kingdoms around him. So Harbin had to bide his time waiting for his army to grow strong after the many small wars he had sent them to fight decimated their number. Ten years he waited, fathering hundreds of more children, until the year his eldest son, Prince Thane was twenty years old. An Alpha sentinel, Thane was every bit as selfish and cruel as his father wanting to own everything his eyes fell upon. He wanted to rule and bring glory to his name. One moonless night he slipped into his father's sleeping chamber, cut his throat and took the throne. He claimed his father's Guides, ordering the physicians to abort all the children they carried so he could father his own brood on them. While this crime was being done, while the halls of the palace ran red with their blood, he attacked Merewood without warning. He killed King Lotha and took the beautiful Sentinel Princess Cahira for his queen, intending she should bear his own first heir. Cahira wanted nothing to do with Thane's cruel ways. Thane was not a man to take no for an answer so he used his queen like a whore until she was large with child. Cahira's labor was long and hard and she could hear King Thane laughing at her pain. Thane held it was the place of women to bear children, and to suffer for it, his own Queen's pain was no different to him. That night as she held her newborn twins to her breast she cursed the king."

None of my line will a ruler be
And they will bow not to cruelty
My line will stretch on without end
From woman to woman it will wend.
To the Guardians my line will mate
Let this be my children's fate.
The Guardians will caretakers be
And seek to end all cruelty.
I ask this now of day and night
Of powers dark and powers light.
Grant to me this spell I seek
Curse King Thane and make him weak.

"That night the curse came to pass. The Guardians ceased to be a cruel king's army and became the protectors of the Guides. They took the Guides he had stolen from him, and worked long and hard to heal them until they were well enough to be taken in true bonds. King Thane was killed and Queen Cahira ruled in his place until she remarried a widower King who's first born took the throne. True to the curse none of her children ever reigned. They are the Sentinels like you, who bond to Guardians, our reward for serving the Queen and rejecting her cruel husband-king. It is said that even today her curse on the cruelty of King Thane still holds true, passed on from mother to daughter, and that while some of her line will bow to an honorable Alpha none will bow to an Alpha with cruelty in his heart."

"Wow, that's quite a story," Blue said with wonder in his voice. "Thank you for telling me. I think Blair would like to hear the story. Did you know he was an anthropologist before they knew he was a Guide?"

"Yes, I knew. And you are right, he would like to hear our fables some day. Sleep now, My Love," Michael said. "We have had an event filled day and tomorrow I plan to make up for the time we missed being alone together."

"Can I tell him?" Blue asked as he was falling into the soft sleep. "I'd like to tell Blair this story."

"Yes," Rathe said, smiling fondly at the eagerness of his youthful mate. "You can tell him."

William Ellison and Admiral Bellingham sat in comfortable leather chairs sipping brandy and watching the newscaster's spin on the Guide reforms they had just enacted. When the expected phone calls started to come in Christopher volunteered to filter them and let William relax for a bit. It was less than half an hour of amiable company before he returned a neutral expression fixed on his face.

"William," Christopher said quietly when he entered the room. "Ruler Haider is on the phone demanding to talk with you." His face was perfectly bland, and William knew that Richard Haider had no doubt given his Companion a taste of just how unhappy he was.

"Thank you, Christopher. This should be interesting, please stay," William said with a wry smile. "Put him on speaker." Christopher obeyed the instruction, punching the proper buttons then seating himself.

Sentinel Richard Haider was ruler of the largest territory in North America. It bordered the Cascade territory and stretched from Montana down to The Rio Grande. While it contained some large cities much of it was farmland with small populations and some was wide open tracts of nothing but unpeopled desert. As a result the population that he governed was the third smallest of all the North American Territories. Even so he was not without influence.

William put a smile on his face so that he would have a smile in his voice. He knew what was coming and if he were to have any chance of talking Haider down he would need to stay calm and friendly in the face of his opposition.

"Hello, Richard, to what do I owe this call?"
"Have you gone insane, Ellison?" Haider asked, his angry voice booming into the room. "You've declared all your Guides sentient and revoked all the slave laws. Now I have Admiral Vallen from my Protectorate here demanding I do the same. Damn it, Ellison, you should have had a consensus of the territories before you pulled a stunt like this. What the hell am I supposed to do? I can't be seen to go up against the Protectorate, the public won't stand for it."

"It's not a stunt, Richard, I assure you that the Guides are indeed sentient. I could not, in good conscience, allow them to remain enslaved for even one more day. They have suffered long enough. As for the other laws, you knew they were coming, I've kept you and every other ruler in the Americas informed of my research and the changes that would be enacted in Cascade territory."

"In your territory fair enough. But it is bleeding over into mine. And I don't have a choice about that. You should have been more reasonable. Given extra powers to the Guardians, not freed the Guides. For Pete's sake, William. I'm stuck here with my dick in my hand. I've got two brothers-in-law who run Guide Houses. They are Vets and good men. Now I'm supposed to kick them out of the business? My sisters are gonna kill me."

"You have my deepest sympathy. I never said it was going to be easy. My advice is, turn your Guide Houses over to the Guardians, they will manage them much better than the Vets did. We need to bring our Guides back to health and welcome them as equal members of our society if we want our culture to survive. Right now the health and well-being of the Guides are more critical than family businesses. Our culture depends on it."

"It's you who is going to destroy our culture with this well meaning lunacy," Haider growled.

"Sentinels need Guides to survive. Now you've handed them a ticket to just walk away whenever the mood strikes them. They are emotional creatures, they will run and cause all sorts of havoc over ridiculous things. You haven't a clue what you've done to the rest of us. Tell me William, are you and your sons setting your Guides free?" Haider was angry, shouting. William took a breath, determined not to shout back.

"Established bonds are not affected by the Guide reforms. A Guide must show proof of abuse if she or he wants to be freed of an established bond. In the matter of my own Guide, she will have freedom of choice in the clothing she wears, the food she eats and the chance to get an education if she chooses. Jim has already given his Guide unprecedented freedom while in the house, and Steven has always ignored the slave laws."

Haider knew that well enough, having met one of Steven's Guides years ago, that individual was wandering the house, unveiled. The Ruler had nearly had a heart attack after exchanging a polite greeting with the beautiful woman he'd bumped into, kissing her hand gallantly, only to seconds later realize he was addressing and holding the hand of another Sentinel's Guide. Very nearly a killing offense if the Sentinel had been a traditionalist and not the forgiving Steven. Neither William or Richard wanted to discuss that incident, both men had been mortally embarrassed.

"I've seen your Guide, William, are you telling me you're going to let her out of the frame and give her mundane clothing to wear? Parade her in such garb in public where any man's eye can fall on her?" His outrage was not feigned.

Richard was just as traditional as William had been. He'd bred his Guide three times, and one of the Guide children had been kept to bond later with his own son. But William had never seen the Guide, never been close enough to hear or to scent her, let alone touch her, not even veiled and draped. She lived in her own isolated housing on Haider's compound with mundane servants, all elderly women, and had never, aside from breeding days, been in the company of any male other than Haider. She
had been raised at the Ruler's compound on the order of Haider's father to be matched to his Heir.

"It's already been done, Richard." William said firmly. Christopher shifted in his chair, and William frowned at him. Something was not kosher, but he didn't have time to ask his Companion what it was.

"Now I know there is something wrong with you," Haider said. "The William I know…"

"I have seen a better way," William interrupted, keeping his voice strong, certain. "I was wrong about many things. I believed what the Vets told me and many of them were acting out of greed. Change is past due. Trust in your Admiral. He will do what is right by your Guides. Be the leader you were meant to be and end the Guides' suffering. We have all been misled."

The silence stretched.

At last. "Do you really believe turning the care of Guides over to Guardians is the right thing to do, William?" Haider asked in a moderated tone.

"It is the Guardians' birthright," William said. "It never should have been taken from them. For hundreds of years they kept the Sentinels and Guides in perfect balance. I know they can return that balance to us."

"All right, William, I'll do it, I'll follow suit, but I just pray that you are right." Richard said with a resigned voice. "I don't see as I have any choice; the Guardians are prepared to take over the Guide Houses by force if I refuse. On top of everything else I can't afford that kind of unrest. Sentinels will panic. I only pray you know what you are doing and you haven't sounded our death knell. But I'll be god-cursed before I let my own Guide out in public."

There was a crash on the line as Richard Haider slammed the phone down. William reached over to turn off the speaker more slowly. His eyes met Christopher's and he raised one brow.

Christopher lowered his eyes and gave the tiniest shake of his head, eyes flicking infinitesimally in the Admiral's direction. Even so the big man caught the movement and stood.

"My cue to leave. There is much to arrange, I doubt any of us will get much sleep for a time. Congratulations. You have the gratitude of Guides and Guardians everywhere for your work this day." He shook William's hand warmly. He nodded to Christopher and after the slightest hesitation reached out his hand to shake the Companion's. Christopher hid his surprise fairly well as he accepted the shake. Then Bellingham was gone.

"What is it?" William asked, tightly when they were alone.

Christopher looked into his eyes. "Our...." He cleared his throat and tried again. "Our Guide," the blond man paused for a moment as if the words blocked his throat. William understood why, Christopher had never called the Guide anything but William's, never theirs, indeed Christopher had only touched her through her robes perhaps a dozen times, no more. A kind of panic was in his Companion's gaze.

"Go on." William encouraged.

"I discovered her in her rooms with sheets wrapped around her from head to foot. The clothes you bought for her were shoved into the back of her closets. She had tried to use the metal hangers in there to make a frame I think. When she was not able she simply covered herself in the sheets. As many as she could find."
William sat there trying to make sense of what he'd heard.

Jim excused himself as soon as possible from the post-news conference meeting in the library and headed for his quarters leaving the Admiral and his father to talk. He was not in the mood for back-slapping and congratulations on 'a journey embarked' or a 'job well done'. Things were starting that he didn't know how he felt about. As he walked he tore at his tie, feeling a bitter satisfaction as the silk ripped under his fingers.

He did admire his father's resolve and the grim, unswerving determination that had allowed William to push through the changes that he at least was sure were the right direction. Jim, he had his doubts, and they ate at him.

Free Guides? Free to make their own decisions. Free to leave their Sentinels, to contest their selection. All the certainty of a Sentinel's world was teetering on the brink of destruction, hanging by the thread of the new laws. A man who had worked long and hard, who saved and fought for the right to buy a Guide could lose it all now, if a Guide merely said no. As for his own situation, it would only take a petition to the Guardians, and Blair could walk away with his children and Jim couldn't stop him. Was that really progress? Perhaps for the Guides it was, but for the Sentinels who would be left behind? Left wanting, needing, trapped in their crazed senses? What were they to do? All the changes, the "progress" struck fear into Jim Ellison. Every cell of his body wanted to scream and rail against the possibility of Blair choosing to, and being allowed to, leave him. Jim quailed at the thought and then felt the noose of hypocrisy tighten around his neck. All Guides free, sure....all but his own. Two Guardians were still at the door of the nursery. Jim approached, attracting both sets of identical brown eyes.

"Has the Vet arrived?" Jim asked, scenting a faint, new presence on the air, partially familiar, but the chaotic time at the Sheehan Guide House was not clear in his mind, fractured by violence and adrenaline, so he asked to be certain the scent was indeed the one he thought it was. It had better be the one man he'd authorized, no other. He was in no mood to deal with any strangers. And he would not tolerate Blair being put to any risk, not again.

"Yes, Sentinel, he is attending to your father's Guide. He will be staying at the end of this hall when he returns." The closest Guardian said, his brother Guardian, looking so much alike that they had to be brothers in truth, said nothing. They were tall, almost spare young men, with big, bony wrists and hands the size of dinner plates, already showing signs of the muscle they would have in a few years. No doubt they were already strong as hell, but in the future they'd be truly impressive.

"Your Companion is within." Such a soft tenor voice for such a large man, Jim idly wondered if it would change to something more akin to Rathe's deep baritone when the youth aged. Jim knew he was being examined, nothing missed.

"Good. I don't want the Vet left alone with my Guide. See to it he is chaperoned." Jim ordered shortly and turned to walk into the nursery. "Let me know when he returns."

"Understood, Sentinel," came the clipped reply. It held a note of anticipation that Jim was surprised to hear. Until he recalled the way Ashley had smelled. The Heir to Cascade smiled. This Vet Ashley was a potential mate of the Guardian variety. Even otherwise distracted, Ellison had noted the way the Guardians at the Guide House had been so very aware and solicitous of the doctor. A pleasing state of affairs. There was no one safer for Blair. The mate of a Guardian would never offer a Guide harm.

Rafe was lying on the made-up mattress keeping watch over Blair, his concentration so complete he
didn't hear Jim until he'd already entered the room. Startled, Rafe rolled over onto his back when he
saw Jim and began to get up. He was wearing very little, shorts and a crumpled T-shirt. He looked
rumpled and warm. Jim raked him from head to foot with hot, possessive eyes. His Companion. His.
Blair might leave, but Rafe was his. Two quick steps and he was standing over the bed.

Rafe was his. Jim knelt down, the denim of his jeans rough against the skin of Rafe's inner thighs.
Jim grabbed bare arms, hung on, buried his face in Brian's hair and inhaled the scent.

Rafe was surprised, than alarmed. "What? What has happened? Was there a problem...?"

"No, be quiet." Jim whispered, he shook his head, soaking up the sensation of being with the one
who would never leave him. Not while they both lived. "Don't get up," Jim said as he kicked off his
shoes, squirming to loosen his belt without getting back up himself, he shoved his jeans down past
his hips. "I need you." His voice was harsh, grating.

Rafe felt his skin prickle. "Yes, Sentinel." He said, unwittingly striking the perfect note as he lifted
his arms to embrace Jim.

Jim raised the slim thighs up around his hips, the position familiar to both of them. He felt the satin,
firm globes through the brief shorts as he dragged them down just enough to gain access, and his
hips tilted forward, an involuntary reaction that drew a gasp from his Companion's throat. Jim
stopped. He shouldn't want to hurt Rafe. He clenched his hands in the blankets and growled. He bit
at the sheets, hard.

And yet....

The stacked remnants of a meal was near the door. Jim smelled fruit, toast, eggs and even a little
ham. Every morsel was gone; Blair had eaten well. Perhaps he and Rafe had shared a meal?

"Don't worry, he ate it all." Rafe said seeing the question on Jim's face. Then his back arched and he
was beyond speech. His hips moved distractingly in tiny heaves, his body yearning for what Jim's
was almost offering him. Jim caught his chin in one hand, turned Rafe's face to his own, stared down
at him, inhaled the arousal.

And........

Jim smelled the heady scent of mother's milk on the air. Pure milk, without the taint of medicines or
other substances. Involuntarily he licked his lips, longing for a taste, a chance to nurse at his Guide's
tender nipple and breast. The thought made him shiver. He could almost see the soft, dark tip through
Blair's pale yellow robe. The ache of wanting rode him sharply, and he buried his face for long
moments in Rafe's silken hair, moaning into the shredded sheets until he regained control. Using his
body weight to hold Rafe still, in place.

Rafe let out a small sound, trying to shift his position, maybe he was trying to close his legs? Jim
smiled against the curl of his ear, raking his tongue over bared teeth. He licked at the skin there, right
under his mouth, right over the pulsing beat of blood that pounded ever harder against his tongue,
sucked it against his teeth, trembling on the edge.

Another sound caught his ear, Brian, sweet and desperate, crying out, uncertain. It was nothing to
reach down, to move the back of the shorts further down, baring buttocks that Jim palmed in
powerful hands, squeezed, pulled ever so gently, inexorably apart, his nose still against Rafe's
temple, his mouth moving along the whorls of his Companion's ear.

Another milimeter inside, Brian's flesh giving way; Jim pushed, then stopped. Rafe scrabbled at his
back, then his motions slowed, Rafe pushing up without really moving, rubbing their chests together through the worn fabric of Jim's shirt. Intentionally, or.....?

Jim fist'd Rafe's hair. He pushed again, raising his head to look down into melting brown eyes as his body entered Brian's. He heard the gasp, saw it, felt it puff against his face. With the wave of heat that followed, came boiling anger. He wanted to drive himself deep inside without worry or care. He didn't want to ask, he wanted to take.

"Shit." He breathed against Rafe's throat. Madness was singing through his veins, demanding satisfaction. Making him want to hurt. "No." He pulled away, their bodies separating, but he didn't get far. Rafe followed him up.

"Hey," he said. "You are scaring me. What is wrong?" Brian pleaded and Jim paused in the act of getting up and leaving the nursery; he turned, looked at Brian.

"I almost hurt you. I wanted to, I still want to hurt you. And you haven't done a thing to deserve that from me." Jim said. "It's just.... You know I didn't settle when I chose you. You know that, right? I chose you because you were my match."

"I know. You told me." Rafe said, quietly, reassuring.

"I should have told you before now, from the first." Jim shook his head. "Oh, god, now." He threw his hands up.

Brian gaped at him, then flushed, and Jim could see the pleasure in his eyes "Yes?" Brian stammered when his Senior said nothing else, trying to grasp what his Alpha meant. "Now?"

"I...everything is changed....the Guides are free. Do you know what that means?" Jim asked, burying his face in his hands. "Blair is free."

Neither Sentinel expected the voice that came from under the edge of the crib.

"I am free?" Blair asked.
Jim wasn't prepared for the sheer strength of the emotion and physical pain that the question sent crashing into him. Three little words. Blair asking if he was free, unsure, not ready to believe yet, and Jim was crushed, obliterated. His throat ached as if a fist squeezed relentlessly, a deep, aching pain, spreading, burning, choking him.

He tried to answer the Guide, to swallow, to clear his voice. The ache grew, worsened, intensified, seizing him and twisting hard, throttling off all possibility of words. He swallowed again, blinked. Blair was looking at him. He turned his head, Rafe was there. But the vise wouldn't ease, strangling him. Desperate, he looked away, scrubbed his hand across his eyes, marvelling at the wetness he found.

"Please," Jim forced out, the word weak, croaking. He swallowed again, harder. Blair was free. "Please don't." Shaky, he leaned forward resting his weight on trembling arms, rocking.

"Senior?" Rafe sounded worried. Jim shook his head, sat back on his heels running his hand roughly over his scalp, trying to ease the tight band there. Rafe persisted, his voice raised, sharper, more urgent. "Jim?"

"Please." He knew he was begging. "Don't leave, don't go. Don't take them." He moaned into his clenched hands. He couldn't bear it. The pain writhed, tight, tighter. Blair stared at the Sentinel from under the protection of the sturdy crib, mouth dropping open.

"Jim!" Rafe was thoroughly alarmed now, he put his hand on Jim's back, tried to pull him into an embrace. Jim crumpled face down into Rafe's lap, his sob a hot damp patch against Rafe's bare thigh.

The Junior's hand ghosted over the larger man's shoulders uncertainly. "Blair!" Rafe called out, his eyes like saucers, brimming, salty wet, wide and panicked.

Blair, galvanized out of his shock, crawled forward out from under the crib. He moved over to them, to where Rafe held Jim, curled in his lap. He reached out, almost touched the other man, then hesitated, fingers curling back into his palm, withdrawing.

"Help him!" Rafe pleaded.

Blair scooted closer, bringing his body in contact with the man curled on his side. He folded himself around him, arms going hesitantly out to hold him. Feeling the familiar, often frustrating sense of being where he belonged, of being close to his Sentinel. How could he fight this?

Oh, it felt good. Blair felt it, the rightness, the contentment, he crooned into Jim's ear, low, whispered words of comfort, holding gently but fiercely onto his Sentinel. Jim lay there in their arms, limp, sobbing, Blair and Rafe stroking him.

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bristling with unease. Something was off, strange. There was no bustling activity, no excitement, no sign of business being conducted. It was too quiet. It made him nervous, and Andy was feeling the same, his defensive, aggressive stance making that obvious, his fists clenching and releasing in a steady, repeating rhythm.

"Welcome home, Stephen." The voice startled him, a deep rumble coming from his left. He spun, truly surprised he had not heard the huge man's approach, nor had Andy. Andy who was now whirling and advancing, broad shoulders dangerously hunched, even in the face of the size of his erstwhile opponent. Stephen put out his arm to stop his Junior.

"I am Michael Rathe." The big one announced. A much smaller Sentinel came from behind him, stepping up, but not far enough to be in Stephen's reach, he had been completely hidden behind the larger man. His hair was still damp, and curled a bit at the ends. "This is my Mate, Caleb."

The way it was said left no doubt as to the nature of the relationship. It was the way Stephen felt about his own Guide and Junior. So, the big intimidating man was human after all. Stephen felt himself relax.

Andy sniffed, not altogether discreetly, he was annoyed to have been caught by surprise. His attention zeroed in on the smaller of the two strangers. "You smell like Brian Rafe." He said in a tone that was more accusation than question.

Stephen put his hand out, knotting it in the leather jacket and pulled Andy to him, feeling Dahl move up to cuddle against their backs, all sinuous grace and softness.

"Caleb is Rafe's cousin." The deep voice informed them.

Stephen computed that for a time, then smiled. "So, that makes you family." He stated, then to Andy's upset, he extended his hand out towards the Guardian. "Good to meet you."

"And we are also pleased to meet you." Rathe said, taking the offered hand to shake it. Caleb moved forward a bit, but not enough to make contact. He nodded, smiling shyly, barely meeting Stephen's eyes before dropping his gaze to the floor. He didn't even attempt to look at Andy, only Stephen.

"What is wrong with him?" Andy half, growled. "Is he always this fucking impolite? Won't even look a fella in the eye?"

Michael felt his hackles raise instantly. He kept his voice calm. "He is the soul of discretion and proper behavior. His one goal is to keep me from having to challenge and kill you." He said it in such a bland and matter of fact way that it took several moments for the meaning to sink in. Then Andy blinked, jaw clenched tensely shut.

"Newly mated?" Stephen asked almost at the same time, feeling sympathy, it was hard to let a new mate back into public. He couldn't miss the very satisfied look on the big Guardian's face. He made sure to keep a tight hold on Andy's jacket as his Companion fumed with outrage, tempered for once by a healthy dose of caution. It had finally sunk into his brain the man he was facing off with was both huge and strong. A trained warrior. Dangerous, far more so than any average Sentinel. Even an Alpha.

"Yes." Michael Rathe confirmed, and the pride in his voice was limitless.

"Congratulations." Stephen said, sincerely. "This is my Guide, Dahl, and my Junior, Andy." He shook Andy once, chidingly, retaining his hold even as the Junior relaxed a fraction as he always did when he was the center of attention.
Rathe nodded to the one and extended a massive hand to the other. Andy glared at him and at his hand. Stephen shook him again. Andy half-pouted, then allowed his hand to be grasped, rather more gently than he'd feared. They shook hands.

Before more could pass between them, a door opened, shut, and footsteps were heard coming down the hall. William Ellison appeared impeccably groomed but face slightly flushed. So slightly most would not have noticed, but Stephen noticed. He frowned.

"It is good to have you home." William said as he came across the floor, his tone warm and welcoming. "All of you." Behind him the door opened again, and Christopher stepped out, also buttoned up to his throat. But his hair... it wasn't the perfect, shining cap of gold Stephen expected, he had never seen Christopher looking mussed. Bemusedly, Stephen watched him smoothing it down. And suddenly everything clicked. He looked at his father's puffy lips. And over at Christopher as the tall man approached, adjusting his tie.

Steven sniffed, dialing up scent. Oh. My. God. "Dad?" He asked, his world tilting ever so slightly on it's axis.

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From the look his younger son had had on his face in the great hall, William knew Stephen had figured out at least one of the changes that had happened since he'd been gone. The unguarded words only emphasized it; the rising, incredulous tone. William fought to keep from blushing, he was an adult, he could do this if he chose. It wasn't wrong. William had not known if he could take Christopher as his lover, but he was certain he owed it to the other man to try. They hadn't gotten far. To the point of kissing, a discreet fumbling, that was all, and Christopher so beautifully, endearingly awkward at those simple acts. Time. It would take time. He would not rush. He loved Christopher, for all that they had never been lovers before, and technically were not yet.

Stephen's reaction had given him considerable pause. His son was shocked by the change in the relationship, though he fought not to show it. Apparently the idea of his father having any sexual, romantic or physical intimacy with the very masculine Christopher was unexpected. Disorienting.

"Stephen," William said giving himself an inner shake to regain his mental footing. "This is Captain Michael Rathe and his mate Caleb. Michael, this is my youngest son, Stephen." Though he wondered now if it were true. Did he have other children somewhere? A daughter? Would he ever know?

"Yes, father, we've introduced ourselves, a cousin by marriage, so to speak." Stephen was not reacting warmly, William had hoped he would be pleased. Instead, he seemed distracted, almost defiant, as if something weighed heavily on his mind. His next words, tainted with suspicion only confirmed it. "What's going on, father? The house is far too quiet. I've never known you to be even a minute late for breakfast before."

William resisted the urge to glance guiltily at Christopher who had walked over to the buffet table and was filling a plate. Stolen kisses, sweet and romantic did take time. His Companion's ears seemed unusually pink. William pursed his lips.

Jim walked quietly into the room bringing with him an air of sullen preoccupation, saving his father from having to find a diplomatic way to tell Stephen to mind his own business. Stephen turned and looked at his brother, as if Jim might give him answers to his questions.

"And Jim late, also," the younger brother said as Andy turned to look. "Apparently family breakfasts are not what they used to be." Jim, when in residence had never once been late to the breakfast table
without a damn good reason. Like armed robbery, or a murder case taking up his time.

"Please come and sit down," William said letting his voice make the invitation into an order, raising his arm to usher the small group to the table. "I have an announcement to make and I think it would be best if you are sitting down to hear it, son." Stephen walked reluctantly even further into the twilight zone, trailed by Dahl and an unhappy, restless Andy who was still watching Rathe with narrowed eyes.

"So, father, does that mean I'm the last to know or that you consider me unlikely to take this news and remain standing on my feet?" Being the baby in the family had it's disadvantages. Jim and William had always felt the need to protect him if they could. And he'd never felt they took him or his views seriously, unless it was to let him know that he was embarrassing the family. He hoped all that was changing, but it was hard to believe it was after all the years of disagreement.

"Please, let's not get into trading verbal blows," William said, holding the chair for Dahl before either of the young Guide's Sentinels could. Andy looked offended, then jealous. "Jim just happened to be in the room when I received this information. Please sit down here next to Christopher. Michael and Caleb, please sit on the other side of the table next to Jim. And Michael, I want to thank you for coming. I know once again I have disturbed your bond leave. Help yourself, there is coffee, regular tea, and herbal, as well as juice or water."

"I am honored to be invited," the big Guardian said, with a bow of his head.

The whole scene was surreal to Stephen. Jim was attending breakfast without Rafe or Blair and his eyes were puffy and a bit red, his jaw would have done Mount Rushmore proud, jutting like a slab of granite. Not to mention, father had invited a cousin, by marriage no less, to a family breakfast.

Breakfast had always been sacrosanct to the Ellison household, immediate family only, Jim, Stephen and William, sometimes Christopher. It was viewed as a time to discuss the issues that would be addressed that working day.

Lunch was for extended family, often a much-needed casual break in the middle of the day, a chance to exhale and catch a second breath. Supper was for formal meetings and guests, a chance for the "good old boys" to exchange ideas and gain support. There was something very weird going on and Stephen doubted it was just the change in Guide laws.

William poured the herbal tea, passing a filled cup to Dahl. He slid the decanters of coffee and other drinks around the table. "Well I suppose I should get to it and say my piece," William said, looking directly at Stephen. "Before marrying your mother and claiming a Guide of my own I, like other Sentinels, frequented a public Guide house. I found out yesterday that I, unknowingly, impregnated a Guide; Michael's Mother. Michael Rathe is my son."

Stephen looked at Rathe and then at Jim. Jim wasn't reacting, so obviously he'd heard this news before. "Oh," he said. And then it clicked. "Older than Jim," he whispered and then looked his father in the eyes.

"Shit, father," he said with a sardonic laugh, "This is quite a bed you've made for yourself. A Guardian, Heir to Cascade, I doubt if the other territories will attack us, but we're going to be ostracized if you make him your heir. You know me, I like stirring things up, but I don't think this is a good idea. No offense, Michael," he said turning his head toward the big man. "It's not you, it's just that Alpha Rulers have a weird sense of propriety. They are going to be even less happy knowing that you are next in line for Cascade's throne than they are with the Guide Laws dad just passed."

"I have declined the honor of becoming Ruler of Cascade," Michael said, without any apparent
emotion or disappointment. "I have never been interested in governing Sentinels."

"Well, that just drives the whole issue underground, puts it off for the next time," Stephen said with a sip of his tea. "There are factions that will try to use this against the family. They'll want to weaken our resolve for the new laws. They'll do everything they can to get you removed from power, father."

"I have weathered that kind of storm before," William said letting his strength of character show through. "What I will not do is deny my son because he is a Guardian!"

"Nor I, mine," Stephen said. William heard the change in the other's voice and glanced up at him sharply. Jim was also staring at him from across the table, breakfast barely touched, really paying attention for the first time since he'd entered the room.

"You have a son?" William asked. Christopher refilled his coffee cup.

"My first Guide gave birth in Europe three years ago," the defiance was even more pronounced in Stephen's voice. "There was no way I could risk having her and the children taken away, victims of the brutal and archaic laws of this country. I kept them hidden in Europe, raising them as human. Two of my kids are Guides; I won't give them over into slavery. One I think will trigger as a Sentinel, a very big Sentinel if he continues to grow the way he has been." Steven met Rathe's direct gaze, fighting to suppress the hostility he was feeling. "I'd like to bring them here." He concluded.

"A Guardian?" Jim asked, speaking for the first time that morning.

"Yes, I believe so," Stephen said with a father's proud smile. "No one can accuse us Ellisons of being on the puny side, but knowing what I know now, I guess there is a good chance he could be a Guardian. Does anyone know if Guide/Sentinel matings always produce Guides and Guardians only?" He asked.

"The father Sentinel must be an Alpha, to produce a Guardian." Rathe answered, choosing to be the one to field the question. "The Guardians know of no Beta who has fathered a Guardian. We do not know if an Alpha/Guide mating can produce an Alpha Sentinel when both the Alpha and Guide carry Guardian DNA. It is one of the things we wish to find out about Guide genetics."

"It sounds like the Guardians have some plans in place," Stephen said, his tone making it clear he wasn't sure how he felt about it. "By the way, father, I'm moving back into the compound with my family if you will permit it. They will arrive tomorrow. Now that the Guides are free I am willing to bring them home to Cascade," he looked around at Andy's growl and amended his sentence with an indulgent smile, "we have agreed not to keep them hidden any longer."

"I'm glad you've decided to come home to stay," William said. "I need you here. There is a lot that needs to be done. Michael, I would like you to move out of the Guardian Barracks and into one of the family apartments. I don't want any doubt in any one's mind that you are a full member of our family. With all that has been going on your formal acknowledgement and reception had been pushed aside. It is now a priority. Christopher, I want you to delegate the catering but oversee the Sentinel/Guardian protocol. I don't want any toes stepped on."

"You have two Guides." Jim said suddenly, fixing intense blue eyes on his brother.

"I'd phrase it more like two Guides have me." Stephen said. Trust Jim with his detective's brain to be the first one to pick up on that fact. "Yes. I am bonded fully to two Guides."

"This will not be accepted readily in the face of the Guide shortage." Rathe said almost casually. But
instead of concentrating his gaze on Dahl, he was looking at Andy instead. He sniffed in the young Sentinel's direction. "You have also elected yet another Guardian's mate, to claim as Junior. It seems a trait of the Ellison Family to select such Sentinels for their own." There was a tone of disapproval underneath the words and Stephen stiffened.

"Andy found me. I in no way coerced him. I will not apologize for falling in love. He chose me every bit as much as I chose him." Now it was Stephen who looked threatening. Rathe looked very grave. Then he reached across the table and cupped his fingers under Andy's chin, his thumb tracing the edge of brow, and down the side of the younger man's face. Andy gave out a little gasp, and every Sentinel at the table scented the involuntary spurt of arousal that perfumed the air. His nipples peaked, pressing against his shirt as he leaned involuntarily into the to the touch.

Caleb reached out and put his hand at the small of his Mate's back. Everyone froze. Then slowly, deliberately, Stephen moved with a growl and grasped the Guardian's wrist. He squeezed.

Rathe turned his head, looked at him. Then he moved his hand away from Andy. Andy let out a gasping moan. Stephen snarled, lips peeling back from his teeth. Rathe watched him with an expression of curiosity, rather than alarm. William's palm cracked against the table top. "Stop this at once! I will not have you behaving this way, challenging each other at the breakfast table no less. I had hoped you would behave as family, but if that is impossible, at least civilly." He turned to Rathe, "Michael, you have made your point. Yes, the House of Ellison has taken from the Guardian's. But it was not a deliberate affront. We have never sought to deprive you, we weren't aware, but we have taken the Juniors who best suited us, for whatever unfathomable reason, they have turned out to be Sentinels that also appeal to Guardians. We owe you no apology for it, but I do acknowledge the fact of it. Do you demand restitution?"

Rathe shook his head. "No." He replied coolly, "we do not seek restitution from the Ruling House of Cascade. We require only...awareness of the facts. They may become important in the future."

William nodded. "We so admit to the facts then, if that is your only request." He switched his attention to Steven.

"Not exactly. We wish to know of the lines that produce Guardian's mates." Rathe said.

William thought for a moment, silence dropping down over the table. "Yes. That is acceptable."

"That is all we ask. We will not seek to remove them from those they are bonded with." Rathe said, backing down gracefully.

"Granted." William replied. Then he faced his younger son.

"Stephen, bring your family here. They will be safe here, you have my word as Cascade's ruler and as your father." His grey eyed gaze challenged Rathe to dispute the fact. Rathe inclined his head, his point having been made.

"Then it is left to me to make an apology to my brother." Rathe said. "I do not challenge your right to your Junior." He said to the still stiffly fuming Stephen. "I merely wished to make it known he is a potential Guardian's mate, as are all the Juniors in this House."

"Granted." William said, again, letting the faintest note of impatience color his tone. "Stephen?" He tossed the ball into his younger son's court, his voice making his expectations abundantly clear.

Stephen was still angry, but he knew better than to escalate the conflict. He directed his words at the Guardian. "I accept your apology, with reservations. I am not comfortable with you touching ~my~
chosen Mate." He let his gaze drift to Caleb, making his own point.

Stephen and Michael stared at each other across the expanse of the table. Andy made a sound, at last breaking away from the spell that had held him focused on Rathe. The sound made Stephen pull him to his side.

"Agreed." Rathe said, he turned to his mate. "Toast?" He passed the plate. Next to him, Caleb let out the breath he'd been holding, removing his hand from Rathe's back, inhaling for the first time in what felt like hours. He took a buttered slice of sourdough and passed the plate on to Dahl. He was very, very careful that their fingers did not touch in passing.
Chapter 33

Breakfast continued, far more quietly now. William's displeasure over the rancorous exchange of earlier kept all conversation polite and unfailingly civil, mostly requests for bread, eggs or more coffee.

Christopher had taken on the role of hostess, keeping the dishes and plates filled and moving, keeping his impeccable suit unsmudged as he refreshed their cups, moving around the table quiet and tranquil an island of calm efficiency in the otherwise tense atmosphere of the table. It was as if he were untouched by the chill or impervious to it.

Stephen stared while the tall blond man was serving the others at the table. This was Christopher. The man who had all but raised him at his father's side. Christopher who had bandaged his knees, attended school functions and soccer games; Stephen had never been big enough or strong enough for Sentinel football, unlike Jim, who from far too early an age, was all muscle and jaw-knotting determination.

Christopher encouraged Stephen, helped with his homework when William was occupied with matters of State. Why did it freak him out so badly to think of his father touching this man in an intimate or sexual way?

It wasn't thoughts of William having someone in his bed that troubled him, Stephen decided, a plate full of scrambled eggs and a rasher of crispy bacon later. He knew his father while being circumspect, did have those kinds of relations. He gnawed on the last slice of bacon as he considered the problem. It was Christopher. Virginal, always correct, never inappropriate Christopher. His "mother" for all intents and purposes; Stephen didn't even have a single memory of Grace, his birth mother. Christopher was his mother. His caretaker. He didn't like to think of Christopher as changing or aging. It was not...usual or expected. He loved the other man, his father's junior. He wanted him to be rock solid, stable, predictable, not changeable.

Stephen, desperate to divert his thoughts, watched from under his lashes as Michael Rathe, his newly introduced brother, served his mate. Caleb sat quietly, even stiffly as he was served, elbows tucked neatly into his sides. He didn't look up. He took his fork and ate what was put on his plate.

Something was wrong there, something new. When Stephen had first been introduced to the pair, there hadn't been this reserve between the two. He mentally shook his head. No, not reserve. The littler Sentinel was furious. Perfectly contained, concealing it admirably, but absolutely furious. And the far larger Guardian was aware he was in big trouble.

The youth's undeniably plain, average face was utterly correct, beneath the swathe of beautiful, dark hair. But Stephen saw his grey eyes were filled with narrowed, stormy promise when the young man glanced towards his glass of milk before picking it up and drinking moderately, then setting it down with careful precision in exactly the same spot it had rested before.

Yes, Rathe was in trouble, Stephen wouldn't want to be him when his mate found ten minutes and a private corner to drag him into. And then, as Stephen watched surreptitiously curious, Caleb licked the foamy moustache off his upper lip, his tongue so sweetly pink, his mouth just a little wet and so lush, and Stephen thought it just ~might~ be good to be Rathe later, after the fight was over. Whether he won or not.

Next to Michael, Jim ate stoically, clearly his mind was elsewhere, his powerful shoulders hunched, his jaw flexing as he chewed. He looked neither right nor left, and after the first plate, he made no
further grunting attempts to thank Christopher as his plate was refilled or his mug topped off. Stephen didn't think his brother was being deliberately rude, just preoccupied with deep thoughts.

His brother. Stephen sighed, no, that statement was not fully accurate anymore. He had two brothers now. He grimaced inwardly. Another change. Another older brother. But at least this one treated him like an adult, however rudely, and didn't try to manipulate him or treat him like a child who needed guiding. Michael Rathe had put the facts to him in the most indisputable way possible, rubbed his face in it then stood back to see what he'd do. Stephen almost grinned. The bastard certainly hadn't pulled any punches to protect Stephen's delicate sensitivities. He'd offered the challenge straight out. Treating him like a man, expecting him to get it, understand it and deal with it. Very different from what Jim or his father would have done. And Christopher coddled him unmercifully, of course, he was the baby after all.

Only he wasn't anymore. He was a father himself. And so was Jim. Blair had three children with more on the way. That made Stephen an adult in this place, damn it. There were other children in the House to coddle and spoil and love now, other noses to wipe, and bottoms to pat. Stephen was ready to have the rest of the Household recognize he was a grown-up, not the youngest child, not the younger brother who needed taking care of. Not any more.

Stephen sipped his coffee. Good stuff. He'd missed it. The Cook hadn't made this, though that coffee was unbearably good, this was Christopher's recipe and that was much better than good.

As he drank the hot, strong brew, Stephen silently considered the encounter between Andy and the Guardian. With the long, powerful fingers wrapped around his jaw, Andy had practically sizzled. All from a single touch. While Stephen knew Andy loved him and vice versa, he also was man enough to admit he'd never made Andy burn like that. Not from so little as cupping a cheek, or one look. Not from anything. Another minute and his Junior might have come in his pants. Melted right in front of their family. Knowing that pissed Stephen off.

It was into this uncertainty that Stephen was bringing his children. He had to be crazy. Instead he felt...anticipation, excitement. It wouldn't be dull, and he trusted his brother, the Guardian, not to harm a single hair on his children's or Guides' head. They would be unfailingly safe. And wasn't that the important thing in all of this?

Change and more change. That was life. It was time to embrace it.

William toppling off his chair at the head of the table was the last thing Stephen expected when he turned that way.

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"I want my frame," the Guide murmured, the frame that would hide her, shield her from all but William's eyes and thrice Christopher's, though he had never touched her skin to skin. Rocking herself with her head hung down and her eyes unfocused, she moaned. She didn't mind William seeing her face, her body, but not...everyone. The robe would hide nothing. She would see everything, and everyone would see her.

"There are no more frames. Ruler Ellison has ordered them smashed and thrown away. They have been outlawed. You're free now. You can wear so much prettier things. There is makeup for you to try, jewels. Emeralds, rubies, sapphires that would go beautifully with your eyes." The attendant was losing patience. She lowered her arms.

A horrible wail escaped from the cowering Guide and she closed her eyes tightly, trying to will the floor to swallow her. She hid her face in the pillow nearest her, drawing her knees in tighter. She hated being able to feel, to hear. She hated that people spoke to her, asked her things. She only wanted quiet, darkness, peace. The sound of her own breathing, soothing her into her meditations.

"Please put on the robe. Then we can go to the table and have breakfast and afterward we can take a walk in the garden. The roses are in bloom, I am hungry, and I am sure you are as well."

Maire ignored the rumbling of her belly. She had been hungry before, it didn't frighten her. She kept her eyes shut, thought of roses. Cool to the touch, with petals of all shades. Their scent far to strong without her concealing veils, but at a distance, so fragrantly wonderful. Roses were beautiful, and overwhelming.

Massive sobs shook the Guide and large tears rolled down her cheeks wetting the bed sheet she clutched around her. She felt as if she were lost in a vast wilderness with danger all around. Everything had suddenly changed without warning and now she had nowhere to turn. Her Sentinel expected her to make decisions, what to wear, what to eat. He expected her to know how to do those things but she didn't. He had always made those decisions for her. She was a good Guide. An obedient Guide, and now… now… a guide without guidance.

"Are you hungry?" the caretaker asked. "Please Maire."

A question, why was her caretaker suddenly asking her questions, using her name? She had always been only "Guide" to all but her Sentinels. No one else had ever called her by her secret name. It was the name that William whispered in her ear when he came to her, those times she and he touched, when he made her feel so alive. She lifted her head and looked at the woman that before today had never asked her a question.

"Does my Sentinel want me to eat now?" The Guide asked through her tears.

"I want you to eat." The attendant said firmly. "You need to eat. He told me to give you whatever you want. So what would you like? I'll bring it from the kitchen." Along with a sandwich for herself, because it was pretty clear she wasn't going to be able to talk this Guide out into the rest of the House any time soon. That was a lost cause. She starve by the time she did.

The Guide began rocking herself and sobbing again. "I want my frame."

The caretaker was beside herself; she didn't know how to deal with this kind of anguish. They had been going around in circles for half an hour. She gave up. Maybe later she would try again. "I'm going to go to the kitchen and bring back a breakfast plate. Then you can choose what you want. I think it will be easier if you see it in front of you. I'll be right back." She needed to get out of there for a few minutes and collect herself before she did something stupid and tried to knock some sense into the Guide's head. It had been so much easier when all she had to do was set up the frame over
the Guide's bed so she could sleep at night, or fit it onto her body for the daylight hours while Maire sat absolutely silent and still.

Maire was alone now, abandoned by her Sentinel and her caretaker. She didn't know how to live anymore. She looked at the sun coming through the window, giving up on keeping the rays from seeping through her lids, turning them pink from the inside. So much light, the gardens were out there in the light. Panic overtook her, sheer terror, she screamed. Cold sweat covered her body and her heart pounded, she had to get away; she jumped up and began pounding on the window. "No, No, No!" she cried out. The glass broke, cutting into her hands and wrists, blood spurted.

She stood and watched it pump from her, running in thick rivulets down her arms, helpless with fascination. Bright red, it puddled on the floor, soaked her sheet. She stood silent watching it, unbelieving that this was her, a part of her, she stood without pain, lifting her head she looked at the jagged edge of the broken window. Bewildered she made no move to stem the flow.

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As if in slow motion, Stephen saw his father falling, his face slack, his eyes wide, his hand reaching for his chest. The fine china tea cup he held smashed as he slumped back in his chair, then towards the floor. All color drained from his face and for a moment he could not draw a breath.

Christopher stumbled the coffee pot dropping from his hands as he clutched his heart and moaned. He sank to his knees.

"Dad!" Stephen was moving, but he'd never reach William in time to keep him from hitting the floor. He barely saw the movement on the other side of the table. But Jim was there, so fast, his big hand cradling their father, saving him from the hard impact. William moaned, his lids fluttering wildly. Then they were open, staring, horrified. His pale grey irises were all but obscured by his dilated pupils.

"Guide!" He croaked, fighting to gain his feet, Jim gave up trying to hold him down. Christopher pushed him backwards, taking William into his arms, and struggling to get both of them to their feet. Stumbling they made it just as the sound of running feet come to them from the hall. William moaned again, clutching Christopher's shirt, they staggered.

There was no way Christopher could carry William in the state he was in. Rathe made an impatient noise. He stepped forward and gently shouldered the blond Junior to one side, and lifted William, his father, into his arms. Then he headed out the door and towards the commotion in the direction of the Guide's quarters followed closely by the others in the breakfast room. Christopher jumped, then relaxed and accepted Jim and Stephen's help in following.

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Blair had finished feeding the triplets and they had had their morning bath. He settled the last one into the crib, Rafe smiling indulgently at the beautiful babies over his shoulder. He touched them giving a silent thank you prayer that they were safe and had a family that loved them. That's when the feeling hit him. He slumped over the crib giving an audible gasp. He clung to the rail as emotions swirled over him buffeting him with all the force of hurricane winds. He let out a moan.

Rafe grabbed him, pulling him into his arms, encircling him with protection from whatever danger the Guide sensed. "Blair, what is it? What's wrong?" He extended his senses trying to find any approaching danger. Blair clutched at him. Rafe frowned, there was something, far away in another wing of the House, but he couldn't quiet hear what was happening. He did hear the restlessness of the Guardians outside the door.
"William," Blair said his head swimming with dizziness, "Something's wrong with William and Christopher." Beads of sweat stood out on his face. He swayed, his hand straying down to his chest, gripping the folds of his loose robe.

"Blair!" Rafe's mouth dropped open and he relaxed his hold just enough for Blair to push free. He tried to stand and walk to the door. Rafe hovered anxiously, and Blair seized his steady arm.

"Go. Let's go!" He exclaimed, pointing in the direction he wanted to go, and giving Rafe an urgent push. Leaning on the strong Sentinel, Blair made it to the door, every step seeming to give him renewed strength.

Blair flung the nursery door open. "Stay with the babies," he ordered one of the Guardians who was staring at him alertly and took off, hurrying down the hall, his blue robes swirling around his legs, leaning on Rafe less and less with each step.

Rafe and the second Guardian were with Blair, exchanging a glance, letting the Guide lead the way, until Blair let out a hiss of frustration. The word he muttered caused Rafe's brows to raise, and the Guardian to actually smile. Then he Guardian leaned over and scooped the Guide into his arms.

It was Rafe, not Blair who made a sound of protest. Blair merely pointed the way he wanted to go, and the big man holding him took off like a shot. Rafe was left gaping for an instant before he ran in pursuit. Man these Guardians could fly, he thought, bending his head down and sprinting.

William and Rathe got to the Guide's room only to see other men crouched and kneeling down around a tiny figure on the floor.

"My Guide," William muttered, distress in each word, then he said much louder, "NO!" And fought to get out of his son's arms. Rathe set him down, but stayed close. He smelled blood and panic. The Guide's heartbeat was not as strong as it should be, her breathing was rapid and shallow. Puddles of blood had soaked into the carpet.

William all but crawled to his Guide, shoving aside the Guardian who was in front of him, blocking his view. "Maire!" He called out. Christopher's horrified gasp sounded as he entered the room at last. He rushed after his Senior.

"Call the Vet," William ordered, unable to contain his horror when he saw how much blood soaked his Guide. The sheet around her had been peeled back. The Guardians leaned over her, sheltering her from any prying eyes, and she lay back in their hold with more trust than she had shown with any of her handlers. They grudgingly moved to make room for William and Christopher, but didn't stop putting pressure on her wounded arm.

"The Vet has been summoned." The highest ranking Guardian said, addressing Rathe. William put his hand on Maire's face, his other hand tugging at the sheet to pull it over her bare shoulders. He wanted to weep, she was so pale, too pale. Fear flashed through him. He felt Christopher's bulk behind him, close, offering what comfort he could.

"Does she have any other injuries?" Christopher asked when William found his throat was too tight to get more words out. The Guardian shook his head, eyeing the blond men with interest. He sniffed, almost too quietly to be heard. Christopher ignored him, jaw tight.

The Guide turned her head toward the nearest Guardian who bent down only inches away from her, his expression gentle. "Help me," she pleaded. "My frame, where is it? I don't...please, help me."
Her confusion was so apparent, her need so clear. The Guardian made a sound that wasn't words.

William stroked her and her eyes met his. "Sentinel." She said, trying to lift her arm to touch him.

"Be still," he ordered her. "We are here. I will find your frame, don't worry." He had pushed her too far too fast and this was the result. His chest heaved as he tried to contain his emotion.

Christopher's arms found their way around him. He let the younger man hold him. He had done this, was to blame. He hadn't thought it through. He had assumed that his Guide, after more than three decades in a frame, would be ready instantly to experience the greater freedoms of the new laws. He was wrong and it had almost cost her her life. He sobbed.

"Move." He heard behind him in a voice that wouldn't be ignored for all it's quiet. Blair. A Guide. Was here. William turned his head a fraction, but found he didn't want to look away from the brown eyes of his own Guide, blinking dazedly in the light of the room.

Blair was beside him, beside them, the Guardians making way for him in a way they had not for William. Their hands found the approaching Guide, helping him. Blair knelt down his robes pooling around him. William lifted his tear filled eyes.

Blair hugged him, one of his arms also including Christopher who was too close to William to separate. "I can feel her, she will recover." Blair murmured. Then he extricated himself from the Sentinels and bent down. He crouched at the far smaller Guide's side. "I am here, sister." He said. "I will not leave you."
Chapter 34

As soon as the door to their quarters closed behind them, Caleb spun around on rigid legs and faced his mate. He crowded up against the much larger man, shoving him into the wall, not caring that Michael could crush him with one hand. He pushed against him, a low growl robbing him of speech, his teeth bared. Rathe watched him, stunned by the change in his usually calm and docile mate.

"Blue." Michael exclaimed, shocked. Caleb ignored him, teeth snapping down on the cloth of the larger man's uniform shirt, tearing, growling. The sturdy cloth was no match; it tore, and with it came a sound from the smaller Sentinel. A sob. Rathe was galvanized into action, no longer frozen to the wall. His arms went around Blue, meaning to hold him, to comfort him. His mate was hurting and Michael had to help. But his action was rebuffed, Caleb refusing to settle into his embrace, refusing to let himself be held and soothed. He snapped his teeth at the nearest bicep and Rathe hastily lifted his arms up and away. This was a side of Blue he had not seen before.

Caleb thrust hard, pushing himself away. He stalked into the center of the room, standing stiff, outrage pouring off of him more clearly than if he'd explained his fury with words. Rathe stayed where he was, a low sense of dread beginning to grow as Blue stood head down, his breathing ragged, the rest of his stance all too clearly telegraphing his desire not to be touched.

Minutes passed, the tension growing. At last Caleb turned, looking directly into Rathe's eyes, his own eyes pale points of fire. Rathe found himself caught in the pure flame of rage, burning a gray-blue that was anything but cool, anything but cold. Blue took a step back towards him. Then another. His chin lifted, his eyes wide, mouth compressed into a flat line.

"How dare you touch Andy like that," Caleb said, letting the anger and hurt he felt bleed into his voice.

"I was proving a point," Michael said, reasonably with a deepening frown. How could Caleb not have seen that a demonstration was necessary?

"It was a point that should have been made with words," Caleb said with a growl. "I could smell what your touch did to Andy, and so could every other Sentinel at that table. You want me to obey your rules. Not make contact with another Sentinel, not even my cousin. Do you think I do that because you are bigger than me? Because I fear you? Do you think I follow your rules because you force me to? No, I do it because I choose to. I make the choice, me... because I want to be a good mate to you, I want to make you proud and make other Guardians envy you. You showed me trust taking me among Sentinels so early in our bond. I thought I could trust you."

Caleb stopped his tirade, his breathing slowed and his voice quieted, his eyes looked distant but still full of pain. "From the time I was an adolescent, when I first felt the pull of another Sentinel, I knew I was going to die young. There was nothing else for me. I would meet an Alpha Sentinel, and he would stare at me. Our eyes would meet and I would feel... such... rage as I can't explain. I would watch them, licking their lips, looking at me like hungry beasts, I would feel them wanting to have me, and I knew I would never let them touch Me. I ~attacked~ Jim Ellison. If I had been older and had a chance to attack other Alphas before him, I would not have survived. He knew what I was, and he didn't kill me for Rafe's sake. As much as I hated him, meeting Ellison saved my life. He protected me. I didn't know that he knew what I was. I had no idea what I was. I lived my whole life knowing I would not accept any other Sentinel as my Alpha. No Senior." He raised his head with freezing dignity. "But. Then I came here, I met you, and now I know what I am. You taught me."

The silence stretched. At last it had to be broken. Michael broke it, swallowing. "It was not personal,
and words would not have had the same impact. How could they?" The big man argued, unable to hide his puzzlement at his chosen's jealous outburst. He reached out toward the shorter man. "Blue, you are being unreasonable." Rathe was struck dumb as Blue took one more step towards him. Hair raised on the back of his neck at the expression in the grey eyes.

"You are deluding yourself." Caleb said. "You wanted to touch him and you found an excuse. He is a Guardian's mate, Michael. Even bonded he pulls on you. You desire him. But you won't admit it to yourself. If you don't admit it, how can you protect yourself against his pull? We are bonded. We made the choice. I will not tolerate you bringing any other into this bond. I am not a Guide to be passed around. It is not in my nature."

"You think I want him?" Michael was stunned. "I am bonded. I was proving to the Ellisons..."

"No," Caleb's tone brooked no argument. "That is not true. Look inside yourself and see what I saw." He waited, and then added. "I ~know~ you wanted him. Just as you wanted Jim's Companion and even William's Christopher. But they are powerful men. While Stephen...he is not the heir, nor the ruler. He is only the younger son who has been estranged from the father you share. Think Michael, think. Feel."

The huge, expressive eyes forced the Guardian to look and truly see into his motivations. He did not like what he saw. Not one bit. He had wronged his mate. He sank to his knees at Caleb's feet his head bent in supplication. "You are correct. I have shown you disrespect in front of our family. I offer you my blood. If you wish, choose another Guardian. I will give no resistance to a challenge. You are free to go..."

"Idiot," Blue muttered, sniffling a little, his tears falling on the back of the big Sentinel's neck. "Don't you dare think you can toss me away so easily..."

The guardian looked up into the defiant, pain filled eyes. "I do love you, Blue. But I have caused you pain. I have nothing to offer in penitence but my blood and your freedom."

Blue swallowed and the tears stopped as the anger in his voice returned. "I am not your child to raise. I am not your possession. And I am most certainly not your Guide, Michael Rathe. What decisions we make we will make together. I am your Mate. I am the other half of your soul. I am your blood, your heart and the air that you breathe. I am what sustains you, what gives you strength. I am what the Gods have made me, and what I am is yours. There is nothing that keeps you alive that I am not. Do you hear me? Do you understand? So once again, choose Me."

Rathe looked up into his mate's eyes with a glimmer of hope and nodded his head.

"Good. You are mine, Guardian. Your words, your power, your love is mine." Blue raised his hand and showed the extended claws at the tips of his fingers; he looked at them, then back up into Michael's gaze. "I look like any other Sentinel." He began to unbutton his un-creased shirt, tucked so perfectly into his black pants. Impatient he jerked it free. Rathe could only watch, unable to look away. A sliver of skin was appearing, widening into a strip and then Blue's whole chest was uncovered. At that point Rathe could not have looked away to save himself. A pulse beat strongly in his throat; Caleb's nipples were tight points, the flex of his abdomen casting the muscles of his stomach into hard relief. He was beautiful, Rathe swallowed wishing he dared move, wishing he dared reach out and claim his mate. But prudence and an instinct for self preservation kept him still, on his knees caught in the spell his mate was weaving, waiting, waiting....

"You see? Is there a difference you can see?" Caleb gestured at his now naked chest, ivory-white claws flashing, the skin of his bare belly like rich, smooth cream. "No. There is not. But..." He continued, tossing his shirt aside, and working his belt free. "...You did not want any other Sentinel
Rathe's eyes moved over the luscious bare skin of his mate, Caleb's scent filing his nostrils, before looking back into his eyes. His blood coursing through his veins was a drumbeat of the past and future. His voice was a deep, deep baritone when he spoke, ringing with emotion. "You are my Mate. This I acknowledge and this I vow. You are my heart and soul, you are the air that I breathe, you are what sustains me and gives me life. I will look on no other as I look on you. I will touch no other as I touch you. You are the one that the Gods have made for me, you are like no other, and there will be no other for as long as I live. I ask your forgiveness for my trespass."

Caleb knelt down and looked into his mate's eyes. "I forgive you. I will always forgive you." This time he let Rathe take him into his arms.

The dimness was soothing on her eyes when Maire woke. She didn't have to lift her hand to cover her face, either. A drape was rigged over the top of the bed, and she was mostly under it, though it was open a slit near her face, allowing her to look out into the room. The safe room. The room the guardian had carried her to, once her arm was bandaged. Both her Sentinels had lain with her for a time, stroking her and making soft comforting sounds. William promised that he would have a new frame made for her.

It was her brother Guide who insisted she be brought to this room, where he could stay with her and his babies and where her Sentinels could be with her, away from the scent of her blood. Marie shuddered at his insistence, she had never heard a Guide take charge like that, never seen a Sentinel bow to another's wish.

The huge Guardians did what her brother commanded, scooping her up covered with a clean fresh Guide robe, a heavy veil covering her face. She was whisked through the hallway across the garden and into a nursery room. She was gently deposited into a pile of blankets and pillows, where she spent the rest of the day being shielded by her Sentinels as she lay between them and listened to the sounds of Blair attending to his Children.

By evening beds had been brought into the large room for her and her brother and she fell asleep, safe under a canopy veil that stretched across her bed, to the sound of her Sentinels purring. Now it was morning and the drapes were drawn, letting only a faint shimmer of light in. Maire sighed, relief flooding her. She felt sheltered here, not so exposed. She let her empathic awareness filter out into the room and felt that her Sentinels were no longer nearby. There were only Guides in the room. She lifted one very sore, and heavy arm and brushed aside one edge of the gauze canopy, peeking around without moving more than her head.

Something stirred off to her left, a small movement, but enough in the stillness to draw her attention. The strange Guide, William had called him Blair, was sitting in one of the chairs nearby, his hair, drawn up haphazardly in a rough bun, out of which most of it tumbled down his back, a rich chestnut froth of curls.

Beside his chair was a large, low slung bassinet. In his arms he held a moving bundle, out of which a soft, pink foot protruded, toes slowly flexing. Maire sighed, relief flooding her. She felt sheltered here, not so exposed. She let her empathic awareness filter out into the room and felt that her Sentinels were no longer nearby. There were only Guides in the room. She lifted one very sore, and heavy arm and brushed aside one edge of the gauze canopy, peeking around without moving more than her head.

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She hadn't seen any of this yesterday. Though she had heard the sounds, babies crying and cooing, their mother caring for them, she had worn the veil until she was put to bed for the night, the room had been dark by then so it wasn't until now, in the dim morning light, that she was getting her first
Blair felt the gentle, empathic touch of William's traumatized Guide, he looked up from the child he was nursing. "Good morning, Maire," he said in as gentle a manner as he was able. "Christopher and Rafe have gone to the kitchen to bring back breakfast trays for us. William has things to take care of but he will return by lunch if not before. How are you feeling today?"

She had to think about how to answer that. She had so infrequently before lately been asked any questions. "I...am fine." She hazarded, not lifting the edge of the gauze any higher. He nodded and they fell silent again as he fed the child and murmured sweet words to the child that were too low for Marie to hear, in a tone that soothed.

Marie could feel the little life that was feeding with such appetite, the child was a Guide. She let her empathy crack open a fraction further and felt the presence of two more children, awake, in the bassinet. Their attention was focused in a vague way, on their mother and the other child. She felt their interest, their hunger, their desire to be held, touched, and their absorption with the being that meant warmth, food, and security to them. They watched him feed their sibling. And the Guide was a he. He thought of himself that way, despite having given birth, and she realized with a start, despite being pregnant again.

But the children were not the only others in the room. Two more Guides were there as well. Adults. But she could not see them from her vantage point, and Marie did not feel like moving out of her tiny sanctuary to see. She was content to stay as she was, watching as the Guide fed his child. Carefully she eased over onto her side, then froze. The other Guide did not react and slowly she felt herself relax.

At last the child he nursed was drowsy and full, and Blair disengaged the little mouth from his milk soaked nipple. Then he looked up and met Maire's open eyes.

"Would you like to hold her?" He asked as he smiled at her. He put the child to his shoulder and patted its back until a small burp erupted. Maire nodded, then looked down at the bandage on her arm. "Don't worry, I'll just set her close to you. She'll go to sleep. You can touch her if you'd like." He leaned in and very gently set the child in the crook of Maire's arm. She started feeling the warm weight settle against her body.

Maire gazed into the blue eyes, into their depths as the child regarded her. She saw the fist being chewed on thoughtfully, as if the child was also trying to examine her, with at least as much curiosity she herself felt.

"Why do you call her she?" Maire asked, surprised that the question made it out of her thoughts and into speech. But it was what she had been wondering. If Blair identified as male, why would he not feel his Guide children were also male?

"She knows herself to be female." Blair answered. "It is the gender she most identifies with."

"Oh." Maire wondered how the child knew. "It is the gender she most identifies with."

"She knows herself to be female." Blair answered. "It is the gender she most identifies with."

"Oh." Maire wondered how the child knew. "She is so young." She offered.

Blair seemed to know what she was trying to say. "She is six months old."

"And you are...expecting another litter so soon?" The Guide was fertile indeed, then. Maire felt a flow of pain, not from her injured arm but from her chest. She had never had a child of her own, not even for the short time she would have been allowed to care for one before it was taken to a House to be properly raised. She would have liked to have had that experience.
Chapter 35

It was a beautiful day and the sound of his children’s laughter while chasing butterflies in the garden warmed Stephen’s heart. Stephen’s entire family including Bella, their three young children, Andy and Dahl were here, able to openly live together at long last. Stephen was speaking to his father again, working with him for a cause Stephen deeply believed in. Life was good.

In the three days since his family had arrived things in the compound had quieted down a bit. There were fewer calls about the new Guide Laws and many of the calls that did come in were transferred to The Protectorate to be dealt with, the only remaining calls that William or sometimes Christopher took, dealt directly with other rulers or Heads of State.

Personal matters had settled into a pleasant daily routine. Maire was still sleeping in the Nursery but with the encouragement and example of Blair, Dahl, and the arrival of Stephen’s first Guide, Bella, Maire had decided to wear her new frame only when leaving the sheltering oasis of the Nursery. Blair, bless his heart, had proven to be a godsend. He seemed to know exactly what she needed, when to encourage her to do more and when to let her be. Dahl reported that Maire had started to take part in the care of the children, only scurrying under the canopy erected to conceal her bed when Sentinels came into the room.

The contrast between the four Guides who now resided in the house formed a unique continuum. On one hand there was the very traditional, retiring and quiet Maire, who spoke softly if at all, was proper, and remained hidden from the world at large. She was known by the public to exist, but was never seen.

Then there was Blair who had far less interest in the world than he had before being declared a wild Guide and subsequently kidnapped. The focus of his daily life no longer revolved around anthropology or the study of Sentinels. Now his life was governed by his children first. He was a mother. Then he was a Guide. Only lastly was he a gifted academic, called on by William or Christopher to evaluate a proposal or position paper on Sentinel or Guide matters.

Before his captivity, Blair had preferred hiking boots, jeans and flannel shirts; casual clothing that was fitting for his role as an easy-going young professor. Now that it was his choice, he elected to wear the Guide robes, re-creations with little difference from the ancient robes that Guides once wore around the world. His reasoning was that he was a Guide, he embraced it with all his being, and the replicas he wore honored that. The newer additions to the Guide wear, namely frames and veils, Blair shunned.

Dahl was the essence of the new breed of European Guide. Fashionable, no longer shy and retiring, he declined to wear any traditional Guide clothing. Instead he dressed in slim trousers and tailored shirts made of soft materials. He reminded Stephen of a young, androgynous Mick Jagger, his lithe, slim silhouette striking. He was openly affectionate, but did not like to be the center of attention, though he had impeccable social skills. Stephen didn’t overlook the way he watched Blair’s babies, or the longing in his eyes that grew exponentially when Bella and the rest of the children arrived. Dahl accompanied Andy and Stephen in public, but preferred to remain in the background, not to be the focus of the cameras that always followed them now.

Bella, the second oldest next to Maire was an exquisitely beautiful woman, very feminine with her Mundane style skirts demurely an inch below the knee. While in hiding she had always dressed as if she were Mundane, and within the Compound she saw no reason to change her habit. She was a dynamo, outspoken, ruling her children and often her Sentinels with a firm, loving hand. Years of hiding had left their mark and while she was gracious, she did not like to be among strangers.
Sentinels in particular. Yet when she was impelled to be in a mixed group, she was unfailingly
certain to state her opinions. No one doubted where she stood. She felt strongly no Guide should be
forced to go into hiding to keep her children. Children belonged with their mothers, and the Laws
had no say in it. She would not be swayed from her stand. She also believed passionately that
Sentinels should never travel without their bonded Guides. The more traditional Sentinels who chose
to leave their Guides at home under lock and key when they traveled received an earful from her
when they arrived at the Compound. Bella believed Guides needed healthy social contact and that
meant not only being the focus of their libidinous Sentinels, rather that they should have contact with
other Guides as often as possible.

“Daddy, look,” Billy, Stephen’s three-year-old son called as he pointed out two butterflies locked
together in a mating flight. “Can we bring Papa Andy to see the butterflies tomorrow?” Stephen
knew exactly what that display of insectoid coupling would bring to Andy’s mind, and he had to
grin, hiding it from his son by rubbing his chin.

“Papa may be busy with Grandpa Christopher again tomorrow,” Stephen said, glancing sideways at
the huge Guardian Sentinel who now stood a discreet five paces away, watching the children. Billy
made a face on hearing Andy was not at his beck and call. The little boy had been ecstatic when he
was reunited with “Papa”. Andy had a mischievous playful streak all children appreciated.

After the incident with Rathe at the breakfast table, Stephen had decided it was best to keep Andy as
far away from the Guardians as possible. He was quite surprised when a sergeant was assigned to
accompany his children whenever they went out to play. He protested, of course, saying that his
children were perfectly safe in the center of the Compound with Andy and himself to look after
them. The Guardian Captain who he spoke with, (Michael and Caleb had disappeared into their
room and no one had seen them in days) agreed with Stephen that the children were perfectly safe,
but the compound now had five Guide children in residence as well as two Mother Guides, one of
them expecting, that not only qualified the Ellison Compound as a breeding house, but it would
make the Compound the focus of increasing Sentinel attention, and under the new laws, it was the
Guardians’ duty to watch over the Guides and their children. That’s when Stephen decided it would
be better to send Andy to help Christopher with the plans for Michael and Caleb’s reception.

“Your children refer to your mate as Papa,” a deep baritone voice said, as the Sergeant neared
Stephen and Billy, his eyes roaming the lawn and bushes. He halted and waited to see how Stephen
would respond.

Stephen turned his head to look at the monolith who stood at parade rest, now the only part of him
moving was his eyes and head as he watched the children at play.

“Yes, they do,” he answered, surprised that the Guardian had spoken to him. He wasn’t sure what
else he was expected to say, few of the others had spoken to him, barely noting his presence until
Bella and the children arrived. The fact that he had children seemed to raise him in their eyes.

“And you allow this?” the Guardian asked with a tone of true curiosity.

“I expect it and welcome it,” Stephen said holding back a growl. While he welcomed Andy
associating with his Guides and children, he did not want to encourage a Guardian to think he’d
welcome one of them making overtures to Andy.

“Then why is your mate not at your side? You give the impression that your bond is not close and
that you are open to negotiation for him.” The Sergeant continued, and while his tone was placid, the
sharpness of his gaze was not.
This time Stephen did not hold back his growl, he kept it low so the frolicking children wouldn’t hear and he spoke through clenched teeth, his eyes making contact with the far calmer pair a foot higher than his own. “Do not mistake me; I will not give up Andy! Our bond is solid! He came to me, I saved his life, I will not have my family torn apart and traumatized by his loss. I will fight for him.”

“It is unheard of for a Guardian Mate to approach an Alpha.” The Guardian said thoughtfully. Stephen bristled.

“Are you calling me a liar?” Stephen asked, being sure to keep his voice low, he had to control himself in the presence of his children. “Do you think that the only reason a Guardian’s Mate would approach an Alpha is if he wished to sink a knife between their ribs? Well, you are wrong.”

“I mean no offense” The large Sentinel said bowing his head. “A Guardian Mate would die before bonding to an Alpha with any but the highest character. Most would choose to mate with a Guardian, one who can assure they are well cared for and honored. That he came to you is a matter of puzzlement on one hand but it is also proof that the Ellison clan deserves its stature in our society. You say your bond saved his life. How did it do so?”

Stephen exhaled and let his muscles relax. “Yes. His uncle had arranged for him to bond with a high-ranking Sentinel. He wanted the prestige that it would bring the family. Andy met the Sentinel discovered they were not compatible and refused the bond. They tried to force it on him, they kept him locked in a room and sent his mother with drugged food and water. But she helped him to escape. I was in hiding with my Guide and our children. I needed help to care for them and I also needed to keep up appearances that my first Guide and children had died in childbirth. I bonded with Dahl and that helped but I needed another Sentinel to stay with Bell and the children when I was away. I was looking for a Sentinel mate but none I found were suitable. Then one day there was a knock on the door and Andy was there. He said he heard that I was looking for a mate. He said he had been watching me and he liked the way I treated my Guides and children. He was great with the babies and I just knew he was the one I sought. There was something different about him. He had something the others didn’t have. He was fearless, sometimes to a fault, I later learned what he was, but I knew even from the first that he would never back down in defense of our family. So we bonded. About a month later his uncle and Sentinel Dragorin, the Sentinel Andy had been promised to, found us. Dragorin challenged me. I killed him…” Stephen shrugged, as if it were nothing, like swatting a fly. The Guardian who was watching him closely nodded as Stephen drew in a deep breath and continued. “Under Sentinel law, in that country, I inherited all his property. I moved to his Compound arranged a second marriage for Dragorin’s wife and took in Andy’s family so his brothers would be safe. We set up a school for Guides and Andy’s brothers are receiving their Sentinel training privately, I let his Uncle know that Andy’s family was now my responsibility. We lived that way until my father called to tell me he was working for Guide reforms.”

“The Guardians owe you a debt of honor for your actions regarding your mates’ family.” The big man said.

“No you don’t, it was and is my duty. There is no debt attached to it.” Stephen said, “I have revealed to the Guardians the name of Andy’s family, and the location of his brothers so they can be protected and have a chance of happiness, without looking over their shoulders for the rest of their lives. I hope there will be an opportunity for them to meet and mate with men who will keep them safe. They are not Alpha, all three are Beta. Perhaps it will prove true they are all potential mates.”

“Daddy,” a little voice called, “I’m tired, I want Mama.” Stephen noticed Cara was sitting in the middle of a pile of flowers. Her eyelids were drooping. Behind her Simone toddled after a young cat that was proving far fleeter than she.
“Okay, Sweetie,” Stephen said as he scooped his daughter into his arms. “We’ll go see Mama and then you can have a story and a nap.”

“Me too, Daddy, carry me too.” Simone was holding up her chubby arms.

Stephen transferred his first daughter to one arm and then bent down to pick up his other daughter. They held on to him and lay their heads on either side of his chest.

Billy came over and stamped his foot, his lower lip protruding. “There is no room for me, Daddy! If Papa Andy was here he’d let me ride on his shoulders.” The boy looked rebellious, his small brows knitted together across his smooth forehead.

The Guardian looked down at the child gazing into his very blue eyes. “I am a poor substitute for your Papa but if your father allows it you may ride on my shoulders.”

Billy looked up at the mile high shoulders mentioned then eagerly at his father; he’d be a lot higher up than his sisters. “Please Daddy?” His eyes were huge as he waited for Stephen’s answer.

Stephen nodded. “Yes, you may. Thank you,” he said to the Sergeant as Billy giggled with glee, leaping up into the man’s arms when the Guardian bent down to pick him up. Billy was maturing physically at a far more rapid rate than his sisters and he was stronger than any other three year old Stephen had ever seen.

They walked in silence half way back to the Nursery until Stephen could no longer stifle his ‘what the hell’ attitude. “How do I get the Guardians to stop sniffing Andy?” He asked bluntly, determined to get an answer if there was one to be had.

“It is doubtful that you will be able to achieve such an outcome. Why would you want to?” The Sergeant was earnest, not mocking. Stephen frowned, feeling he was missing something.

“I don’t need the constant reminding and veiled challenges,” Stephen said in a quiet tone. “I know that he is desired. I know that perhaps he would be...happy to be the mate of a Guardian. But he is mine, my family is his family, he is...a second father to my children. We do not want to lose him. I love him as I do our Guides and our children.”

“Scenting a Guardian Mate is not a challenge it is a compliment, a sign of recognition. We have never been permitted to openly acknowledge those who should be ours. The Alphas have often stood in our way.” the Sergeant answered. “We do him honor, and you. We acknowledge he is worth having, worth scenting, we give him recognition that we know and respect what he is. If he is ever free he will not want for a place to belong.”

“I guess I have a lot to learn about Guardians then,” Stephen said with an ironic laugh. “I don’t even know your name.”

“I will be glad to teach you about Guardians, and I am Sergeant Jackson Miller. I am assigned to watch your children, day or night.” The big man who was carrying Billy high up on his shoulders, said.

Billy crowed with delighted laughter, his fingers knotted in the Guardian’s dark hair, his heels drumming on the broad chest. “Faster!” He demanded, “I want to go faster!”

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Jim stood in the shower and let the icy cold water run over him until he was shivering and his entire world was the sensation of cold. It consumed him, his skin dimpling with it. It wasn’t helping. He
needed Blair and he could not forget it, nor did the cold drive the need from him. He had waited for his Guide, hoping Blair would sense he was needed, that he would acknowledge the Sentinel/Guide bond they shared, but minutes had become hours and Blair did not show. Finally, absent his Guide and his Companion, Jim Ellison had struggled to his feet and into the freezing torrent of the shower. Now he forced himself to stand, hands braced against the tiled wall, and endure the chilling water.

The Guardians had received a tip that a cargo-container filled with young Guides was being smuggled out of Cascade’s port this morning.

Jim headed the contingent of five angry Alpha Sentinels, along with five Guardian Sentinels as they searched for the container. He thought they would need more men but the Guardians seemed to be able to sense the distressed Guides in a way that the Alphas could not. The insulated and soundproofed container was no hindrance to their search.

They found the terrified Guides in the vast dock area quickly, crowded into a locked container wearing very little clothing and with nothing to eat but a barrel of Guide kibble and a barrel of water. A thin layer of hay was strewn on the floor for sleeping, and a portable toilet was fastened in one corner for the use of all ten. The Guides had been locked in just after dark and the pirates were long gone.

The Guardians had locked onto the scent of the smugglers, and once a Guardian started tracking they did not give up until they had their prey. The five were off and running once assured that the Alpha Sentinels would see the rescued Guides to safety. Jim knew that these particular traffickers were dead men walking, even if the Guardians had to follow them to the other end of the world, they would be found and punished. Time and distance meant nothing to a Guardian in pursuit of anyone who abused a Guide.

Being with the stressed Guides, comforting them with touch and low purrs had been one more test for Jim to endure. They clung to him, frightened, seeking reassurance. The heat of their bodies, the warm scent, and the press of flesh pushed all of his senses into overdrive. All around him the other Alphas were in similar positions, comforting frightened Guides, leading them to the covered vans that would take the trembling creatures to safety. For Jim it was agony, too close to what he needed, and yet too far from it to be enough. They were not Blair.

For Jim the scene had been too reminiscent of what had happened to his Guide. How many men had forced themselves on Blair in an effort to increase his sale value by impregnating him? Jim did not wish to think of it. His body screamed for him to get home to his Guide, to check and see that Blair was alright and to renew his bond. But he had to clean the scent of fear and pain from his skin before he could approach his Guide.

Dragging himself from the shower, Jim dried himself roughly as he shivered and then dressed. There was a blue tinge to his skin, only after he was fully dressed, and under rigid control did he return to the Nursery hoping that Blair would now be free.

Blair was fully involved in taking care of the children and reading a stack of papers, Maire sitting at his feet, resting her back against Blair's chair. When Jim entered Maire moved under the table, pulling her veil down over her face. Jim looked away, allowed her time to lower the veil, then went to the overwhelmed Blair and stroked Blair's hair as he nursed one of the children. Blair had smiled at him abstractedly, a faint frown creasing his brow as if he sensed something was not right but couldn't pinpoint what it was. Jim couldn't find the words to describe what he'd come from witnessing. Not wanting to distress his Guide or the babies Jim drew back, his eyes haunted as he looked away.

Rafe was nearby and Jim turned to him, taking him in his arms. Rafe went to him, pliant and
biddable, willingly resting against his Alpha’s body, His face nuzzled into the bend of Jim’s neck. Jim wasted no time, taking Rafe to their private quarters in an attempt to quiet his body’s call.

He had been taking Rafe twice a day in an attempt to quell his need, but his craving grew steadily, unremitting, the one thing his body wanted was Blair. Today the wild coupling was no different, and he left Brian, his Sentinel Companion, in the tangle of sweat soaked sheets to cool himself in the icy shower again. His closed eyes could not shield him any more than the frigid flow, and he felt his sense memory recall the touch of soft curls on his hand. He ducked his head letting the spray take him in the face.

He moaned at the pictures that filled his mind. His Guide in his bed, in Rafe’s place under him, spread wide and unshielded waiting to be taken, his body pierced and claimed. Blair, ready to embrace him, to feel the slide of bliss enter him, to feel, taste, scent, see, hear the movement they made together, their smells mixing, the dew of sweat, the power of the touch they could have, Sentinel and Guide.

Jim shook his head violently. Blair was not available. He was nursing, caring for others who needed him. He had that right now; the right to say when and where he would be claimed, and his Sentinel had to wait. Jim had to wait. The mouthful of water was so cold it burned as he swallowed it. And still it wasn’t enough to cool him inside or out. He twisted the knobs, giving in to the failure of his control, dousing the stinging spray, biting the inside of his cheek, the iron rich taste of blood bathing his taste buds. He spit the mouthful onto the tiles, watching it wash away with the last of the water, a slash of vibrant red that reflected the dangerous fire that seared his gut.

Tousled, Rafe leaned up on his braced elbows, blinking at him.

“Jim?” His query was soft, uncertain. Jim strode across the intervening floor, six quick strides, until his knees hit the bed, Rafe’s eyes widening in alarm. His hand planted itself in the middle of the younger man’s chest, pushing hard, pinning him to the bed, his movement all aggression, all power, all heat.

The need had control, all of it. Jim had lapped at Rafe’s skin earlier, at his throat, his cheeks, his face, all the places where there had been the lingering if faint scent of Guide. Now it smelled only of him, of Rafe, and frustrated he bit into the tender flesh, not breaking skin but trying to taste deeper, down below the surface. But again there was no more taste of Guide.

Rafe’s hiss of pain brought him back to himself. He growled down at the man who lay on his back looking up at Jim bending over him, feeling the shift of lean muscle against his palm. He could still smell it, the scent of Blair, of the children Rafe had been tending, all Guides. He hunted for the reservoir of that trace. He found it on Rafe’s hands.

Jim didn’t try to hold back his moan as he licked over the right palm, savoring the taste/scent. Rich. Undeniable. He took the thickness of Brian’s thumb into his mouth, suckled it. He worked his way around finger to finger, then switched hands. Entering Rafe was not difficult, he was still relaxed from before, and Jim sheathed himself inside. He went from beside the bed, to on it, hooking his forearms under Rafe’s knees and into him in one slippery, perfect movement.

Jim found himself heading for the Nursery; he didn’t even realize it until he was outside the door, staring at the faces of the two Guardians who stood there. Their eyes were flat, emotionless as they watched him come to a stop. He felt the ripple of nervous energy flow over his skin. He shivered. One of the men shifted his feet, turned, his head lowering, gaze narrowing, growing less flat, harder. Jim saw the nostrils of the man flare.
They would not let him into the Nursery in the state he was in now; Jim had no doubt of it. He spun on his heel, turning his back on them, growling his frustration and heading for his father’s office, away from the delicious feel of Guides that ran like balm over his senses, and yet drove him slowly mad. He shook his head, increasing his speed, the sound of his footsteps, his shoes slapping the flagstones taking up a staccato rhythm that pounded into his skull.

The sunlight was like a knife stabbing into his brain through the portals of his eyes, he squinted, eyes watering, raising his hand to shield them, until he entered the welcome dimness of the Main Hall. Heads swiveled his way, and clerks hastily backed up, disappearing into rooms or further down the hall. He hesitated for an instant as his pained eyes adjusted. Then he went for William’s door.

William looked up, startled by the unannounced intrusion. “Jim?” He asked, lowering the pages he had been reading. Admiral Bellingham gained his feet with a smooth surge that Jim barely noticed. “I was just telling the Admiral…” William began, speaking to his son.

Jim stalked across the floor, his face flushed, his mouth drawn into a snarl. He saw a flash, and spun to the left, to see the intersecting lines of a blueprint tacked onto the wall. The lines captivated him, rotating him around, flowing into one another in a fascinating way that commanded all of Jim’s attention.

He fell into the lines, his forward momentum slowing, stalling in front of it.

“Jim?” William stepped nearer, only to feel a huge hand on his arm stopping him. William looked down at the hand, not believing someone had dared touch him without his leave. His head snapped up, his eyes meeting the darker ones of Admiral Bellingham. The eye contact was fleeting, and then the Guardian was looking back at Jim.

“He has zoned.” The deep voice said, and William blinked, not understanding. Then, he frowned; Jim was standing so very still. “Your son has zoned, Ruler Ellison.” The Admiral said again, drawing William’s eyes, his voice softened, soothing, and easier to understand.

William looked back at his son. “Jim hasn’t zoned for years, not since he was a child.” He said, puzzled. It couldn’t be, it wasn’t possible. Not now that his son had chosen his Guide. Blair would never let it happen, let Jim get into such a state. He started forward, intending to go to Jim, who was standing stock still, his gaze fixed, his chest barely rising and falling with shallow breaths. “Oh my god….Jim?” It was true. Unmistakably true. He would shake him back to reality; William reached out, only to be jerked to a halt once more.

“No. Do not touch him, not unless you are ready to deal with a rogue Sentinel, which I prefer not to do.” Bellingham rumbled. “This is not a situation for a father to deal with, it needs a Guide.”

Chapter 36

Warmth.

That was the first inkling of awareness Jim Ellison felt. Just a small patch of warmth against his chest, not large, about the size of a single hand. It stayed there, on his chest, seeping into his cells, infusing him with heat where he had been so very cold. He felt the fingers of the hand curling, rubbing his skin, and he held still to enjoy the sensation, distant as it was. He wanted it closer, larger, more intimately.

He choked, drawing in air for the first time in so long he couldn't remember, and it hurt, the raw air filling his lungs. Air and scent. Sweet, welcome scent, slightly spicy, musk that was terribly faint; and stronger, the rich, beckoning scent of milk, it made his mouth water, his tongue licked at his lips, rasping, desiring. He breathed in the smells, let them curl in his lungs, finding every patch of aching emptiness that had been there for so long, filling them, filling him, rolling across his tongue like a fine sweet wine.

When his hearing came back it was to find a soothing, regular rhythm vibrating in his ear. Deep, rushing, calming. The most wonderful white noise he could ever hear. The beating of a heart he loved more than his own. Beating, beating, close, sounding full of life, of purpose, of comfort. It was sound he could sleep in, could rest in, while it healed him.

He could move soon after that, lift his hand off the floor with effort, and place it on the soft warmth where all he wanted lived. He rested there, his fingers tensing, gradually beginning to define what he touched, who, a thigh, a Guide. Life for any Sentinel, filled with the power to give life, to carry life and deliver life. His Guide.

Turning his head took time and even more effort, but Jim managed at last, seeking the heat that cradled his cheek. Moving was worth the effort it took to see the haloed nimbus of gold, copper and chestnut brown around a worried face. Blair. He gazed into indigo blue, falling into the deep set eyes, deep and dark, pools that never ended, with lashes like lacy spikes, spiced with the scent of salt, wet. Tears.

Tears that made no sense. They were here, together, what else could matter? He struggled, concentrated and his hand lifted higher, to the rounded cheek of the beautiful face that filled his dreams. His thumb caressed the fine skin, working across it, marvelling at the texture, the familiar strangeness. It was his...but not. He couldn't take it. Not without asking. His but not his. A flare of despair flooded him, conflict, a knife through his heart, his gut.

"Jim?" Yes tears, they were not only on the Guide's face, but in his voice as he spoke, tones that promised everything, each emotion in its fullest. Sadness now, Blair was crying. "I am so sorry." He held Jim's hand, the one Ellison had not tried to lift as of yet. He held that hand, and wrapped his strong, square fingers around the Sentinel's. Jim felt the callouses, the pulse of blood so shallow under the skin.

Jim lay still, gazing up at the face, soaking up the scent, listening to not only heartbeat but the treasured voice. He felt the knot that had lived in his chest for so long loosen, unraveling, fading. He could breathe, he didn't hurt, perhaps there was hope in those eyes that gazed down, brimming with tears. Perhaps he would be allowed to touch. There was nothing wrong with laying on his back. Not even here, especially not here, with his Guide so close. He looked around. They were in his father's office. He ignored it, the oddity of being on the thick rug, laying there not trying to get up, the nagging questions. He turned his gaze back to Blair. That was the important thing, the only one.
There was something else he wanted, and he would be complete once he had it. The thought slipped and almost got away, but he had it, held it, wouldn't let it go. And it struck him, that last need. He knew, then he tried to share it as he lay on his back, his head gently pillowed on a welcoming thigh.

"Sssst.\" He said through dried out lips. His tongue didn't want to work. Blair's face twisted, his lips trembling. He bent forward, his body closer, warmer, the scent stronger, tingling across Jim's senses. His mouth watered. He lapped at his lips again.

"Oh, God.\" Blair whispered. "What have I done? Jim?\" His hands patted at Jim's face, his chest. All good, Jim accepted it, waited, trying to tell his Guide what else he needed. So close. Only a little closer would be enough. Jim begged with his eyes. Begged as hard as he could. Please. Why couldn't his Guide understand?

Another scent, a sound, too close, Jim tensed, nostrils flaring. Tried to turn, to strike, to protect his Guide from the marauding presence. He wanted only Blair near, only his Guide. He wallowed, his movement uncoordinated, jerked as he turned, fell on his face again, weak.

William Ellison, the Ruler of Cascade, bent down, worried when Jim didn't immediately get up off the floor. Around the room the Guardians shifted restlessly, not liking the events, not liking the Ruler moving towards the downed Sentinel. William paid no attention to them nor the one who followed behind him, within easy reach.

All the previous zones William witnessed Jim have, and none had been recent, passed quickly when a Guide had been summoned to attend to his son. This time he seemed confused, his eyes unfocused. He was having trouble moving, his arms flailing, his words incomprehensible. Jim who was one of the most beautiful athletes the Ruler of Cascade had ever seen, who moved like a sleek, large cat on the hunt.

The presence, the smell moved nearer, and Jim felt the sharp course of adrenaline flash through his body, the taste of it bitter in his mouth, sharp in his nose, churning a path from his chest to his fingertips, to his toes. He whirled, lashed out in one lightning fast motion, claws fully extended, body arched in extreme extension, fluid and sure. Satisfaction was fierce, immediate, the bared throat was ~there~, in his range. Vulnerable, blood vessels throbbing under the skin, full of blood that would soon pool at his feet, his rival dead, his Guide safe. His.

William watched, almost not believing it as he saw it, the perfection of effort. A fatal blow, impossible to avoid, he closed his eyes and waited for it. Jim would rule, and well, William had every confidence.

Jim timed his strike flawlessly, flipping onto his side and raking his extended claws through the air. There was no way the rival Alpha could avoid the blow, Jim felt triumphant satisfaction surge through his body.

Blair never had a chance to grab Jim's arm. He could only watch helplessly as the deadly claws moved like lightning through the air. Memories of the foul vet in bloody pieces on the Guide House floor filled his vision and he tried to scream, but the only sound Blair could make was a pitiful squeak of protest. He didn't want the same fate for William, the man who had listened, who had believed and whose generosity had given Blair hope of a new life.

William saw the claws coming for him, directed at his throat, there was nothing he could do, no way to avoid the strike. He couldn't watch it. But instead of a hot pain at his neck, he felt a huge force at his back, and he was literally ripped from his feet backwards, feeling the claws pass fractions of an inch from his carotid, scraping the tender skin on his throat but not killing him as Admiral Bellingham jerked him away from harm, with the power of a Guardian's speed and strength. William
was stunned, on his hands and knees, panting, hardly able to believe he was alive, not dying.

Blair wasted no time pressing his body the length of Jim's back. He'd thought William was dead. But he'd gotten away with four shallow parallel gashes across his throat. They oozed blood but did not gush, Admiral Bellingham had saved William Ellison's life.

Jim saw, the rival was gone, its heart still beating, no blood spilled, jerked backwards out of reach by a huge force, there one second in reach, half a breath later, just gone, out of range. Jim felt the barest scrape of his claws over flesh, smelt the splash of too little coppery blood, felt anger, disappointment. He bared his teeth and hissed his rage. Scratches, mere scratches, where he'd been so close to victory, he growled his anger, his frustration.

Blair wrapped his arms around his Sentinel and watched as William was tugged further back into the corner of the office, Bellingham putting the bulk of his large body between the Ruler and the Heir. Jim was still fixed on his hidden rival, not seeing the familiarity of the rival at all, just seeing, knowing, scenting another Sentinel, one who was trying to claim his Guide. His growl grew in volume, his head casting side to side trying to see the other.

Jim growled, made it fully onto his knees and fell to the side, adrenaline-magic fading, his arms collapsing under him. He lay on his side panting, ignoring the shouts that filled the room. His head was cushioned on soft flesh. Guide scent filling his awareness, his forehead pressed into a soft belly, the scent of sex and Guide flooding him. Dampness against his cheek. He turned his face, inhaled. Milk, ah, so good.

"He is not your son right now." The Guardian Admiral spat out trying to shield William who he pinned back with one elbow, and watch the other Sentinel, the Heir, hoping he would not be able to rise. "To him you are not his father, you are another Alpha approaching his Guide when he is unable to stand and face you. You are a threat!"

William didn't want to believe it was so, even though it was. His son would kill him, if he got close enough to help, kill him in the red rage of the moment and feel no regret, until later when he would be overwhelmed with remorse. He saw the way Jim's straining eyes searched the room in the direction William was, even behind the much larger Admiral, William couldn't really hide. Jim knew he was there. William watched as Blair folded his body over Jim, surrounding him with all things Guide.

It was so achingly hard to roll his uncooperative body, but Jim did. Sheer will power got him back up to his hands and knees. His Guide was with him, here, out in the open, with no other protection, only Jim. Jim strained.

Blair felt Jim's muscles bunch, preparatory to leaping after William, he held on tightly. "Jim. No. I'm here." He clung to Jim, desperate to keep him from launching another attack on his father. But he knew there was no way he would be able to stop him if Jim leapt. "Jim I'm here," he called again and again, frantic to get through to his Sentinel. He could feel Jim's muscles continue to coil for attack and knew that not even his full weight would slow the Sentinel, not when he believed his Guide was at risk. And then movement from both sides converged in front of the huddled Blair and growling Jim, blocking the path to William and the Admiral. Bella, Dahl and the fully robed and veiled Maire were there, a shield between them and disaster. Maire took her place in the middle, flinging her white robes wide to each side into the outstretched hands of the other two Guides and spreading her arms, so her robes blocked all sight of the two men in the corner of the room.

Blair felt Jim relax a fraction. His Sentinel could still smell the other Alpha, but the scent was diminished by the scent of multiple Guides. Jim tilted, sinking down, fell for the third or fourth time, a heap of muscle and bone, breathing hard.
The smell faded, the rival Sentinel out of reach, out of sight, out of range, unable to approach or take the Guide. Jim lay on his face; his arms limp at his sides, Jim couldn't lift them, that was beyond him. He had to prioritize, and getting closer to the scent, promise, taste again became the most crucial goal. He wriggled. His face finally pressed into the taste, his mouth opening to inhale it, the tiny molecules entering him with each breath, all of it, scent, taste, touch, and the relentless beat of the wonderful heart. Guide. Guide, Guide. Each beat announced it.

At last his mouth had the last bit he needed. Tasting the Guide, and he pressed into the dampness of the cloth. His tongue flickered out, tasted the full power of flavor that soaked the material. Life. Strength. Guide. Blair.

He was fumbling through the layers of cloth before he knew what he was doing. Proximity to the Guide brought back some degree of strength, enough to seek out what he needed to recover himself. It was too far away, the cloth too binding. Jim slid his claws free, slashed through the flimsy robes with the ease of butter cleaved by a hot knife. There. Flesh, skin. Blair. Jim put his face against naked skin, a pebbled nipple, opened his mouth and sucked.

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Rafe was in the hall outside of the wall of big Guardian bodies, unsure of what to do. He wanted to go to his Alpha and to his Guide. He itched to go to them. But he didn't want to have to force his way through the tightly grouped, serious faced men. He didn't want to touch them, and have them touch him. He paced up and down the corridor. His fangs were bared, his claws bristling, then he ducked his head, submissive. He heard a noise, a whimper. A moan. His hackles rose. He eyed the men blocking the door. Fists like hams, shoulders like mountains. Taller than himself, broader, harder. He snarled, turned, paced.

A shout from in the room. Blair letting out a cry. Rafe's head spun, his feet taking him toward the noise. The men, the big Guardians, were still blocking his way, but Rafe no longer cared. He went ~through~ them to get to his Sentinel Alpha and their Guide.
Blue snuggled in against the warm muscular body as his mate's giant hand lovingly stroked down his arm, across his hip and up his back. He was as close to purring as humanly possible. He had never felt so content, so relaxed and secure, his limbs feeling like so much jelly. His little happy and relaxed moans were making his mate smile.

"Blue, we have to get up," Mike said, his voice quiet as he gently rocked his lover, Blue's body was almost liquid against his. Even in the setting of warmth and repose, he was aware of a growing sense of unease that he could not explain away. There was no physical threat in the secured room with them, no urgent deadline he could recall. He extended his hearing, but heard nothing that would give him any clue as to what was setting all his senses on edge. He leaned in and kissed the smooth forehead of the man he held to his chest, ruffling the soft hair that fell in a heavy wave across closed eyes. "Blue, I need you to wake up now."

Blue woke immediately and fully. There was something in the tone, although spoken softly, that told the young Sentinel there was an emergency that needed attention. Blue sat up, the veil of sleep instantly gone from his mind. He wasn't exactly tense but he was prepared. "What is it?" he asked, ready to respond even in his state of nakedness if need be. In the short time he had been the Guardian's mate he had come to know that the big guy had a sixth sense when it came to the safety of Guides or the Ellison family.

Rathe shook his head, frustrated that he couldn't put it into words. "It is just a feeling, something is wrong. I can't pin it down." He said. He sat upright now that his moving wouldn't jolt Caleb. "But I need to find my father. I can't stay here, and I'd like you to be with me. I want you with me." He couldn't say why, it went beyond the usual reluctance of leaving a new mate, of pulling out of contact for more than the briefest of times, this was definitely more than that. Just the thought of Blue being out of his sight raised the hair on the back of his neck. His arms tightened, flexing until they took on the hard, immovable texture of iron. Blue let out a little grunt at the force, exerted by the arm around his shoulders.

"Ok," Caleb said, chilled by the predatory, scanning look in the normally loving eyes, "let's get up." He gazed up at the preoccupied face, seeing that Rathe was still trying to isolate whatever it was that was alerting him to trouble. The large man's brow was furrowed. Guides in trouble? Ruler Ellison? Something else? Guardian business? It could be anything, and they wouldn't find out what it was by sitting here. Gently Blue disengaged himself, from the hard grip. "I promise, I will not be out of your sight. You won't have to worry about me."

Rathe nodded and both men slid out of bed. Rathe headed right for the closet and clothing. Caleb froze on the way to the bathroom and a strongly desired hot shower. This was new, Rathe was usually impeccable when it came to grooming. Not today.

"Time for a shower?" Blue asked hopefully as he watched his mate take down a uniform and prepare to put it on. They smelled of sex and of each other. It was a scent few Mundanes would miss, and none of the Sentinels in the house would. Rathe wasn't moving slowly, he was pulling his clothes on with ever increasing speed.

Caleb hurried over to his own side of the closet. He wasted no time insisting on an answer from the sense absorbed Guardian, knowing Rathe was sifting through the information, assessing, collating and discarding the relevant from the irrelevant bits. He doubted that Rathe would hear any questions until he dialled his senses down and refocused on here and now. Caleb may as well have not been in
the room at all. Only...that wasn't precisely true, if Caleb wasn't near, then Rathe would be wasting energy looking for him and keeping track. Having Blue nearby meant Rathe could expend his energies fully on other things besides monitoring his mate. They finished dressing in silence.

When Rathe headed for the door without even trying to shave Caleb knew whatever they were heading into was bad. He grabbed his mate's sleeve, halting the much larger man. He watched Rathe's eyes struggle to see him, then he had all of the fearsome attention. He swallowed.

"Do not put yourself at risk." Blue said, holding on, refusing to let go until he was sure Rathe heard what he was saying. "Remember, your life is mine. What hurts you will hurt me."

Rathe looked at him for a long moment. "I can not be anything but what I am." He said at last. "I am Guardian." He reached up and cupped Blue's face.

"Michael!" Caleb said, suddenly afraid, his hands knotted into even tighter fists, bunching the dark fabric of the uniform. "Don't you fucking try to be a hero...."

"You swore to me that you would accept what I was. You forbade me to set you free. This is what I am, I can not be else." Rathe murmured, his eyes like pits of green fire.

And that was true enough. Caleb grabbed his collar and hauled him down close. He kissed him hard.

"I love you." He said, once he'd pulled away to breathe. He thought his heart would stop from the clench of pained fear. There were a thousand things he needed to say, but all he repeated was, "I love you."

Rathe ran his thumb over the sweet mouth swollen by days of kissing, meeting the wide grey eyes filled to overflowing with trepidation. "And I you." Such a simple declaration, but it said everything. Caleb nodded, letting his fingers slowly unknot from the collar he grasped. Rathe didn't try to smile, his jaw was clenched.

He led the way out of the suite. They ran down the hall, Caleb pushing hard to keep up.

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It was a disappointment really, that Rafe didn't have to fight to get through the bunched men blocking the door. Once he headed straight at the ranks of Guardians, once his claws slipped out of their sheaths, the big men melted away out of his path, giving him a clear shot into the room beyond, and they were fast, so damn fast, they flashed aside, spun, almost pushed him along until Rafe had reached his goal, his claws disappointingly bloodless. Rafe took it, the easy way, despite wanting to fight, wanting to show them he would fight for his Alpha, his Guide. He would, he'd fight hard. He'd protect them, he'd give his life for either. But it turned out he didn't have to.

He got inside and crouched assessing the situation in an instant. He saw Jim lying on his side with Blair in front of him, his breasts partially bare, exposed in the center of the room, Jim's face resting on his chest, his mouth suckling gently. Blair's hands fluttered, coming to rest on Jim's cheek, then trying to cover his breasts, then back to Jim. Rafe headed that way, across the carpet, ready to stand over his fallen Alpha and offer protection.

Blair's expression was one of worry, of self condemnation and self consciousness. He tried to hold the nursing robe closed without separating from his Sentinel, but Jim, by being where he was prevented that. The conflict, wanting to be covered, versus wanting to be close to his Sentinel warred on Blair's face. Rafe grunted, looking around, seeing all the eyes watching, unhappy being exposed to even the dispassionate gaze of the Guardians. Worse, there was another Alpha in the room, and others who had no right to see what was being shown, Rafe sniffed at the air, sorting through the
arousal, the anger, fear, the reek of testosterone from too many sources, his hackles raising. He paced
with measured tread to Jim and Blair's side, close but not too close.

The other Alpha was familiar, Jim's father, but it only mattered that he was an Alpha in here on the
far side of the room; a second Alpha, where there should be only one. Rafe wasn't happy about his
presence. The pressure to bow his head to his Ruler fought with the need to eliminate all threats to
his vulnerable Alpha and Guide. Perceptions fed into his brain, flew past the higher brain and turned
to flame deep in the reptilian remnant of the brain stem, firing the territorial imperative. In the space
of seconds it became clear which instinct would win. Defend the Guide. Destroy the rival. Reclaim
the territory.

Rafe growled and stalked on stiff legs towards the corner where the Alpha was trying to conceal
himself. With each step his body became more fluid, lubricated by the rush of fighting hormones, he
stalked, intent on the prey that threatened the Bond, one who looked on the bared skin of his Guide,
the rival Alpha who dared inhale the tantalizing, receptive scent of the claimed Guide, one who
sought to take the Guide. Barely enough humanity remained in Rafe to grunt his command, "Out," in
a voice so garbled it was surprising that he was understood at all. His body quivered with the need to
battle. He held his feet rooted in place, his muscles jumping.

Admiral Bellingham was no fool, he took the opportunity unexpectedly offered and dragging the
Ruler of Cascade behind him, he went for the door and the hallway where safety lay.

Rafe held himself rigidly immobile for as long as he could, until they were almost out of range and
then instinct overwhelmed his best intentions and he sprang for them as they retreated in a rush of
snarls and claws. Guardians had long since grabbed the remaining Guides and the room was
suddenly emptied, leaving only Blair and Jim in the center of the room behind the attacking
Companion, Admiral Bellingham and William Ellison very near the door.

Witnessing his prey nearly out of reach, Rafe sprang, clearing the distance in a flash, running up
against the outstretched arm of the Guardian. The other Alpha snarled a warning from beyond the
Guardian Admiral. Rafe answered, trying to maneuver around the bulk between them, slashing the
air with his claws. He saw the flash of similar, wickedly hooked claws rake at him, almost close
enough to seize, he bared his fangs and snapped his jaws shut with a warning hiss. He wriggled,
shoving, trying to work his way to his goal, no more interested in the Guardian than if the man were
a rock to be climbed to get to his destination.

William's scream of challenge hit Rafe's ears like an ice pick thrust to the lizard brain, shooting down
his nerves and he screamed his own challenge back.

Rafe had almost succeeded in getting around the Guardian when he saw another of the big men enter
the room, larger than even the Admiral. It was Michael, face grimly determined reaching out with
huge arms and locking ham sized hands onto William who was again snatched out of harm's way,
out of reach, fighting it, all civilized veneer absent his face. They disappeared out the door in a ball of
raking claws and and spittle and blood.

Bellingham, who was swearing a blue streak, gained the door, blood streaming from the arms of his
shredded uniform, pierced in multiple places by William and Rafe; his arms and chest a mess of
tattered skin and fabric, he followed after the Captain, pulling the door shut behind him with a
decisive crash.

Rafe slammed the heavy, manual bolt on the door, securing it against all intrusion that didn't destroy
the door itself. Anything less and whoever sought entry would not get through. He grunted in
momentary satisfaction. He sank to the floor for a moment, he heard them on the other side of the
door, moving, muttering. Then his chin lifted, eyes going to the windows. They were outside as well,
It was quick work, closing all the drapes and tying them shut. Then Brian settled himself on the plush carpet a careful six feet from his Alpha and their Guide to watch and wait. Rafe took the time to attend to himself, licking the blood off his claws, careful to get every trace from them. The taste was of Guardian blood only, no taint of another Alpha, which was a great disappointment, the blood of the vanquished would have been heady wine on his tongue. But the regret could be borne in light of the fact that the other Alpha had been driven from Jim's territory and away from the Guide.

Rafe dropped his head when Jim's summoning growl reached his ears. He crawled forward, inch by inch, until he'd attained Jim's side. Jim's hand touched his bowed head, a benediction, a reward and Rafe felt his heart swell. His licked the wrist in front of his face, kissed the strong forearm, up the back of the hand, and understood completely when Jim withdrew his hand, turned back to the their Guide a moment later, trying to sit up.

Carefully Rafe helped Jim discard the clothing that encumbered him. He examined his Alpha for injuries and found none. Jim exchanged a brief look with him then once more turned his attention to Blair who was biting his lip, watching. The Guide's large blue eyes made it clear he understood what was happening and what was being asked of him, his hands held the front of his robe closed.

Rafe knelt in front of Blair, on the other side of Jim. He waited until Blair broke the gaze he shared with Jim. Then very slowly Rafe raised his hands and touched Blair's robe. He waited for Blair to make the decision. Blair's hands spasmed where they held the fabric together. His generous mouth was uncertain, soft and trembling. Blair clutched at the fabric, then slowly he released his grip.

Rafe helped Blair slip the robe from his shoulders, shielding Blair with the warmth of his own body. Brian moved up behind Blair, straddling Jim's legs. If the Guide needed him, he was here. He held out his hands to Blair, waiting for the Guide to chose.

Blair gave his hand to Rafe without hesitation, they shared a brief glance, fingers wrapped around each other's, then Rafe helped him move forward, both turned their gazes back to Jim who rested on his back beneath them, still, waiting, his classic features handsome, his eyes patient but filled with a very obvious need.

Blair lifted himself higher for one moment, allowing Rafe to help him find his balance, Rafe's hand reaching down touching Blair, slipping low, spreading the soft folds of his body, then Blair sank down, taking his Sentinel inside, slick and sweet and so right, knowing it was what Jim needed. His head fell back as he slid down and was filled.

Jim's hands fisted, then unfolded, spreading wide on Blair's thighs, caressing, holding, loving, digging in, unable to let go. His lids fluttered shut, his neck arching as a sigh escaped him, feeling Blair around him, hot, tight, flesh around flesh, Sentinel encompassed by Guide. He watched Blair's nipples tighten all at once, six pink/brown peaks, the Guide's body shuddering, his knees separating wider, yielding.

Rafe's arms moved around Blair, holding him, cradling them together, moving with him, a subtle surge at first, riding Jim, a barely noticed motion, then more. Blair moaned, Rafe's erection pressed to the small of his back. Jim's hips shook at the sound, his bright blue gaze fixed on the face of his Guide, and past his shoulder at the submissively averted face of his Companion.

Rafe helped Blair move, to stroke himself with the hard flesh that pierced him. Blair's head fell back to rest on Rafe's chest as Jim's hands found his soft genitals, exploring them with knowing fingers.

It was startling. The touch on his cock. Blair bent, curling over in surprise, eyes going wide at the
long missed sensation, as murmured whispers tickled his ear, a tongue lapping over his lobe, teeth nipping his throat until once more he was boneless surrounded by a pleasure he wanted more than anything.

A sweet long stroke inside, another outside, up and down his hardening flesh, a touch that made his body flutter. The need built, the need to give into it all, to feel and not to think, to know that this was his right, his to take, his to enjoy. Sentinel hands knowing his every point of sensitivity, finding each, touching him with tender worship. There was no question, he was Guide and this was his, his joy, his celebration, his duty, his right.

Rafe's hands were on his hips, then over to his belly, holding him, moving lower to cups his balls as Jim thrust deep. There was a tongue on his shoulder, the nape of his neck, licking. They went to the side, falling onto the carpet, Blair underneath one and beside the other as mouths tasted him, nuzzling, rasping like wet silk over his skin. Blair dropped into a well of sensation that built and built until his body exploded, out of his control, all the while held by knowing, belonging hands that took him too high, up until he tumbled over the edge, then carried him down, safe and sound and loved.

They lay, afterward in a panting heap of contentment, a wealth of arms and legs intertwined, relaxed as a pile of cats with bellies filled with cream. Sighing breaths leading into a restful sleep on top of the thick, knotted silk carpet. Blair's eyes drooped shut and he slept in the arms of his Alpha. Rafe's hand was on Blair as the Guide lay cuddled close in Jim's embrace, their joined bodies slipping apart.

It was Maire who rushed to William as soon as she saw the blood dripping from him. Bella and Dahl were not more than one step behind.

"I need a first aid kit," Bella ordered, meaning to handle the first aid herself. A Guardian gently moved her away. She opened her mouth to retort angrily, but saw the pale blond physician take her place next to William and begin working. William was angry, snarling and struggling to get to his feet. Dahl also found himself moved aside, gently herded by the Guardians towards where Andy and Stephen waited with ill concealed anxiety. Gracefully Bella changed her objective from caring for the Ruler of Cascade to soothing her agitated Sentinels. It hadn't been easy on them to witness the fight and know that their Guides were so close to the danger. Dahl was already in Andy's embrace, letting the Sentinel soothe himself by soothing his Guide.

Michael, still holding William as the ruler continued to growl at the closed and locked door, whispered into the elder's ear. "You are wounded, Father," the timbre of his voice modulated just right to penetrate the Alpha's mind. The scratches on the elder's neck were superficial but by their location the Guardian could tell they had been intended as a killing blow. "Rest. Let the doctor work."

"Jim wounded me and then Rafe attacked me," William growled, as his fight response began to wane. It was more a statement of facts than a condemnation. There was no outrage in his voice.

"Rafe was protecting his Alpha and his Guide," Michael whispered in his soothing tone. "Would you expect any less from Christopher?"

William took a deep breath and exhaled. With that his fight response dissolved and his ruler mentality returned. Michael released his father and took a step back as William scanned the hallway evaluating the situation. His eyes settled on Admiral Bellingham as his Guardians attended to him. The doctor stepped back from William and Maire moved closer taking his place. William looked down at her...
veiled face feeling a wave of pleasure at her public attention.

"You are not much injured." The Vet said to William. "You should shower and wash the cuts with soap and plenty of water. The sooner the better, Ruler." He bowed and moved to assess Admiral Bellingham who had far more in the way of injuries if the bleeding that hadn't stopped was any indication.

"How bad is it?" William asked, worried for his new friend. The Guardian had saved him from serious, perhaps fatal injury. Rafe was younger, very strong and fully caught up in the instinctive need to protect Jim and Blair. He would have held nothing back in a fight.

"He'll require stitches," the doctor said, tersely, his fingers touching lightly over the long slashes that traversed his arms and up to a few deep ones on his broad, bare chest. "But I can't tell if there will be permanent muscle or nerve damage." He began wrapping long lengths of cloth around the wounds. "We need to get the bleeding under control first. Then get him to the infirmary where I can clean and suture the lacerations."

"I assure you, Companion," Bellingham said with a laugh, "the wounds will heal with nothing more than a scar left behind. It is only a matter of time and a little pain." His attention was riveted in the doctor's fine features. The pale skinned man blushed, but didn't let the look distract him from his work, not even when the Admiral leaned in and sniffed at his neck with blatant appreciation, rumbling his approval of the scent.

"Humor me, and let me do my work, Guardian." Dr. Ashley scolded, mildly, trying not to notice the power of the muscles under his hands.

"I'm glad someone sees the humor in this," William said with a scowl. "I have been a Ruler for many years and a Sentinel all my life. And yet I made every wrong choice. It was my fault it came to this."

"No. Change is always painful and disorienting. It is not your fault. You reacted as a father. With concern. Nothing more." Rathe said. William looked at him, nodding after a few seconds of consideration.

"Still, it was the wrong choice." William said firmly. "Something that can't be changed." William glanced at the barred door again. Then Christopher was there, blocking his view, taking his arm.

"There are others to watch the door and to watch over Jim." Christopher said tightly. Maire's hand tightened infinitesimally on William's hand, and that more than anything else stopped the words of protest from being uttered.

"Yes." William Ellison let his Companion and his Guide lead him to their private rooms.

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"Imagine a Beta attacking an Alpha," William said to Christopher as his Companion cleaned and dressed the scratches on the Ruler's neck and the few deeper ones on his hands. "If the Admiral hadn't been there I would have had to kill him. Or at least try."

"Rafe is not an ordinary Beta," Christopher said. Maire was curled up next to William, hidden entirely by her robes but her weight was warm reassurance against his thigh.

"Those who are suitable as Guardian Mates do not back down in the face of superior force. I expect at some level you know this. Why else would the Ellisons chose such Betas as their Companions?" Christopher remarked.
"Perhaps we should have a new designation for Sentinels that are potential Guardian Mates," William said. "I will have to forgive Rafe of course, if it were any other Sentinel but my son in that condition I would have left the room as soon as his Guide arrived. Thank God the Admiral was there to save me from my poor judgement."

"Faulty logic is part of being a parent," Christopher said.

"Well," William frowned, "my faulty logic nearly caused my son to commit patricide."

"Nearly. But you are safe and well." Christopher said. "And that is all I ask."

William opened his mouth to say more, but a small, slender fingered hand stole out from under the puddled robes and touched his mouth. Startled he looked down and realized Maire had lifted her veil and was looking at him with a tender gaze.

"Please." She swallowed, "I would like for us to bond." Her gaze dropped, then rose again, seeing his eyes widen comically. She held on to her urge for a moment, then gave in and giggled. It was a tiny sound but real. William had never heard such and unguarded noise from her. He stared.

"Uh." The Alpha was stymied. He glanced up at the blushing face of his Companion who had gone quite pink.

"Please," Maire repeated, her tone more certain though still quiet, "I would request to bond with both of my Sentinels."
Dr. Terrance Ashley was nervous. He sat in the small reception area that was off the main waiting room leading to the formal office of Guardian Admiral Paul Bellingham.

The Admiral had summoned him here, apparently giving his staff firm instructions that the doctor was not to wait in the public area. Instead he'd been shown to the area that usually would be inhabited by any Guides who needed to see the man in charge. If the hour was not so late others might have been in the comfortable room. Ashley checked his watch again. It was after midnight. He sighed. He was tired.

There were children's magazines and picture books strewn tidily about the room, a concession to the fact that many House raised Guides could read only a little or not read at all and had no formal schooling.

There was a selection of slightly more advanced toys, a bowl of fresh fruit and vegetables, unwilted even at the late hour. Next to the fruit was a mound of high protein crackers and soft cheese, fresh, cool water and stacked blankets. Soft music played in the background.

Several sleeping mats were situated so they had a small degree of privacy up against the walls of the waiting area. Ashley eyed the mat with longing. He'd give a lot to be able to curl up and take a nap. If only he dared.

Anyone who was laying on one of the mats would be mostly shielded from observation by draped tents of heavy fabric. They could be gotten to quickly by worried Sentinels if need be, but also could feel they were not being stared at. Likely a nod to the Guides who had been kept draped and isolated by possessive Alphas and who weren't comfortable with any amount of exposure despite the new laws that allowed them a greater degree of freedom.

Ashley wondered why he was here. He was not a Guide, and he wasn't escorting one, either. He could wait in the main area as easily as this one. But he'd been brought into this area and asked if he was comfortable, offered a tray of refreshment that included caffeine rich coffee or tea which was not provided already in the selection for Guides. He was also offered a more appropriate level of reading material and a laptop computer to use. Not knowing how long the wait was going to be he accepted the offer and yet he couldn't concentrate long enough to use it. He fought against a jaw cracking yawn and lost.

He sighed, rubbing his tearing eyes.

He had no idea why the disconcerting Admiral wanted to see him, or why he'd been brought here instead of meeting at the Compound. It was odd. This was actually the only time he'd been off the Ellison Grounds since he'd first been literally taken from the Guide House to set up his Guide clinic there. He'd had an escort here, not one but three Guardians, who now waited just outside the door allowing him privacy of a sort.

His term of residency at the Compound had brought him into more direct contact with Guardians. He'd seen more of them in one month than in all the previous years of his life. Disturbingly, they all seemed interested in him. And even more disturbing...he felt a certain unmistakable interest in them. He tried not to, because along with the interest, he also felt a good deal of alarm when any one of them got too close or sniffed at him. Something they liked to do. Sniffing.

Ashley was a Sentinel, though he was a Beta, and he knew what sniffing like that meant. He was in
trouble, somehow, some way.

The yawn was larger this time, again bringing tears of fatigue to his eyes. God. He had to lay down, just for a minute. He looked at the door. It was closed. He looked at the nearest mat. It looked so soft, the blankets folded next to it so warm. Before he knew it he was crawling onto it, drawing the cozy folds up to his chin. Two breaths later he was asleep, snoring quietly.

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Admiral Bellingham wearily pinched the bridge of his nose. He'd been reading through the notes of one case after another all morning, then again after lunch. It was now well after midnight. It was taking up more time than he'd expected. The cases hinged on the argument that the Guides named in the suits could be proven unable to make decisions for themselves. It should have been very hard to prove, but page after page of interviews and depositions were building up an ominous case history. The litigators had chosen carefully. Every Guide was uneducated, uncertain, and if the cases were taken to a jury as part of a class action suit...the evidence just might be strong enough to overturn the new laws. Or parts of them.

How to prove the opposite was true? His only option was to produce Guides who were not simple, uneducated people. Guides like Blair. Articulate, knowledgeable, and admittedly a Sentinel expert, though almost no one knew he was a Guide, too. Blair who wanted and deserved to have his desire for privacy honored. Bellingham shook his head.

Bellingham would just as soon not have to ask it of Blair. But if the new laws were to survive the defense had to be as aggressive, as blatant and contradictory to the prosecution's case as he could make it.

Otherwise there was a very good chance at least some Guides would be going back into breeding programs, handled by the same morons who had bred them into infertility. Back to Guide Houses run by Vets for profit, not for the health of Guides. Those men missed the power and the money that they had commanded. Many would do anything to get it back.

One of the cases in his stack of 93 folders struck him particularly hard. The Guide was young, fertile and contracted to produce a "litter of pups" for a Sentinel who had paid handsomely for the service. The contract had been signed before the new laws went into effect, and only Admiral Bellingham's order to review all cases that potentially conflicted with the new laws had caught this one in his net.

If the contract was allowed to proceed, the Guide would lose all rights to her children. She would have no right to raise them, to nurse them, or to know what happened to them. They would be the property of the Sentinel who paid for them.

The fee for this service was an astronomical 900,000 U.S. dollars payable to the former Guide House that had authored the contract. A normal fee for that kind of service would have been closer to 300,000. But the new laws had been in the wind and Sentinels were willing to pay through the nose to get their contracts pushed to the front of the line and get through the courts before the laws were signed.

How was he going to stop any of the contracts from being carried out? More than one judge had ruled that the contracts were valid in their current forms because of the presumed date of signing and sent them onto the Protectorate for Bellingham's signature. They expected him to support them because he had no choice. He couldn't see how he could refuse permission no matter how abhorrent he found the terms. Not without proof of wrongdoing. Just thinking about it was giving him a headache.
His intercom buzzed. Grateful for the distraction, he answered it, his voice a rumbling growl. "Bellingham."

"The Doctor is waiting in the Guide lounge, sir. Shall I reschedule your appointment with him?" The baritone voice of his aide responded.

Dr. Ashley. Damn. He'd forgotten.

Decisively the Admiral set the case file aside and took a relaxing breath. Finally a good moment in a day that had had far too many disappointments. "Send the doctor in, please." He instructed his secretary.

"Yes, sir." The intercom clicked off. Moments later the monstrous bulk of his Secretary held the door open, and Bellingham looked past him expecting to see the much smaller figure of the physician entering behind him. The lieutenant however was alone. Bellingham did a double take. Was Barrow...smiling? He blinked.

"I think you should see this, sir." The large young man whispered, Sentinel soft. Bellingham frowned but got to his feet to follow. Anything to get out of this room and away from the files.

Once in the Guides' waiting room, Barrow stood to one side and tilted his head towards a corner of the room. Bellingham took another step into the room. And he saw the tousled blond hair of the man he was waiting to see.

Ashley was snuggled down in the folds of one of the extra thick Guide blankets, his cheeks flushed with sleep. His faintly pink lips were parted, his hand curled up under his chin. He looked all of ten years old though Bellingham knew exactly how old he was. Thirty six. A whopping twenty years younger than himself. The perfect age. Seasoned. Yet still succulent. He smelled sweet, his voice was pleasant, his manner appealing and Bellingham imagined he would taste...like pure heaven.

"I'll sit in here with him. I need coffee, and bring me something to read. Anything but those damned files. A newspaper. Magazine." He waved a hand, it didn't matter. He moved over to a chair as his aide disappeared to do his bidding. He chose a chair that would give him a view of the sleeping man, but not be obtrusive, not be in the man's direct line of sight.

This was just what the doctor ordered, he thought. Just what he needed to get his head back on straight. It was one of the things he was fighting for. To bring out into the open the lives and needs of the Guardians, every bit as much as the rights of Guides, to be considered human and not treated and owned like an animal. His kind had too long lived in the shadows.

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Blair was showing now, his pregnancy rounding the front of his robes in a gentle mound that drew all eyes to it when he went anywhere.

Sentinels were finding all manner of excuses to visit the Ellison Compound, manufacturing reasons if they had none. They sniffed the air if Blair was not visible, savoring the connection, no matter how tenacious with a pregnant Guide.

Sentinels were a superstitious lot and many believed that proximity to him might convey fertility to them, which they could pass on to their own Guides. Blair sympathized with their hopes, but they scared him with the intensity of their eyes, their absolute awareness of him. They looked to a man, like they would literally eat him alive if they could. He made sure he was never alone with any of them.
Blair didn't know if it was true, that fertility passed from Guide to Guide. He'd read some interesting folklore, apparently the ancient shamans had believed that Guides who lived together "increased" together.

Sentinel eyes, hungry and wanting made him shiver. He could see how their hands twitched into fists of frustration, wanting to touch him, to cup palms over his rounding belly, part his delicate folds with their thumbs. He had no trouble envisioning them hard, ready. He shivered. He imagined he saw how much they wanted to lay him down, to slide into his body, to feel him accept it, mating with them, wanting him to be carrying their babies instead of Jim's. He felt how the very idea burned in the gazes they fixed on him.

Rafe was his constant shadow, Jim also spending more time with him than ever before. One or two Guardians joined them on the days when William invited Sentinels for meetings. Alpha Sentinels were opportunists. If presented with a chance, Blair had no doubt one of them would disappear with him.

He walked carefully. Stayed out of sight when he could. When William called him to the office, he declined to go. It was far safer to have the Ruler of Cascade come to him. With Jim's children growing in his belly, Blair was taking no chances. A pregnant Guide today...was priceless.

Maire touched her belly. She had never been pregnant, didn't know how it felt from experience, but she was sure she was pregnant now. She watched Blair, saw how his body was changing and couldn't wait until her own did the same.

She was unsure whose children she carried within. She had lain with both of the Sentinels who were hers. In truth, it did not matter to her. She had never expected to have a child. Each time William lay with her in the past she had hoped. But nothing had quickened in her. She feared she was just another barren Guide.

She looked up as the door to the Nursery was filled. Blair entered quickly, Rafe behind him, the Guide moving with instinctual grace despite his increasing bulk. There were visitors from the nearby kingdom of Seattle today, and Blair wasn't comfortable with others any more than Maire was. Maire spent most of her life now between her rooms and the Nursery. Her meals were brought to her. She had her books, and if she needed company she had the other Guides and the children. It was more than she'd ever hoped for. Some nights, rare nights... she even had her Sentinels.

Maire was happy that there were Guardians in every hall. She was safe as long as they were there. No one would be able to get past them. She met Blair's eyes as he visibly tried to relax now that he was in their sanctuary. That was how Maire thought of the Nursery. A sanctuary.

As always Blair headed towards the playpen that held his three children.

Maire smiled at the way Blair and Rafe lifted the alert toddlers who woke almost before being touched. She loved to see how curiosity lighted their eyes as they explored their environment with ever increasing energy. They were getting around with alarming speed now.

Blair had reluctantly stopped nursing them, saving his energy for the growing pregnancy. Now the triplets ate with gusto, anything and everything presented to them, gnawing on biscuits and soft carrots with equal pleasure. And it was as often that Rafe fed them as it was Blair. More rarely Jim would help. And even Maire had her chance to hold and feed them from time to time.

Blair looked up, as if feeling Maire's eyes on him. He smiled. She lifted her veil despite Rafe being in
the room, wanting Blair to see her own smile in return. His smile lit the room, it always did. Hers
was no less bright. She saw his eyes widen, his mouth forming an oh! of surprise. His gaze dropped
to her hand, still resting on her belly. He headed for her, one child settled on his hip.

Maire didn't flinch when Blair's hand reached out to touch her, landing next to her own and fitting to
the flat contours of her abdomen. His brows rose, and he smiled again.

"You are sure?" He asked, his face reflecting her own happiness. She nodded.

"Do they know?" He asked, quietly, sitting next to her on the bed. Her blush made him nod with
understanding. It was too soon, too much might go wrong. She had not yet told anyone, in fact she
hadn't expected him to guess the news. He took her hand and squeezed it. "They will be pleased."
He said as they sat together holding hands.

Rafe approached head tilted as he took in the scene. His dark brown eyes were sharp. Maire watched
as his nostrils flared once, twice, then his brows rose and he nodded to her.

Maire saw his longing, knew he wanted children of his own, and that he expected never to have
them. Just as she had thought she would not. She leaned forward.

"Do not give up." She said to him, their eyes meeting, for the first time holding the look. He nodded
slowly. Her heart ached for him, for in that moment she knew he loved Blair wholeheartedly. And
she also knew he had never been able to make love to him. She reached out and dared to put a single
finger on his arm.

"Do not give up." She repeated. She would speak to Blair. She would tell him when they were
alone. The Guide held the key, if he asked for Rafe, Jim would give him Rafe. Maire had learned
this herself only a short time ago. She would see that Blair understood far sooner, way before he
reached her age and regretted lost time.

It was the Guide's choice.
"Jim."

Jim didn't know why it was such a shock to see the other man. Abrys Llwellyn's father, the ruler of New England, was one of the dozen rulers invited to attend the latest council on Guide Law reform and the reception for William's acknowledged Guardian son, Michael Rathe and his Sentinel mate Blue. It was to be the first ever public reception of a Guardian bonding, all other times the celebrations had been for the large men only, no outsiders.

Jim hadn't seen Abrys for more than a decade, not since they were both recruited into Rangers and Special Forces training. At the time they had been very close, mired as they were in an attempt to survive the most difficult military black ops training in the world. They had gone from haggard recruits to seasoned soldiers in each others company, for a time inseparable, then...separated, sent on missions to opposite ends of the world. Jim shook his head at the irony of life and advanced on the man who stood across the foyer.

"Abrys." He responded, the one word carrying as much weight as an entire conversation, pulling his old friend into a welcome embrace, the movement automatic, he couldn't have stopped it, and he didn't want to. He felt the other man's hand, a fist at first, then flattening out over the muscles of his back, big, warm and strong, just as he remembered it. That quickly they were connected again, friends again, close again.

It was surprising to see that Lew, as Jim had once called him, looked only a little older, with the lines around his mouth barely deeper than they had been. His face was lightly tanned, the blond of his hair gold against his cafe au lait skin. The greatest difference Jim noted was the pinched look around Abrys' brown eyes. He looked worn and tired when you met his gaze. His body may have been stronger, his face just as handsome, still a man who would attract his share of admirers, but his mind had heavy burdens. Jim knew exactly how he felt. Though he'd lost a little more hair than his college friend, it was the mind that took the greatest amount of pressure.

"Good to see you." Jim said, meaning it. They stood together comfortable in one another's space feeling no urgency to move apart. At one time during training they had lived in a dirt floored, low ceileding 10 by 10 room, the doorway of which had to be entered in a crouch. In those close quarters you either got to know a man very well, or you killed him. They both made it to the end of the training alive, which said volumes about the depth of their friendship at the time.

Around them others moved, parting like water to flow past, not wanting to disturb the greeting between the two smiling heirs, a sight not often seen. Abrys grasped Jim's shoulder when they finally moved apart, let his thumb move against the side of Jim's throat in a familiar move that wasn't quite a caress. Jim remembered that touch, and it nearly drove him to close his eyes in reaction. Once it had been his only comfort, Lew, his only human contact for days at a time, this man's unfailing touch and unflagging support had sustained him. The well recalled tenor voice spoke, stirring more memory. "I've heard the news. Is it true? Is your Guide with child again, your child? So soon?" Abrys' brown eyes burned with intensity.

Jim nodded despite his instant resistance to sharing any information about Blair with another Alpha Sentinel. "Yes," he said and saw the flash in his old friend's eyes; he felt an odd sensation take root in his gut. Jim tried to isolate the feeling, did he mind that Abrys wanted to know? He did not, not really. He wanted to take Abrys with him to the Nursery and show him Blair and all the children. He didn't want to keep the man out. The desire to reveal Blair caught him by surprise, in contrast to his first instincts which usually ran to keeping his Guide secret and away from other Alphas.
"You're a lucky man, El," Abrys said, sadness coloring his voice. "I've been trying, with two Guides and nothing. Six months. The vets...the advice they give is useless, worse than useless. I believe my Guides were harmed by the drugs and potions they insisted on giving them. Injections of fertility drugs, hormones, aphrodisiacs. Then when those failed to help, they spoke of surgeries." His square jaw flexed in fury. "That was the last day they set foot in my House. But it was too late to repair all the damage they did. My Guides...they are no longer eager for my touch, that is all that following the orders of the vets has gained me. Guides who fear me, who fear I will have them cut." He shook his head, bitter. Jim put his hand on the man's arm.

"Lew," Jim said, "It's not hopeless; my Guide's fear of me caused him to break the laws; but we worked through it together, and our bond is deeper now than ever before. Would you like to meet our Guides and see the babies?" He asked, surprised that he was offering even as the words came, "Maire is a bit shy so we'll have to give her time to get her veil on, but Stephen's Guides and my Guide Blair will be fine."

"All the Guides are together?" Abyrs asked as they began to walk toward the Nursery. He was unable to hide his doubt of the wisdom of that idea. "How do you keep peace in your house? My father's Guides and mine are kept separate at all times. I do not think they have even seen each other. Not once."

Jim shot him an understanding look. "We used to think that was best, but the Guides were introduced to each other and stayed together, it was their choice, their decision, and once they made it none of us dared object." The smile that quirked the edge of his mouth was rueful. That much was true, he would not have dared try to remove them from each others company. Jim recalled the firm front the four Guides had displayed. "They prefer to live together. Father is in the planning stages of new housing for the Guides, with a central living space, that way we'll have more room for the privacy the Sentinels want and be able to keep the Guides together. Admiral Bellingham claims Guides tend to be more fertile if they're allowed to live together, Blair says many legends say it is true, and judging from our Guides, it seems he is right."

"Admiral Bellingham, the head of the Guardians in Cascade? He agrees with your Guide?" Abyrs asked in disbelief, as if the idea two such divergent creatures could agree on anything was shocking. "What could either of them possibly know that Sentinels don't?" Jim didn't answer further; because he trusted the man with him, he had let something slip about Blair he had not intended to be let known. They continued the rest of the way in silence. It was time to hold his tongue.

They came to the Nursery room door with a Guardian standing guard on either side, the tall young twins again, Jim saw, who looked down impassive noses at the approaching Alphas, identical eyes calculating the threat they represented. Jim turned to his friend, knowing him well enough, even after the years, to not be surprised at the look of offense on his face. Abrys aside from the privations of Special Forces training, was not used to being denied anything he wanted. Being barred from a room he had thought himself invited into...it didn't sit well. Jim spoke quickly to head off the pending confrontation.

"Sometime ago," Jim began, "Blair asked for the Guardians to protect him from me. That's how much he feared me."

"If he's over his fear," Lew asked glaring at one of the guards, "why are they still here?"

"Two reasons. Their presence calms the Guides, and with all the strange Sentinels coming and going in the compound they feel more secure having them here, and so do I. If there is anything I've learned since the new laws have passed, my friend, it's that when it comes to Guides trust the Guardians." Jim turned to one of the guards. "Please tell the Guides there is a Sentinel friend I would
like to bring into the Nursery to meet Blair and our children." Jim did not try to question why he felt the need to claim all of Blair's children, the toddlers as well as the unborn. All were his in his view, and he would not deny them simply because they rose from an unknown man's seed.

The Guardian nodded and slipped through the door, leaving his brother to wait for word before he would let the stranger in, no matter who vouched for him. From inside, drifting out Abyrs and Jim picked up the warm, alluring scent of babies, powder and fertile Guides. Jim watched Abyrs swallow hard.

"And the second reason?" Abyrs asked as they waited. It took Jim a moment to regroup.

"They say," he said, "that Guardians and Guides have always lived together. Sentinels used to live apart. In groups. And came to the nesting places where Guardians protected the Guides, to ask for sex."

Abyrs looked at his friend as if trying to decide if he was crazy. The return of the Guardian from inside the Nursery cut short the conversation.

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Blair had had more than enough. He was tired of living inside and of feeling pursued. He felt as if he were no more than a curiosity, or a natural wonder people came from all over to catch a glimpse of. His being kept safely behind locked doors and thick walls only seemed to intensify the need for strangers to seek him out, to see him, sniff him. Well, if they wished they would get their chance, they could sniff him, want him, but he would not be hidden away any longer. That was over. His hands twisted the edge of the robe brutally, almost tearing it as he pulled it out of the drawer. He took a deep calming breath, then another. Anger would not help his cause. He had to remain in control. He was determined to attend the meeting of rulers and leaders. Not everyone would want to see him at the conference or the reception. He had to be rock steady, unflinching under their scrutiny.

Jim would be at the conference along with William and Christopher. Stephen had elected to spend the day with his growing family, having announced to the rest of the Compound's residents that Dahl was expecting. Dahl had been blushing, and it was clear enough from the proprietary way Andy was attending the young Guide just who thought he was the father of the coming infants. Blair hid his smile at the way Andy couldn't seem to keep his hands off the slim, androgynous Guide, whose belly remained flat as a board. Maire's announcement had not come that long ago, and William and Christopher had worn identical looks of astonishment followed rapidly by dizzy pride. They had grinned like loons for the entire month. Even now all it took was seeing Maire, even at a distance to make the two of them beam. It didn't seem to make the slightest difference to either man who the father was.

Blair dressed carefully; he decided on a tailored Guide tunic that Bella had designed and sewn for him. It had long cuffed sleeves like a dress shirt and a button down collar which gave it a slightly formal appearance. The front was pleated from the shoulders and draped nicely over his full breasts and round belly, and on the left, over his heart, was the code of arms for the Ellison family. The color was the traditional white but the material was expensive Egyptian cotton, still, there was no mistaking it for anything but Guide clothing. "How do I look?" Blair asked Rafe, he knew that there were many rulers at the council and he wanted to look better than merely presentable.

"Beautiful," Rafe replied as he brushed back a wayward lock of Blair's curly auburn hair securing it with a silver pin.

"I wasn't fishing for a compliment. It's important. I won't wear a veil, but I don't want to offend the more conservative members of the council, either." He considered that statement. "Well, not any
more than I have to." He amended.

Rafe smiled but his eyes held the pain filled look they sometimes got. "I think Jim and William will be very proud of you and the other rulers will be very jealous. Every Sentinel in the household will wish you were his own."

"Thank you," Blair said, giving Rafe a kiss on the cheek. He let his hand come up to linger on the Sentinel's cheek, smoothing the place he had just kissed.

Not for the first time Blair wished Jim was as liberal with Rafe as Stephen was with Andy. Rafe had yet to be Blair's full lover. The touches they occasionally shared, the day to day companionship made them very close. Blair wanted him, longed to feel him and love him physically, he wanted to chase away the melancholy pain that he knew Rafe felt, because he felt it too when he looked into the Sentinel's eyes. Maire's action had led to Blair questioning his own courage. Rafe was as much his Sentinel as Jim was and that meant that he had a responsibility toward him. Was he doing to Rafe what he had done to Jim? Was he turning his back on his Sentinel, making him suffer needlessly?

Maire had dared ask, and not just any Sentinel, but the ruler of Cascade. She had been granted her wish. Yet Blair was afraid to ask. Afraid of what exactly, he wasn't sure, making Jim feel rejected, perhaps, or of Jim trying to deny his wish? Blair didn't know.

Why didn't he take what he wanted? And yet, it seemed only right to ask, especially now, as he carried Jim's children in his belly. His hand went to the growing swell that was impossible to miss as he entered into his sixth month. What sort of person was he that he wanted to take another man into his body while he carried these children and loved their father? He shook his head.

But castigating himself didn't change the desire. He may feel guilty, but in his heart he desired Rafe. Not to replace Jim, but to add to their relationship. Maire had no doubts in that department, she had given no sign that she felt it wrong to take both Sentinels to her bed. She was happy. Blair had no doubt of it.

And Dahl, Stephen was his lover, and Andy as well. No conflict there. Bella had made her feelings clear in regard to her Sentinels. Stephen came first in her heart, but Andy was more than welcome in her bed. Only Blair it seemed, had doubts. And thus, only Blair was going without. Without the intimate touch of his second Sentinel, an intimacy he wanted very much.

It came down to, ultimately, that Blair Sandburg was not a man who wanted to hide, not who he was or what was in his heart. He wanted to join the rest of the world. The song that he had learned as a child, the one that he was teaching to Stephen's children, came to mind; 'This here little light of mine, I'm going to let it shine.' And he was determined to do so.

The inner door to the Nursery opened and one of the twins came in, his long loping stride easy, not urgent. Blair relaxed seeing that. There was no warning about to be delivered.

"Mother Blair," Titus said with a bow of his head, "Heir Ellison is here with a Sentinel he names friend. He wishes to bring this Alpha into the Nursery and to introduce you and the children."

Blair looked around the room, Maire was nowhere to be seen. "I'll see him," Blair said and headed for the door with Rafe by his side. He would see the Sentinel first, and make up his own mind before allowing the man access to his children.

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"Jim," Blair said, ignoring the strange Sentinel who was looking at him with an expression of awe,
his attention floating between Blair's bared face and the swollen belly under his Robes. "Now is not a
good time, Maire is having some difficulty with morning sickness and Bella is attending to her. The
Guardians will be taking the children to the ...gardens..."

Blair stopped in mid sentence to stare at the strange Sentinel who suddenly dropped to his knees in
front of him. What the hell? Blair stood steady feet planted wide as the man reached out towards him.

Blair heard a low warning growl from Rafe and Jim's hand shot out to grab his friend's wrist just an
inch short of touching Blair's pregnant belly. Touching another Sentinel's Guide, without permission,
could be a killing offense. The only thing that kept Rafe from instantly slitting the man's throat was
the fact that he was on his knees, as it was, Jim should have taken him down onto his back not
merely grabbed his wrist. Rafe continued to growl, in spite of his Alpha's relatively mild reaction to
the situation.

Blair reached out and patted Rafe. "It's all right," he told the Sentinel and Rafe's growl stopped but
his body stayed ready to spring. Blair took his hand and held it. "Jim, it's okay," he said to his Alpha
Sentinel once Rafe was secured. Then Blair reached out his free hand towards the strange Sentinel.
As he took the Sentinel's hand in his, he gently removed Jim's grip from his friend's wrist and met the
man's brown eyes. He pulled the awestruck Sentinel's hand toward him and placed it on his firm,
round, abdomen. "It's okay," Blair repeated softly.

Abrys looked up into Blair's eyes with a longing that stabbed at the Guide's heart. The Heir to New
England had felt the baby move. Tears were running down his face. Blair wished he knew the man's
story, he was sure there was one worth hearing.

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Jim and Abrys entered the conference room followed closely by Blair who was escorted by Rafe.
The meeting wasn't quite underway, with a few rulers still pouring coffee at the buffet table and
greeting old friends. Everyone turned when they picked up the alluring scent of a pregnant Guide.
Conversation ground to a halt.

"Blair," William said surprised to see the Guide. "How good to see you. Is everything alright? Will
you be staying?"

"I'd like that if I may," Blair answered, knowing that William would be happy to have him. Abrys
had moved on when Jim and Blair and Rafe had stopped to speak to William. Abrys moved to his
father's side, his face relaxed, his smile wide. His father looked at him, noting the lessened lines of
worry.

"You're inviting a Guide to our conference?" One of the rulers asked, glaring at William. "You're
making a mockery of the reason we are here. How can we openly discuss these matters with one of
them here? Her pregnancy is a distraction."

"Blair is educated," William answered in a voice intended to soothe. "He is here as proof of what
Guides can become if we give them the opportunity," he said, emphasizing the masculine pronoun.

"Educated, phhh," another Ruler chimed in. "Has he read this report, is he capable of understanding
it?"

"I have read it. " Blair said, speaking up for himself, but not telling the man that he had written most
of it. "And I understand it. Recent Sentinel Tradition has failed. The old ways of living, the wisdom
of past times provide us with answers that will save us. It is time to listen."
"A trained dog making his speech..." One man said, hotly. Only to be interrupted by another.

"Did you hear him?" A voice in the back said. "He could not have been trained so well. He understands." The conviction in his voice spread to the nodding heads around him. Jim let out a threatening growl that had all the men in the room freezing in their tracks.

"My Guide is not a trained dog," Jim snarled at the Ruler of the Texas Territory, causing the older man to pale finally seeing the danger he had put himself in. Abrys Llwellyn moved across the floor, back to Jim's side, standing shoulder to shoulder with his friend. He turned his own glare on the man who had dared to belittle Jim's Guide.

"It's okay, Jim," Blair said, giving Jim a reassuring pat. "I've run into this kind of prejudice before. There are none so blind as those who will not see," and for all of a Sentinel's heightened senses some of them refuse to open their eyes." It was a politely delivered rebuff to the offending Sentinel and William was sure if it had been delivered by another Sentinel a challenge would have been made. But at least it showed Blair could hold his own, even among this group. As entertaining as it was to see Texas stutter in outrage, William cut the encounter short.

"Please, Gentlemen, sit down," William said wishing to defuse the anger in the room. "Surely we can have a discussion like civilized men. Christopher, be so kind as to bring a chair to the table for Blair."

"If I may change the subject. I have a question for the Guide?" Ruler Llewellyn asked, after everyone was seated.

"By all means," William answered, grateful to get away from whether or not Blair should be allowed to attend the conference. "Please ask Blair directly."

"None of us can miss the fact that you are pregnant," Ruler Llewellyn began, "and we have heard that two more Ellison Guides are expecting pups. Do you believe that the change in Guide laws are responsible for this sudden increase in fertility? And if you do believe how is it possible?"

"I conceived just as the new laws were being passed so for myself no, but I was a wild Guide and thus I am outside of the norm for most Guides raised in this country." Blair began, carefully choosing his words. "As for the other two Guides living here who are also pregnant, I believe that Ruler Ellison's Guide, Maire, gives the best anecdotal evidence..."

"What did you say, Guide?" one of the rulers interrupted, sharply.

Blair began again, fighting to keep the irony of having to dumb down his explanation for the Sentinel to understand him from making him smile. "I believe that change in living arrangements and other changes in Guide Maire's life, triggered by the new laws, brought about her fertility. I fully realize that the evidence is anecdotal, but Maire has never before conceived nor had she ever gone into heat. That alone makes the changes worth trying."

"Anecdotal?" the ruler asked too interested to be short this time.

"Yes," Blair said, as if he were teaching a class at the college, "It means the evidence is based on personal observation as reported by the subject herself, rather than scientific analysis."

"I am aware of the meaning of the word, Guide. What surprises me is that you are aware of it and able to use it correctly." Blair smiled at that. And despite his fear the other would be angry, the man actually smiled back at him.

"You are a wild Guide? And Ellison accepted you?" Was the next question that shot out. Blair
"I was a wild Guide. I was not subject to any fertility treatments, medicines, hormones or surgeries meant to enhance my fertility. So I suppose, I am also an advertisement against their use. But we were speaking of Guides residing together. It was the ancient way. The myths are adamant that Guides living together had increased fertility. Drugs, isolation and castration, all have harmed the fertility of the Guides."

There were more than a few shocked gasps when Blair spoke. But more thoughtful murmurings as his points were considered.

William decided to step in and turn the focus back to the laws. "Blair knows a great deal about our old legends, which is why I invited him to this council. I know many of you object to me declaring the Guides sentient, but Blair is not the only educated Guide I have spoken with. Stephen's guide, Bella, is also educated and quite articulate. She has taught at a Guide school in Europe and she has asked my permission to open a school for Guides here in the compound. She is currently schooling her own children. My Guide, after a difficult adjustment, is blooming; She is a joy that I had never dreamed was possible. Given the opportunity Guides will learn, they will enrich our lives and our society. The laws we have and honor must protect them, and grant them that freedom."

A disconcerted silence followed as his words sank in.
Chapter 40

Blair sighed as Rafe pulled the brush through his hair, the flat of the Sentinel's hand followed to smooth down the wild curls. Each stroke brought comfort and relaxation with it. The nightly hair brushing had become a ritual that both the Sentinel and Guide looked forward to, a way to bridge the stress of the day into the calm of night. Rafe let the long hair wind around his wrist, a rope of silk, fragrant with Blair's scent. He let his hands enjoy the feel of it, warm and strong before recalling himself to the task he hadn't finished.

In many ways it was the most intimate part of his day with Blair. All the other touches they shared were fleeting and left Rafe aching and thinking of forbidden things, other appetites whispering hungry urges in his ear. He knew he wanted Blair, but he wouldn't allow the Guide to be hurt, or himself injured or beaten for giving in to his desire. Rafe had been there when madness had driven Jim to attempt killing his father when he thought the elder Sentinel was a threat to his claim on Blair. He would not put himself, or Blair, in that position again.

And there was Blair's own feeling on the matter to consider. Blair had not had it easy when it came to Sentinels. He had been taken against his will when his status as a wild Guide was discovered. Kidnapped, he'd been subjected to repeated rapes in an attempt to impregnate him and increase his asking price. Jim also had not asked, not in so many words, for any consent; Jim had taken him as his own when it suited him. Rafe knew it was not a thing the Guide could forget.

Jim was Alpha, and Rafe knew he mustn't challenge what his Alpha required of him, or of his Guide. Yet, he couldn't fight what he wanted. He wanted to curl around the Guide. He wanted to encircle him, hold him tight; but, instead he fought his body, every muscle was held back from rolling Blair up and over, held back from stroking his Guide open, and burying himself deep inside. It was an inner war fought each day, and each day he found the strength to touch his Guide gently, offering him closeness, companionship, and an undemanding love. And then the night came and with it a roller coaster ride of emotions as he brushed the Guide's hair; the want smoldering inside of him and the search for the inner contentment to be a quiet presence at Blair's back. No. He couldn't let his mind continue to churn like this. Until he had Jim's permission, his blessing, and Blair's, he would not claim the Guide.

Blair's body was close, sitting snug between his thighs, soft but firm, incredibly, richly fertile. Rafe let his fingertips glide over a stray lock of hair, savoring the sensation before gathering it back in with the rest. The colors of that single wayward lock, chestnut, brown, auburn, and dark gold woven so wonderfully together. Bright and shining in the lamp light, Blair's head bent forward, canted like the attitude of a silent pieta, a Madonna. So serene, so lovely and faintly sad. Rafe feathered the lightest caress over one smooth cheek, almost losing himself in his sense of touch.

"Ninety eight, ninety nine, one hundred," Rafe counted softly, speaking aloud to break the spell, feeling the crackle of electricity, generated by the brushing, snap under his palm. He blinked, drew in a breath, let it out. He watched the profile of Blair's face. So serious tonight, no laughter, no smiles. And there was nothing he could do to alter the Guide's mood. He could only be here, with him, to wait and to watch and offer comfort if he had the chance. His fingers slid into the waves of luxuriant hair, moving over Blair's scalp, hearing the faint sighs of relief and enjoyment that escaped Blair. Awareness of the pleasure Blair took in this washed over him, and he fed it back to the Guide.

Rafe heard Blair's sigh, tasted the mix of contentment and regret in the sound. The nightly ritual was nearly at an end, and they lingered over what was left of it, both wanting silently for it to go on. Blair leaned his head back, Rafe felt his cheek come to rest on his shoulder as the Guide turned a little.
One hundred strokes per night, no more, no less. To break that unspoken rule would open the door to breaking other rules. Blair straightened up again, it wasn't quite finished, not yet. Rafe took the heavy mass of hair in his hands, felt the skin of Blair's nape against the back of his fingers as he worked to braid the hair for sleeping. He enjoyed the work, the braid grew long, hanging down Blair's back, as thick as a man's wrist, Rafe's fingers plaiting it, caressing it as he did.

When the braid was finished Blair drew in a slow, deep breath as Rafe helped him to his feet. The Sentinel could tell that the pregnancy was beginning to effect the Guide's balance. He walked beside Blair, one hand gently cupping the Guide's elbow and ready to act if more support were needed. He sat Blair on the side of the turned down bed and, not giving him a chance to struggle with removing his slippers, Rafe dropped to one knee and cupping his Guide's calf he lifted his leg and removed first one slipper and then the other from Blair's feet, massaging over the sole of each foot with his strong thumbs as he did so, easing away tension.

"You always know just what I need," Blair said, with a melancholy smile as he ran his fingers through Rafe's hair. "I..." he stopped the flow of words before he voiced feelings he would regret. He swallowed looking down into dilated brown eyes. "I am grateful for you, Brian," he said.

"It's my job to know what you need," Rafe said simply, understanding the words that neither one would risk saying, there was danger in even thinking them. "Now into bed with you. You've had a long day and you need your rest." Rafe held the covers up, easing Blair's way under them, and helped him to lay down comfortably on his side before walking around the bed and getting in from the other side.

The bed rocked gently as Rafe moved over and snuggled in against Blair, bending his knees at the familiar angle so he and his Guide would fit together like two pieces of a puzzle. He wrapped his arm around Blair and placed a protective hand on his round belly, gently pulling him in under his chin; he could feel the last remnants of of a stress filled day leave the Guide's body as it was replaced by a feeling of safety and contentment. Then he turned up his sense of touch patterning the shape of Blair's belly as he did each night, keeping his exploration light and soothing.

The curve of the Guide's pregnancy changed every day and, with at least two active babies moving inside, Rafe could often see the tiny movements stretch at the skin then recede. Tonight the babies were quiet as Rafe's hand soaked up the added heat that came with pregnancy. He inhaled deeply, savoring Blair's natural scent and the feel of his silken hair under his chin. The soft lub dub of Blair's heartbeat comforted him along with the quiet rush in and out of Blair's breathing as sleep washed over him. Rafe felt such love for this man, and every night as Blair fell asleep in his arms that love filled him and gave him strength.

It was hard, being so close to Blair, his instincts screaming at him, urging him to take what was there. Blair would not refuse him, he knew it. That gave him the strength to resist. He had grown up without much. Jim Ellison had changed that for him and for his entire family. Rafe had expected to be sold, so that his family's life would improve. Going to the police academy was a boon he hadn't counted on, a surprise that came from his extended family's hard work and sacrifice. Jim choosing him as the one, his Companion, from so many, was more than he'd ever hoped for. He would never betray him, or his family, not even for this, for the sexual love of a Guide. Rafe had learned from his mother to survive by counting his blessings no matter how few and far between. Now was a time of many blessings and he was not one to focus on what was missing. He accepted what his Alpha required of him and every night he brushed and braided his Guide's hair, and held him while he slept. His body ached and burned, straining towards that of the Guide he held. He resisted. And every night he counted it a blessing.
Territory. The guiding light of a Sentinel's life. What he owned, where he resided, what belonged to those over him and beside him. For any Sentinel, the Territorial Imperative was the strongest instinct overall, whether it defined what they actually owned or what was owned by the men who ruled them. Territory defined their lives and their positions, freed them or restricted them. Whether Alpha, Beta, or Guardian, a Sentinel was 'made' by his territory and his hierarchy within it.

Jim could feel his own imperative itching at him, making him restless. Inviting strangers or even known Sentinels into their own territories, whether Sentinels of equal, lesser and superior ranks, was not natural. The Drive was to isolate, cut out, defend and solidify one's claim on that which belonged to the individual, the ruler, the territory one called home, what one owned. Jim was chafing at the forced hospitality of the last few months. He'd spent all week in meetings, by his father's side, Stephen on occasion joining them, Christopher there without fail. But Jim had not had his Companion nearby. He felt the lack deeply.

The lion's share of Rafe's time was taken up by Blair and the children. Jim was not in the position he had been accustomed to, he was no longer first in his Companion's world. Nor was he first in his Guide's world, Blair's priority was his children. Jim had to be content being a part of their lives, not all of it. A difficult adjustment when it came to both men.

The Ellison Royal Compound was filled with more visiting Rulers and Sentinels of consequence than at any other time in the Heir's memory. Men invited to invade their territory. The constant awareness of their presence weighed on him, a tingle in the back of his mind that didn't fade away, always there, keeping him on alert, waiting for any movement, any change that would signal a coup. These were Sentinels after all, and Alpha. They were his equal in rank and he could not completely overcome the unease, the primitive awareness that on one level they were rivals every bit as much as they were allies on another. Jim frowned.

Within Cascade there was usually only one man who had the right to claim his Guide over him, William, his father. For his father, if he was in his right mind, Jim would unwillingly, bitterly have bowed his head and bent his knee as his Guide was taken, teeth gritted perhaps, but William alone could lay claim without bloodshed. But no other. No one else had the right to lay hands on Blair without permission, and if they assumed, they would die. Once William had bypassed his claim to the Guide, Jim's claim was absolute. But now other rulers walked the halls of the compound. Jim didn't like it.

The same rule of possession held true for the Sentinel who Jim had taken for his Companion. Brian Rafe was his, part of his territory. Undeniably his, in every way, in every circumstance, Brian's life, his possessions, his body, his very breath, all belonged to Jim Ellison; even more than Brian belonged to himself, he was Jim's. The very man who he watched from the doorway of the room. Rafe, his face youthful in sleep, unlined. Beautiful.

Jim paced silently into the room. It took only moments to undress, he did so without waking either of the sleeping occupants. Rafe's arm was around the smaller figure who rested amid a tangle of flimsy sleeping robes, bare feet poking out beneath the hem. Blair, his hair braided loosely to keep it from tangling around his face as he slept, leaned back into Rafe's protective hold, Rafe's hand cupped along the side of Blair's belly, a loving shield. Rafe's much shorter hair was tousled around his head, curling at the nape of his neck, the skin there, pale and vulnerable, sleek and beckoning, the faint bumps of his spine asking to be explored by mouth and tongue. Jim inhaled deeply of the well mixed scent of Guide and Sentinel. He let the moment of intense satisfaction flow over and through him.

The infants under Rafe's hand were his. Blair was carrying his children. The realization could not have been more perfect. His Companion was guarding Jim's Guide and unborn children.

Undressed, Jim advanced on whisper quiet feet to the bed, and slipped onto the soft surface behind
his Companion. Jim looped his arm around the slender, strong torso, feeling the slide of fine grained skin move past the skin of his own forearm, stirring the tiny hairs, firing along his nerves until it tickled him down to his toes. His skin prickled, tightened, and he nudged his nose into the junction of neck and shoulder as his startled Companion woke partway. An instant stiffness of vigilance, Rafe assessing the situation, sniffing out who it was behind him on the bed, then...Jim was rewarded with surrender, the willing surrender of his Companion.

He shushed into Rafe's ear, his voice, even without discernible words soothing his Companion, his lips finding those smooth rises and hollows. Jim felt with satisfaction all resistance fade, the melting of the other Sentinel back into his hold, without restriction, without terms, just surrender. Jim Ellison paused to smile. His eyes drifted shut in bliss. This was the recognition he needed. That he was Alpha. He soaked it up hungrily letting their bodies rest together, feeling the shift of breathing, of heavy muscles easing bit by bit back into the laxity of sleep.

There was no doubt in Jim's mind as to the place Rafe held in his life. He was the foundation of all Jim had, his life, the rock upon which all rested. When Jim could not be vigilant, his Companion protected him. He was his right hand, his eyes, his ears in places Jim couldn't be. Without Rafe Jim would not have his precious Guide; without Rafe Jim would lose Blair. And he knew it.

He ran a slow hand up the lean, muscular arm and into the soft, silken hair. Dark brown, lightly curling, fragrant with the scent of him. For a long moment Jim just leaned against him, soaking up the feel of him, listening to his breath, the steady beating of his heart. Then he slowly fist ed his hand, tugging Rafe's head back, revealing the long, sweet length of his throat. It was a gentle but authoritative move, not one meant to hurt. It had the desired effect, Rafe was drowsily awake, receptive, his hips pushing back into Jim's pelvis in that perfect move that never failed to make the Alpha smolder.

"I've missed you," Ellison breathed into his Companion's ear, his voice modulated so as not to disturb the Guide's sleep. Rafe let out a faint sound, very like a moan, and Jim felt it slice through his body, until it reached his groin. Jim was hard now, hard and leaking. He pressed closer, finding a grip on the other man's shoulder with careful teeth, his palm trailing flat down the muscles of Rafe's belly, brushing low into the crisp curls at his groin, finding the rigid evidence that Rafe was in no way opposed to this kind of attention. He cupped his hand lower, feeling it.

Jim heard the answer to his words, a repeat of the soft, nearly silent moan and an arching movement, an offering of the Beta's body to his Alpha.

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Rafe woke, his senses coming on line instantly, reaching out, assessing, evaluating. It was scent bare seconds after he woke that clued him in first that it was Jim behind him. He relaxed without thought, sinking into the arms that held him. It was warm; while he slept his back had cooled just a little and having the heat radiating off of his larger partner warming him was very pleasant.

"I've missed you," Jim whispered into his ear. His Alpha rarely expressed sentiments and he had to stifle a moan as his desire for his Alpha raced through his body. He felt Jim's hard organ pressed against his back and then it came; the claiming bite. Every nerve in his body seemed to fire as Jim's hand slid over the muscles of his torso with agonizing slowness the familiar fingers reached his groin.

He stifled another moan, arched himself in offering and then lifted his arm, bending it until he could slide his fingers into the bristling short hair of the man behind him. He formed his hand to the proud skull, *seeing* and feeling the classic beauty of his Alpha. Many saw Jim as the epitome of masculine beauty, determined, unflinching, loyal and honorable. And Rafe was this man's lover, though they had never put it in so many words. It was enough to say they were Alpha and
Companion, without adding all the mushy stuff. Still, unusual as it was, the way Jim was touching him tonight was good, his big hands searching, caressing, and more than welcome, more than enough to fill the hollow left by the want of Blair. Even if they never spoke of it, this kind of touch let them both know, that what they had, went beyond a simple, expedient bond, it was another blessing in his life, to be the one claimed like this.

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Blair woke. The hand that protected him through the night was no longer pressed against his belly. But it wasn't danger he awoke to, but love. It wasn't the soft and gentle love he was becoming used to sensing from Rafe, this love was fire, heat, powerful. Desire scorched through him, the licking tongues of it pouring into his mind from two sources. The feel of it, the enormity of the pure emotion armed with the teeth of lust overwhelmed him and he gasped and then moaned as his own body reacted to the bond. His throat ached and tears filled his eyes.

The Sentinels sensed the moment their Guide awakened and then they caught the sudden, spiking odor of Blair's arousal followed by the salt scent of tears. He shuddered next to them, turning for comfort into the arms that wouldn't refuse him. Rafe held him, even the urgency of his desire not stopping him. Blair clung with the fierce strength of desperation.

Jim reached over Rafe and laid his hand on Blair's shoulder. "Guide, attend us." It was spoken neither as a question or a command, but it was spoken without doubt. The new laws be damned, this was his Guide and his Companion. The bond told him everything he needed to know, they were his, more than blood, they were his rock, and his life, one was ripe with his future, and he was theirs.

"Us?" Rafe asked, not sure he understood the Alpha's meaning. He would not take what was not his to take; he waited, holding Blair.

Blair lifted up on his elbow forcing Rafe to loosen his hold, facing his Sentinels. "I want it to be us, truly us," he said, hoping Jim would understand. "But only if you'll give your blessing. I won't be the cause of discord. I want my children to grow-up in a home filled with love not antagonism." He lifted his chin, afraid to hope, yet...hoping.

Jim reached out his hand and cupping his Guide's face he rubbed a thumb over his cheek wiping away a tear. He licked the drop from his thumb, savoring the taste. "I approve of your choice, Guide, I would have it be us," Jim said as he picked up Rafe's hand and used it to brush Blair's sleeping robe from his shoulder. "I give you my Companion, Blair. He is as much yours as he is mine." Jim's eyes were hot blue. Blair stared at him open mouthed.

"Mine?" Blair asked, uncertain.

"Yes." It was a whisper against his fingers as Jim kissed his hand.

Blair's gaze shifted to the deep brown eyes of the smaller Sentinel. Rafe's eyes were glowing, his face alight. Blair smiled shyly. "Sentinel?" He asked.
Chapter 41

Jim Ellison rolled onto his back, feeling the sheets bunch under him. His skin felt good, smooth, not too tight, not itchy, not cold, and he didn't mind the touch of the slightly sweaty cotton he lay on top of. He was warm, relaxed, satisfied. He lay still, feeling the moisture evaporating from his skin as he pulled the sheet off. He smelled of Blair and of Brian, and he felt utterly content with that.

They had rearranged themselves several times during sleep. Once Jim had woken with Rafe on top of him, sprawled like a starfish, snoring gently in Jim's ear, his breath curling against Jim's jaw, their hearts in synchronous beat, one on top of the other. Another time he half woke with Blair upside down in the bed, his Guide's soft toed feet nestled under Jim's chin. He'd kissed those toes, lapped them with his tongue, before hugging them to him and feeling Blair wriggle, his digits flaring once in drowsy reaction before drifting back to sleep. Jim had slept well despite waking from time to time, hardly moving, his partners the ones who shifted, cuddled, and moved around him, and he woke now, more rested than he had been in a long, long time.

Blair and Brian had not excluded him when they came together, faces showing a heartbreaking disbelief at first that they were being allowed this longed for intimacy. Jim had regretted the insecurity that had kept him from granting them his permission before tonight. He knew love and desire when he saw it. Blair's eyes had gone luminous in that moment before they'd dared touch, Rafe's dark and heated, but both men had moved slowly, savoring this very different first touch between them.

They had not let him stay on the sidelines as he had intended. He had held Blair, kissed him as Brian's hands ran up and down Blair's body, circling over his belly, mapping it, and then looking up into Blair's down turned face in a manner so close to worship Jim was awed. Rafe's kiss, on the small patch of darkened skin just below Blair's out-curved belly button was chaste, yet burned with emotion. Jim had felt Blair's reaction, heard his indrawn breath, felt it against his cheek when at last Rafe, unable to hold back and turn it into a slow seduction, had risen up, his body alongside Blair's and entered their Guide with shattering gentleness. Jim had been there, hearing Rafe's trembling groan as his hips moved, slipping deep, seeing the tears squeeze out from under the other Sentinel's lashes, as he held Blair, feeling where he was, feeling Blair against him, around him. Jim had touched Blair then, dampened his fingers with Rafe's fluids and stroked them where they were joined, Rafe hard and urgent, shaking, Blair soft, wet and yielding. He had seen, scented, tasted, listened and felt them move. Not long after, Jim had felt Blair shudder in climax, heard him moan, his thighs flexing at the sides of Rafe's hips, and felt him relax bonelessly, trusting, into Brian's arms. He had also seen how Rafe nuzzled the Guide, soothingly, even while he was still hard and wanting, before starting again, his body braced up on outstretched arms, seeking his own release. Blair had arched his head back, his throat long and beckoning Jim's tongue.

They had both reached out for him, included him, loved him as they loved each other. There was no bitterness, no bad aftertaste to the encounter, the change in their lives, Jim knew he had made the right decision, that their bond was stronger for it, for the loving they'd shared.

Now he sat and watched them from the side of the bed, his legs crossed under him, his own genitals slack and heavy where they rested against his leg, sticky and well used for the night, with no chance of rising for more. His Companion and his Guide were curled up together, a warm mass of naked limbs covered by blankets. Blair's hair had worked it's way free of the carefully constructed braid and now lay tangled across the pillows, a yard long and silky soft, while Rafe's short, much darker hair tried to look messy but remained a sleek cap on his handsome head, with only tiny sweat curls at his nape to show what he'd been up to. Jim didn't try to resist reaching out and running his hand over the
top of his Companion's head, down the strong neck, thumb moving over the rounded protrusions of each vertebrae, and ended toying with those dark, damp curls. He liked to touch Rafe, to acknowledge their bond much more openly than they once had. Their daily interdependence had never been called into question, it never would be. Rafe had never led him to question his dedication or loyalty. Rather than threatening their places in each other's lives, this night bound them even more closely.

Jim leaned down and brushed his lips over Rafe's heated cheek, and even in sleep Rafe turned towards him. His mouth was partly open, and that sparked a memory of those full lips on his body, mouth open, gasping, licking his way past all resistance, Jim not wanting to intrude into the moment he thought of as belonging to his Guide and Companon, before taking Jim into his mouth and sucking. Shuddering, low groans had sounded in his ear when Rafe's body had been beneath his, familiar and welcoming; Jim remembered not being able to control his reaction to Rafe's tongue teasing over his flesh, finding every sensitive spot and laving it. Jim had writhed while Blair stroked his hair and watched, his mouth open, too, his breath coming short, nipples tight points, hand clutching at Jim's belly as he panted his way through Jim's orgasm.

It had been love for a very long time. Not that first day, nor the first month, but some time in that first year Jim Ellison had started to love Brian Rafe. They lived together, worked as partners, depended on each other, cooked meals, ate, and slept in the same bed. They spent more time in each other's company than most husbands and wives. Rafe was Jim's spouse, his helpmate, his wife in every way but one, they could not bear children together. Jim wasn't hypocritical enough to deny his intense bond with his Companion. But neither was he a man to talk openly about it. Or about feelings. It was enough that Rafe know, that those close to them learned of it eventually if they watched the two men at all.

Jim turned to Blair, leaning further over the bed to touch him, to pick up a handful of curls and marvel at them, they were both soft and springy in his hand. So many colors. Such wild exuberance. It was so like Blair. Jim marvelled that his instinct had led him through the fetid slave market to this Guide not so long ago. Blair. Once a wild Guide, now his Guide, their Guide. He could see how others could want Blair, could crave him with a need bordering on madness. He knew that they did. That they always would. Legends always grew up around fertile Guides. Many myths and tales had featured fertile Guides. Those tales had only gained popularity as the number of Guides declined in recent decades, and more because the Guides who remained were not as fertile as they had once been. Now Blair, prominent because of his attachment to the Cascade Royal House, and more exposed because of the many recent visitors, was attaining almost cult status. Not every one had seen him, but visiting Sentinels had sniffed him out, they knew he was there.

Jim had heard the stories that sprang up in tribute to his Guide. He'd listened. Some were accurate, Blair had three children and was pregnant again. That was rare enough to incite comment from an eager and proud Cascade populace. But in communities further out, in other states, rumors and myths had Blair delivered of a dozen, two dozen or three dozen children. All Guides. All needing only a decade and a half before they were available. Some said Blair alone would be the saviour of the Sentinels who ached for new Guides, who suffered for the lack of them. Jim knew such tales were dangerous. He sighed. The truth was the only way out. Talking Blair into taking a more public role, going public with his life and the lives of their children. Being seen, letting his children step into the public eye, though Jim would keep them safe. Involuntarily he bared his sharp teeth. He would shield them, oh yes he would, by any and all means he needed to use.

Blair stirred under his hand, sensing his Sentinels busy thoughts, almost waking, and Jim smiled, sitting next to his Guide and watching him move closer, his face rubbing against Jim's hip. Jim stroked Blair's hair away from his face, looking down on the smooth cheek. If he could make his Guide feel safe, Blair might agree to step out, with Jim and Rafe in attendance, and however many
It was hours later, when Jim, still sitting and watching with fierce, unmoving vigilance over his slumbering Companion and Guide, heard a movement out in the hall. Guardian's voices and one other murmuring, low tones, nothing violent or threatening. He recognized the less familiar voice and reached for his shorts, tugging them on, adjusting himself as he walked towards the door, not bothering with more clothing. The man outside had seen him in far less, more times than he could count. He let himself out of the Guide quarters and stole on silent feet to where the voices still whispered. His sense of hearing had been augmented by his time with Blair. He had full and complete control of his dials. He heard Abrys asking for him, urgency in his tone. He smelled his friend and fellow soldier's arousal, his desperation, and subtly, his contrition.

"Abrys." Jim greeted him, standing in the low light of the hall. Abrys turned towards him, his face strained. Jim held out his arm and Abrys moved toward him, not hesitating, the Guardians watching him like twin hawks, though they made no move to stop him. He went directly to Jim, not stopping when Jim expected him to hesitate, ending instead against Jim's body, Abrys body, hard and demanding, pushing him up against the wall, Jim's one arm around his shoulders.

"Oh, god, you smell of him." The words were tortured, broken. They kept Jim from striking out, from pushing his way out of the more intimate than expected embrace that tightened around his body like steel bands. "I want...." Jim cautiously closed both arms around the other man. Abrys was hot, his skin sweaty, his hands were knotted against Jim's side, pressed like heavy stones into the flat, powerful muscles there.

"I cannot stop thinking of him. Of what he could give me and mine. His fertility, I would give everything for it. Share it with me. So I may pass it on to my Guides. Please Jim." The words came out in a rush, real force behind them. Abrys bit at Jim's neck, and Jim knew it wasn't to taste him, but to taste the flavor of his Guide that lingered on his unwashed skin. Abrys moved closer, his groan rumbling deep in his chest, Jim felt as well as heard it ripple over his skin and through his sensitized nerves. Abrys' hand moved down his body, going to Jim's groin, forming his hand around Jim, holding him, shaking. His leg pressed between Jim's thighs up into his crotch, tight and intimate.

"Abrys." Jim held him by the shoulders, aware of the heat and hardness aggressively pressing into his belly through too few layers of cloth. Abrys moaned. Jim dug his fingers in, trying to break the other Sentinel's focus on scent. Abrys kissed him, his tongue licking at his mouth, at the taste of Blair still there, his erection surging against Jim. Jim couldn't push him back, didn't want to hurt him to do it. He let the kiss continue, let the pleasure of it continue, it was a weak sensation only next to what he'd felt with Blair and Brian not long ago. Abrys' hunger transmitted itself to Jim, it was in the taste of his tongue and mouth. It grew in him, weaving it's way through his body, stirring his desire, making him want, again, what he'd had. He wanted Blair again, he wanted to hear his Guide moan with pleasure, he wanted to feel him move into each caress, to feel his body accept every thrust, to
fill him with seed, and know it was Blair in his arms, Blair who he filled. Not Abrys who he held in his arms and who strained into his hold. Abrys' body remembering the past, wanting to breach into Jim's body, but if he did, he would not find the taste of Blair he sought. He strained, and Jim resisted.

But he could not let go. Jim turned, keeping the other man close, letting him lick his skin, letting him reach inside his shorts and hold him, letting fingers seek past, knowing it was Blair's scent the other Sentinel truly sought not a return to something they'd had before, when they'd both been on the edge, needing, and having only each other to turn to. The bonds forged then were strong, Jim didn't deny them, but they were not the same kind he had forged now, nor could they compete. But he had to give some answer, he had to help the man who had kept him sane in a small, hot and humid hut, reeking of fear and soldier's sweat all those years ago.

Abrys' gave a sound like a sob into the crook of Jim's neck. "I am so sorry. So fucking sorry." He still tried to get further between Jim's legs, in closer, tighter. Jim held him, more than understanding this madness, moved him into the door of the Guide quarters, closing the door in the face of the silent Guardians, who watched the scene, seemingly without emotion, though the Sentinel had no doubt of their disapproval. They moved as Jim went into the area that housed Blair and the other Guides, but didn't follow inside, didn't grab the door when Jim closed it. They were right outside, and Jim knew they would hear any trouble, any protest and if they did they would enter, break down the door if they had to, regardless of what he the heir of Cascade wanted. Their mission was to keep Blair safe, the Guides safe. Not Jim Ellison.

He brought Abrys inside, holding him, giving him no freedom. Jim kept him close, controlling him. No matter what Abrys had been to him, no matter the debt owed between them, Abrys was not being given permission to take Blair. Jim would not let him mistakenly think that. He kept his hands firm on the other Sentinel. When he brought him onto the huge bed, it was on the side away from the Guide, with Jim's arms keeping him from reaching out to Blair. Rafe stirred instantly, his nostrils flaring, sniffing out the presence of a stranger. He was up on his knees, claws extended, pupils dilated, a wall of protection between Blair and the intruder before he saw that Jim was also there.

Rafe's dark eyes asked questions, demanding answers of his Alpha. He did not give way. Behind him Blair stirred, rising up on one elbow, seeing they were not alone, seeing also that Jim was holding the other man, not fighting him, but holding him gently. Blair waited to see what reason his Sentinel had to bring another inside their sanctuary. He didn't worry for his children, they were in the room behind him, with Jim, Brian, and even himself, if it came to that, between them and the man. Blair would stand against the man if he moved that way, towards the door into the nursery. No matter what was said by whom, he would not let any man not of his choosing near his children. He rose to sit, still mostly behind Rafe, adjusting his robes to be certain his body was completely covered. Then he waited to hear the explanation.

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Christopher waited while Maire rinsed the acrid scent thoroughly from her mouth and then he wiped a cool, wet cloth over her face and helped her back to their bed. He gave her watered fruit juice and knelt down by the bed. Maire had been plagued with "morning sickness" now for over a week, it seemed to hit her anytime day or night. It was one aspect of pregnancy she heartily wished gone, though she would endure it every day if she needed to in order to bear children. Christopher had started sleeping in the Guides' quarters to calm his own anxiety about her well being, intent on monitoring her condition and occasionally William joined them, though both Sentinels liked to be more circumspect with their changing relationship. In public no one would be able to point to any telltale sign that Christopher was no longer the virginal Companion. Usually it was just Christopher who slept here at hand, ready to help Maire.
She had bloomed in so many ways since moving in with the other Guides and learning she was pregnant. She had it in her mind to attend the reception for Michael and Blue, entirely draped of course in her modified frame, but she was going. Her insistence on the matter had surprised both William and Christopher, but William acquiesced knowing that it would go a long way toward showing he was not above the new Guide laws. Many of the Sentinels knew that the Ruler had kept his Guide in a full frame for years and wondered in public and private conversation if she was still kept that way, in spite of William's insistence that his Guide was now allowed to choose her own clothing. The rumors of her pregnancy would also be substantiated. Despite William's earlier announcement, not everyone believed that a Guide who had gone so long without bearing children could be pregnant.

Christopher took a package of crackers from the night stand and offered one to Maire to settle her churning stomach. She took it in her slender, pale fingers and raised it to her mouth, wondering what her stomach's reaction might be this time. It was anything but predictable lately.

She nibbled on the bland, salty cracker quietly before speaking in a soft voice. "I hope I carry more than one child. I would like one of them to have come from your seed." She did not quite look up and meet his eyes, the lessons of a lifetime not easy to break. He looked up at her from his place at her feet.

Christopher smoothed her hair, smiling, but serious. "That doesn't matter, any child that you have will belong equally to William and I, we will both be father to the children."

"I know this," she answered shyly. "But still I think that a child of yours would be very beautiful. William has sons from his seed, at least three, you have none, is it wrong for me to wish to give one to you?" She met his eyes then, and he smiled again for her. Her sweet disposition and innate kindness never ceased to amaze him.

"No, not wrong," Christopher said, earnestly. "It will happen if it is meant to be. It is not necessary though."

The Guide thought for a moment before answering her Sentinel. "I believe that it is sometimes good to have what is not necessary."

"You are very wise," Christopher said, bending over to kiss her forehead. "It is indeed good to sometimes have what is not necessary, yet is so precious."

"My stomach has settled," Maire said with a solemn eyes, and Christopher felt his heart surge. She slowly raised her arms and encircled his strong neck. Her body stretched along his, straining to fit his much larger frame. Well, it was fun to try.

The Sentinel knew that small hitch in her breath, and the scent of his Guide's arousal that accompanied it. It was a siren's call, one that couldn't be resisted and, ignoring the cracker crumbs biting into his skin as he lay down on the bed, he pulled his Guide into his embrace.
Chapter 42

Blair's eyes never left Jim's as he sat on the bed waiting for an explanation, he remained mostly screened behind Rafe's shielding body, looking around the Companion at the two men tussling on the bed, his gaze intent and hyper-vigilant. When his eyes finally drifted from Jim to the man he held in locked arms, Blair was a little surprised at the way he was being watched in turn. He had been looked at like that before, of course, he'd seen that same look in other Sentinel's eyes, but not often. The look was hungry, but it wasn't...violent, it wasn't forceful, it wasn't scary, not precisely. It did send a surge of something electric through him. Blair relaxed a fraction, the tight knot between his shoulder blades eased, and he began to observe the men in front of him on a new level.

Two Alpha Sentinels, frighteningly closely matched in strength, Blair thought, either man might win the struggle they were engaged in; as he watched the other man, big, rangy and solid, heaved against Jim's hold, straining upwards, twisting and wrenching at the grip around him with increasing force. A beautiful curve of body, toned muscle and bone perfectly formed obvious even mostly hidden under the cloth of his shirt and pants. His face held a level of desperation that was beyond simple lust. It was the face Jim had worn not so long ago, the face that had preceded near tragedy. Desperation that pushed one to the edge of sanity, terrifying in its single minded intensity.

Abrys' eyes were fixed on Blair, meeting Blair's over Rafe's shoulder. Hungry, obsessive. Helpless to stop.

Blair shivered. He moved to the side a bit, no longer all the way behind Rafe, whose arm immediately came up to stop his progress. He watched as the long, thick muscles in the stranger's body bulged, and then Jim's did the same in counterpoint; they fought, silent but for grunts and hissing breath as they strained, and the creak of sinew and bone. Jim fought more gently, the near stranger, Blair searched for his name, Abrys? Abrys, breath sucked harshly between clenched teeth, was pulling at Jim's arms with hooked fingers, yet, oddly for a fight between Sentinels, without extended claws.

Rafe made his move, trying to shift in front of Blair again, intending to nudge him backward, to put his body firmly between Blair and disaster, the weight of his body and his touch gentle and familiar. Impatiently Blair pushed at the hands trying to pull him out of the way. His attention was riveted on the writhing pair. Jim threw a leg over Abrys' hip, held him down, or tried. Abrys tested the hold, making not a single sound as he did. It was a dance of gorgeous power, Blair could not, didn't want to, look away.

The struggle had gone from Abrys merely straining at Jim's encompassing hold, to an outright fight, all the while with Blair in Abrys' sights. Blair felt a surprising flutter in his belly, and shock washed over him for an incredulous instant, before he realized it wasn't sexual arousal he was feeling. No. It was an awareness of sorts, but it wasn't about sex. He inched forward, sensing Rafe's distress, the Companion trembling at his side now. Blair wanted to touch Abrys. He wanted to touch Jim. He wanted to feel that straining, heaving, masculine Sentinel muscle under his widespread hands. He wanted their sweat to soak into his skin, to daub his breasts and the rest of his skin. He wanted to run his fingers over the line of dark tanned flesh where it met the paler skin, hidden always from the sun. He wanted them to be his to touch, to hold, to explore. His breath came more quickly.

Blair paused, contemplated the situation and his roiling desires, what was he thinking for gods' sake? Desiring to put his mouth to sweaty flesh and taste them? Trying to touch another Alpha with Jim right here? That Jim had brought the other to him, well that hardly mattered. Alpha Sentinels did not always make sense.
But, it was pretty easy to put an answer into words, yes, he wanted to put his hands on that Sentinel, that Abrys. Simple. Every bit as much as he wanted to pull Jim to him. What was complex was why the hell he should want it. He went to hands and knees, he crawled forward. Well, he would find out the answer to his question the best way possible, he'd just go ahead and do it.

Rafe's hands were on his hips, tugging him backwards, gripping hard, digging in firmly enough that Blair knew they'd leave bruises. Blair made no headway against the hold. He looked back at Rafe, frowning. He wanted to go to Abrys. He pushed at the hands, Rafe didn't let go, but Blair ~was~ going to go to the Alphas, he spread his knees for better traction, pulled against the restraint. Rafe should know that Blair had to go, he shouldn't try to stop him. He wriggled a bit. And he felt down in his belly, another flutter.

His babies were awake in his womb, awake and very much aware of what he was doing. He felt little heels kicking at him. Not displeased, just active, excited by the overpowering awareness of struggling, squirming Sentinels? He wasn't sure. He reached back put a hand on Rafe's and tugged the Companion forward instead of trying to free himself. Rafe came up against him, startled at the action, his body moving over Blair's back to front, surrounding him like a blanket. Blair put Rafe's hand right on top of the spot....and Rafe felt the kicking.

Rafe held his breath, his other hand fell away from Blair's hip, arms wrapping around Blair's belly, both hands on the Guide's stomach spread wide to catch any and all movement transmitted through the flesh. Rafe was afraid to breathe, afraid he'd miss the movement under his hand, they both stayed still. The babies kicked, keeping up a tattoo against taut skin. Rafe, unable to pull his Guide behind him, settled for wrapping his arms around Blair protectively, holding him snug and close, he shuffled on his knees and got Blair partly turned away from the two Alphas. Abrys had frozen, gone so absolutely still that for a moment Blair thought he'd zoned. His eyes were hugely dilated and fixed on Rafe's hand where it cupped Blair's belly. The tableau lasted forever, and yet no longer than a single moment. All of them were unmoving, no one staring at each other, Blair looking into unfamiliar eyes, held by something he didn't understand at all.

Then Abrys exploded. His body arched up off the mattress, sending Jim at least a foot into the air. Abrys got a arm free and it darted out, reaching for Blair. Everyone gasped, letting out air held too long in bursting lungs. Rafe moved like a striking snake even as his Guide extended his own hand. Rafe's claws were fully deployed, streaking for Abrys' throat, Abrys' palm coming to rest on Blair, cupping over his abdomen, right next to The Spot where little heels drummed insistently. Rafe's hand was an instant from contact when Jim's hand wrapped around Rafe's wrist, trapping it, and Blair's hand came to rest on Abrys' holding it to his stomach.

Rafe's claws vanished, the killing blow muffled in Jim's hold, the ripping slash stopped cold. Rafe hissed unhappily, trying to dislodge the strong fingers from around his wrist and tugging experimentally, hopefully. Jim didn't let him free, and Blair didn't remove his hand or force Abrys' away. Rafe could not slice into the throat of the Alpha who was not Jim, yet who dared to touch his Guide. Rafe whined unhappily.

Blair look up from the unfamiliar hand that rested on his belly, into Jim's eyes, his expression held one all encompassing question. Why? Why did it give him pleasure to have the Sentinel he barely knew touching him, face intense, rapt, as he felt the kick of unborn feet against his sensitive palm? A few inches below Jim's, Abrys' face was.... Blair smiled, reached down and petted the thick hair of the new Sentinel he'd let this close.

"He's hurting," Jim said, uncertain why he was not jealous, why he felt no urge to kill the other man, the pain he felt for Abrys all too clear in his voice and expression. "He's like a brother to me, I can't abandon him to this insanity." Yet he wasn't positive, his tone was unsure. He looked up at Blair
who was still stroking Abrys. Jim had no power to stop the thin growl that trickled out of his throat, the hand...he didn't like the hand on Blair. But Blair settled lower, giving tacit permission for Abrys to touch more of his belly, as he watched Jim, as his eyes forbid Jim to object. Blair moved the questing hand to another point, and another kick fluttered there. The babies approved of the touch. Blair knew he carried at least two who were Guides then. Unborn, they still enjoyed a Sentinel's attention.

"You've done this," Blair said to Jim, his tone accepting, actually sounding pleased, as he stroked the back of Abrys' hand. "I don't want to turn him away, his touch calls to me and my body is answering. My children know what he is." Blair looked at Jim, deep into the icy blue of his eyes. At first he had feared the look in those eyes, the hard purpose, the aggression, everything that was an Alpha Sentinel. Now he knew the depth of Jim's love, his regard, now he understood what Jim was, what a Sentinel was, and what he was himself, a Guide. More importantly he understood what a Guide was, could do. He lifted his chin. He could do this. "I accept the offering you have brought to me." Blair said. Jim lowered his eyes.

Blair felt a smile growing as he watched Abrys map every part of him that the Sentinel could reach. The Guide chooses, he thought to himself. As was right. The Sentinel offers, but the Guide decides. That was the way it should be. The way Nature had made them.

Rafe gave a warning snarl and again tried to move Blair behind him. Blair leaned back into him, throwing him off balance. "It is my choice, my Claim." Blair said quietly. Rafe let out a sound like a whimper, turning his face into the tumbled locks of hair at Blair's nape. He didn't like it, but he obeyed. Blair waited. Rafe didn't object again. Blair patted the arm locked around his swollen waist. Watched as Rafe's hair stood on end all along his forearm when an accidental brush of Abrys' fingers touched him. He felt Rafe's lips peel back into another snarl against his neck, but the Companion kept the sound inside.

"Please." Abrys said when they had all been silent too long. "I've heard the stories. Two Guides that have never conceived before became pregnant after being exposed to you." Abrys inched up on one elbow. "Bear me a child. Let me be father to one of your children." His need filled every corner of his being and shone out of his eyes.

Blair shook his head. "No, I can't. I already carry the children of another. They are my children, our children," he reached out and touched Jim's cheek, let his fingertips move over the face he loved. Jim raised his eyes, met Blair's. Some unacknowledged tension eased. Blair saw true pride there, in beautiful, cool blue-grey eyes.

Blair sighed and moved his hand from Jim to stroke Abrys' hair. Jim kept watching Blair's face. "I know you're looking for fast, simple answers," Blair said, "but there aren't any. I know there is a Guide for you, Abrys, and I believe you will have children." He bent down and kissed the slightly rough cheek, morning stubble beginning to grow on the tanned skin. "Before that, you should have a Companion. I'll help you find one."

But Abrys was already shaking his head. He inched forward again, watching Blair for any sign of refusal as he neared, looming though it was clear he had no desire to intimidate or overwhelm.

"Your child." Abrys said urgently. "You are a Guide I would be honored to have, I will pay for you, whatever amount will free you. My father doesn't believe in Companions. To mate with another man? No. I can not. Father has a wife from an arranged marriage, an Alpha's daughter. The arrangement has strengthened our holdings and given him me as his heir, I am heir to twice the lands he has. He wishes the same for me, for our family, to increase our holdings our standing among Alphas. No Alpha worth forging an allegiance with would give a daughter in marriage to be second
"He doesn't know about your feelings for Jim?" Blair asked. Abrys looked alarmed at the idea. His face paled then reddened. Jim looked slightly startled, but not put off enough to move away. That was answer enough, Abrys had not shared his feelings with Jim, or anyone else. Blair cooed comfort at him, thinking out loud. "William had a wife, a Companion and a Guide," Blair offered in reason, "I think you, though, would do better with only a Guide and Companion. One of each. It wouldn't be fair to have a wife." Abrys was red, from hairline to chest; Blair twined a silky bit around his finger. The man had such nice hair.

"The Llewellyns are not as rich as the Ellisons, how can we afford....?" Abrys said, then he stopped, as if thinking over his words, he leaned forward, his breath warming Blair's skin. "For you, I would give it all up. I will give all of my part of our kingdom if you will be my Guide. Bear my children. I will stay here...I will wait until you are ready, until you agree." The hope in his face was painful. Blair stroked his cheek, his chin. He knew it wouldn't work. Maybe in the past, when the Guide's choice was understood by all, maybe in the future, but not now, not today, when the Laws had only just begun to change.

Blair unwrapped Rafe's arms from his torso and moved over taking Abrys out of Jim's arms, he stroked the distraught Sentinel as he spoke. "It is Christopher who tends to Maire when morning sickness comes to her. It is Rafe who kneels and takes my slippers from my feet now that my belly is too big for me to bend. Guides need Companions, they understand the needs of Guides better than any handler can. It wasn't until William released all of Maire's handlers and trusted Christopher to care for her that she conceived. Alpha, Companion and Guide, that is the core of family for our kind. Guides are not possessions to be kept locked away, kept pregnant and breeding. We need to serve Sentinels, but we need the freedom to serve, to choose who we will claim, not enforced servitude. We need to be able to choose." His intent eyes searched Abrys' dismayed face. "Do you understand?"

"Guides are precious, even more so when they are pregnant." Abrys shook his head slowly and argued. "I would not give the care of my Guide over to handlers, if you were mine I would tend to you myself. I am not too proud to kneel at your feet to remove your slippers and when our children are born I would care for them the same way a Companion would." Blair wondered if Abrys heard what he himself said.

"Is that what you do now, with your Guides?" Blair asked. "Then why are they not here with you?"

"No, as Heir I have other duties." Abrys whispered, his gaze averted, as if he knew he wasn't speaking the full truth, "But once a Guide is with child...." His face was close to Blair's belly, his eyes fixed on the swell. Involuntarily he licked his lips and his face held such longing Blair ached with it.

Blair smiled, he had some harsh lessons to impart, not only to Abrys, but to his own Sentinel as well. "Being owned, being named as livestock is not what Guides need from Sentinels," Blair said. "The Guardians are our protectors. Alphas protect the community, the territory, Companions protect the home front and Guardians protect the Guides and their children. There is a place for each of our kind. Guides know who their Sentinel mates should be. It is the Sentinel who should be faithful, who should devote to one Guide. Until Alphas give Guides the right to say no to a bond that is wrong, no amount of pregnant Guide scent will bring a Guide into heat, or make a difference in any other way. You need to let go of the past and start fresh. Take the Companion who is right for you, love him and together seek your Guide. After that, children will come. Trust the Guide to know."

"I think Sentinels know," Jim ventured to say, without anger, "If we can be brutally honest with
ourselves. I let many Guides go before I found Blair, I could have kept them in a harem, the way most ruling families do, but I let them go."

"Yes, Abrys knows," Blair said. "In his heart he knows, but he thinks that it is a betrayal to everything that he is, but the true betrayal is to himself for not following his heart."

"I can't," Abrys whispered, his face pressed against Blair's belly. "I can't."

"Hold still," Bella said, not for the first time as Dahl shifted impatiently. "I don't want to stick you with a pin." Well, maybe only an eensie-weenie poke, if he didn't hold still.

"How much longer will it take?" Dahl asked, his tone perilously close to a whine. "It's just the final fitting, I don't see why it's taking so long."

"You're the one who wanted a maternity shirt for the reception," Bella pointed out, with brutal honesty, "even though your belly is still flat as a board. It's not easy to make the shirt both formal and full. With your figure...you've always been able to buy off the rack and still look like you spent a million bucks." Bella grumbled at her fellow Guide.

"Blair and Maire are wearing maternity gowns," Dahl said with a pout, only just resisting the temptation to fluff out the shirt while Bella was pinning. He came very close to stamping one slim foot. "I'm pregnant too, why shouldn't I get some of the kudos? Can't you make it...more obvious?" He still looked too skinny. He frowned. Two months along and not even a visible bump. He stuck his lip out, he'd waited so long, thought it was never going to happen, and then...it had. He wanted to show it off. But there wasn't anything to show off.

"Humph," Bella frowned. "Recognition I can understand but just don't lose sight of the fact that some of these Sentinels have strange ideas about how to get a Guide to quicken. More than one of them want Jim to give up Blair, or at least give them the go ahead to take his scent back to their own beds. They think it's the scent of a pregnant Guide, Blair's scent, that's responsible for your pregnancy."

"That's ridiculous," Dahl said, reaching out to hold Andy's hand. "It's my Sentinel who is responsible for my pregnancy, not Blair. And if they want his scent, he should pee in a cup and they can take that with them. You know people used to think that injecting pregnant rabbit urine...." Bella poked him with a pin, and he yelped. They exchanged a long, potent look. Andy beamed, missing the interplay.

"Not all sentinels are as reasonable as ours," Bella said, after a moment of silence during which Dahl didn't even twitch as she pinned the rest of the hem. She leaned back a little to look at her handiwork. "Just remember, at the reception, don't get out of reach of Stephen, Andy or a Guardian. I wouldn't put it past one of the others to try to steal us." She wasn't pleased to have so many strangers around. Not now, not when there were three pregnant Guides to care for.

Three pregnant Guides who had to be guarded, and a house full of Sentinels who had to be watched, prevented from running off with one or more of them. Stealing them. Bella's mouth turned down and grimly she bent back to her task, adjusting at a few spots. Andy and Dahl were gazing into each other's eyes like love struck puppies. It was adorable, but she only wished they weren't so distracted. They needed to be alert.

"I'll stay with him," Andy said, giving the Guide's hand an affectionate squeeze and showing his teeth, unaware he was doing so. Bella felt a spurt of approval, that was more like it. She nodded as
Andy continued, his voice deepening with his sincerity. "He'll be safe." Perhaps he would be, Bella thought. A newly pregnant Guide, a possessive new Sentinel father, Andy would be vigilant. She hoped it would be enough, it never hurt to be over prepared though, she fully intended to have a word with that huge Guardian son of William's about security.

"No offense, Andy, I know you would die for us and you know I love you," Bella said, concern coloring her voice. "But take a Guardian or two with you if Dahl has to pee. A desperate Alpha, with a higher rank then Stephen, wouldn't think twice of challenging you if he found you alone and I don't want to lose either of you. You could be put down for resisting the wrong Alpha if he had enough power to be able to demand Dahl and you refused." She didn't trust the new Laws, sure people said they'd changed things, but...in a house full of powerful men, surely some believed they were above the law.

"Bella's right," Christopher said, joining in the conversation, from where he lounged against the wall, all six feet and six inches of beautiful, blond man. Bella found him just gorgeous, and if she wasn't with Stephen, or even if Maire would be comfortable sharing...but no, it wasn't possible, nor the right time for it. She sighed and slipped in the last pin, stepping back to look at her work with a critical eye.

"William is going to ask Admiral Bellingham to assign two Guardians to each of our Guides at the reception. The Guardians are not required to submit to the demands of a higher ranking Alpha Sentinel. We will also have Guardians at all the entrances and exits to all compound buildings and the grounds as well as patrols," Christopher spoke again.

"It sounds like Ruler Ellison is expecting trouble, he is a wise man." Andy observed. He watched his Guide being dressed in flowing silks. He had never seen a more beautiful sight. The fabric fanned out over the non-existent belly, hiding just how flat it was. But soon he knew that flat, hard belly would soften into a curve that would hold new life. He licked his lips. He wanted to reach up and pull Dahl down off the pedestal, he wanted to nudge Bella away. Andy wanted to put Dahl onto his back and enter him in slow, honeyed inches, feeling the wet slide surrounding him as he took his Guide. He wanted to fuck....he growled, his eyes darkening as his pupils dilated.

"You two will not do ~that~ in my sewing room." Bella said, and glanced at Andy quellingly, looking pointedly around them, reminding him they were not alone, in private. She treated him to one raised brow, and shook a tiny but sharp pin at him. And while he didn't blush, he didn't put Dahl on his back either, and that was all Bella could ask for.

Christopher cleared his throat delicately, pretending he didn't notice the by-play. "William is trying to avoid trouble with a show of force," Christopher said, as if there wasn't a new, heated tension filling the air, as if the scent of aroused Sentinel and Guide didn't make thinking let alone speaking nearly impossible. "It's the only thing the Alphas' understand." He shifted his stance, well aware of his own body's response to the scent. No longer being celibate created its own problems.

Bella sighed, her eyes not missing a thing. That Sentinel was impressive. All over.

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outcome possible. Yet, he'd still brought Abrys to Blair, trusting his Guide to find a solution and willing to accept it, whatever it was, even if it hurt. Rafe hadn't been so forgiving. Blair sensed his anger even now, and it was reasonable. Things might have gone very badly indeed. Any or all of them could have been injured. Killed. And now someone else was touching the children Rafe was responsible for. Rafe would need time to get over that. He'd been willing to kill Abrys outright to forestall the chance of such an outcome. To keep Blair from being harmed. And now, Rafe was angry with Jim for making it almost necessary.

But Blair had figured it out, watching while Abrys murmured sweet nothings to his pregnant belly, talking to the unborn babies, his hand running in delicate sweeps over Blair's skin. He'd wormed his way under Blair's robe, much to Rafe's outrage and to Jim's chagrin, but Blair had been willing to allow it, and his trust was well founded it seemed. Abrys didn't try to fondle him, didn't try to have sex. He only wanted to touch Blair's stomach, to get closer to the babies inside.

That was when Blair asked for Jim and Rafe to bring their children. He stroked them again, smiling. Abrys' agitation had vanished almost at once. As the first child was laid on his chest, that was all it took, his trembling stopped, his caresses along Blair's abdomen, his sniffing licks over Blair's belly, all of it stopped. The tension left, replaced by a look of complete wonder. And Blair saw, the same look was reflected in Jim's eyes, as well as relief. The Guide smiled, but hid it from his Sentinel. Jim deserved a moment's worry for his precipitant act. He hadn't asked for advice, just brought the Sentinel in trouble to Blair. It had been a rather nasty shock. But it was working out. Blair settled into Rafe's arms. Rafe squeezed him tightly, holding him securely.

Rafe was still furious, but he'd get over it. Blair planned to keep him busy until he did.

Abrys now lay with his head on Blair's nearest thigh, every few minutes he'd tilt his head back a fraction, so that his hair rubbed along Blair's stomach. Jim had moved nearer and now leaned in placing a kiss on Blair's cheek. He was cautious, as if not entirely certain of his welcome.

"Thank you." He said, his lips moving sweetly against Blair's cheek. Blair shot him a mock glare.

"You owe me, Sentinel." He growled, trying to look fierce and failing. He was far too pleased with how this had turned out. Jim, serious, nodded, swallowing, suspecting he'd landed himself in the dog house. His eyes drifted down to watch his old friend. The lines of tension relaxed.

"I know." Ellison said.

"Do you?" Blair asked. "I don't think you really do."

"What?" Jim asked, glancing up sharply, hearing the tone in his Guide's voice. "Am I missing something here?"

"Oh let me see," Blair pretended to think. He held up his fingers one by one. "He didn't try to kill you. No claws. You didn't try to kill him. Again no claws. And don't tell me it was because of his being your friend. You tried to kill your ~father~ not to long ago. So." Blair held up a third finger. "No groping, no sex, even after he got around you and touched me. And you still didn't try to hurt him even when he had his head under my robe and in my lap. You let him ~lick~ me." Blair pointed out, then looked even more pointedly at the way Abrys was caring for the babies, all his attention focused on them. They both watched as Abrys tilted his head back again and rubbed against Blair's pregnant belly.

Blair raised his brows, staring at Jim. Jim frowned, not quite there yet. Blair sighed, patting his Sentinel indulgently, enjoying the feel of sinew and so much muscle under his hand. He felt Rafe relax suddenly against his back. OK. Rafe had figured it out. Jim though, well, being an Alpha

"The 'Companion' is the important thing for him." Blair said, emphasizing the word. "Only then, the Guide, matched to both of them, a wild Guide would be best." Blair waited. Jim waited. Blair sighed, then whispered into his Sentinel's ear. "Abrys' Companion needs to be an Alpha Sentinel, one that will accept who he is."

"Huh...?" Jim stammered, aghast at the suggestion. "An Alpha, are you sure?"

"Weren't you listening, Jim?" Abrys doesn't want to just Claim a Sentinel ~as a mate~, he wants to assume the role of the Companion. He wants to be the one to tend the Guide, a very male Guide is the only possible choice. If he is forced into marriage it will be a disaster. I am willing to bet his Guides are of female orientation, mostly because he believed such Guides would be more fertile, not out of real desire. They sense that when he goes to them, they know that the bond is wrong. And he knows it. That's why he is willing to pay any price for me, I could give him children. What he won't yet admit, he seeks an Alpha as well as a Guide. So that he can be Companion."

Jim stared in shock. Abrys...was gay? Jim tried to wrap his head around the stunning revelation.
Chapter 43

Incacha stood watching the sunrise bleed its red promise over the morning sky.

Today was the day he would send his son to the far land in the north seeking his destiny. The sun rose fierce and strong, its rays lighting the green forest, striking the dew on the leaves into glittering, ephemeral jewels. The sounds of the forest rose to a crescendo, building as insects, birds, monkeys and other animals woke and began their search for food this fateful day. Frogs sang in the cool dampness. Incacha felt the joy of the wakening, but it was tempered with an uncharacteristic sorrow, too. Today his son was going away.

His mind flew back to the memory of the birth of his second child, the labor he had gone through, both long and hard, and the vision quest he undertook on the boy's fifth birthday was a year late, as even then he feared the small boy would be taken from him. But tiny Oma had been strong, stronger than any one knew or guessed, he beat the trials of this fearsome jungle. Now he would head towards a new one, a new jungle of steel and man-made stone, a place Incacha himself feared.

The shaman shivered at the recall of what he saw in the vision that whispered of his son's future. Sentinels who took Guides without regard to a true bond and then mutilated their bodies in sacrifice to an imagined god of fertility. A place where too few Guides gave birth, and those that did lost their children to men with empty hearts, who dared sell the most precious of lives. He did not want to send his child into the civilized wilderness to meet those savage Sentinels. And yet it was where his child, his now adult son, was meant to go. The gods had spoken.

They called themselves civilized, the Sentinels of that far off land, and he'd known one man from there who had become like a brother to him in the time they had known each other. That had been many years past, when this son, who was destined to leave, was only a boy, not yet a man. The shaman knew it took more than brick buildings and marvelous machines to be civilized. A truly civilized Sentinel looked to the bond above all else and would come with his Companion, kneel at the feet of the Guide's father and humbly ask that he and his Companion be accepted as bond mates, that they be tested for the right. But those practices had been lost to the "civilized" Sentinels. They denied the truth, the gift, and so it was withering, nearly lost to them.

Now his son, young, proud, confident in his abilities, and sure he would prevail... sure of himself as only a youth could be, would step into a world far more dangerous than the jungle he grew up in. Incacha had shared the vision with Oma, had counseled him as well as he could. There was nothing more to do but let him go to meet his future, and his Sentinels, for the vision had told him there would be two. Incacha prayed to the gods to guide his son in his trek to the far off land, for Oma held no fear or caution within, it fell to Incacha to feel it for him.

Incacha had wondered if he should go to the terrible place in the company of his son. But the vision had not bidden him to do so. His own destiny did not reside in such a journey. His life was here, in the shade of the great trees, in among the dirt trails, leading his people. His fifth son was old enough now for his training to begin. The only other child of his who was a Guide, who might, someday be the Shaman to follow Incacha. The others Sentinels, tall and proud, dwarfing him when they stood at his shoulder. He had to stay with his remaining children, and let the one go on the path of the gods, to trip over the rocks and stones without Incacha at his side. All he could send with Oma was faith and love.

The shaman had seen in another vision that one family of Sentinels in the north had seen the error of their ways and were desperately trying to save themselves and Guides from extinction. And into this cauldron, his son would step. It was almost more than he could bear. There was a great gathering and
it was time for his son to go. The Alphas that were his son's destiny awaited him, and the pain filled
cry of one of them echoed desperately in Oma's mind and heart. Incacha had seen in his vision quest
that the Alphas would not seek out his son, the gods did not speak to them, their Guide had to be the
one to go to them.

Incacha had foreseen what would come to be as his son's voice joined with voices of other Guides
and the voices of their Sentinels in a call to the Sentinels lost in the wilderness of their own fear and
need. His son would be a shining example of the way a true Guide could live. There was much work
to be done and his son's destiny was part of it. Together, in time, the Guides would show the lost
Sentinels the way out of the dangerous wilderness and all would return to the way it should be.

Even knowing how it must be, Incacha feared for his son in the barbaric land.

The night before....

The bass drums beat their potent tattoo, sounding their deep throated echoes out into the night and
letting all know that the Chopec were in the midst of a celebration. They celebrated many things
during the course of every year. Life, death, birth, comings, and in this case, goings. One of their
own was going. The son of the Shaman was leaving. And such a thing had to be celebrated, honored
or the gods would be angry. If the gods were angry the voyage of their precious son would not be
blessed. He would need every blessing where he was going. So the Chopec celebrated. They drank,
danced, and loved. So that the young man who they were sending out would arrive safely in the land
of his destiny.

The drink of pounded, soaked roots had fermented perfectly, and around the fire in the center of the
vast circle, Guides drank it from small cups holding it in their mouths. One by one they stood,
glistening, naked, their compact brown bodies as intoxicating as the brew they sipped. Two by two
the Sentinels danced around the edge of the circle, attention fixed the the display of flesh. The
Guides swayed, beginning the dance. They sprayed the drink into the air, a shower of whitish fluid
floating like mist, tiny drops landing on the skin of any who were near.

The Sentinels were there, covered with the mist, the movement of bodies growing more overt. They
grasped hands, paired mates, Alpha and Companion, Guardian and Mate. The Alphas were the most
sensitive, and thus the first to succumb to the drug sprayed out of the mouths of their Guides. At the
very edge of the group, a young pair, unmatched as of yet to any Guide, hypersensitive, their control
not yet established without the modifying influence of their true Guide, writhed together. They sank
to the ground covered in the god-drug, and waited to see if this night they would be chosen.

Older pairs, alreadybonded, lowered themselves and lay on the ground, not still, but surrendering to
the choice of their Guides, though nothing about their magnificent bodies, the fire in their eyes, was
submissive.

Incacha sat above it all, set apart for now. He felt the heavy feeling low in his belly, the call to mate,
and to breed another life. He had borne six children, tonight he would conceive his seventh and last.
He was no longer young, and though strong, his body no longer bore children with the same ease.
But it was the will of the gods, and he embraced it.

He looked out over the Sentinels who filled the clearing, his eyes measuring each. Who should father
this last child? Should it be the old Sentinel pair who would soon be beyond fatherhood? The
powerful pair who led the warriors on their raids? His own Sentinels who he could not help but to
desire with a flame that would never be quenched, the fathers of four of his six children? Or should
he chose the youngest pair, the unmatched, should he bear them their first offspring? It would be a
worthy Shaman's gift, one to please the gods. Incacha watched them all and thought of his choices.

Across the fires dotting the clearing, past the dancing, wild Sentinels and gleeful Guides, his own Sentinels danced. Subdued, controlled, older, but eager for him, his scent riding them, beckoning, alluring. They stayed out of the spray, it was too soon for them to lay down for him. It was too soon for them to sink into the madness of the mating celebration. They had painted themselves bright colors, emphasizing their genitals with red streaks and orange. Incacha saw their beauty and was glad. His eyes were drawn back to the young pair who lay alone, a little apart from the established Sentinels. And he knew he had made his choice. The gods would bless this new child. He stood and made his way through the dancing tribe.

And there was Oma, even further back from the actions of the tribe, he climbed into the elevated seat that his father had left. His body cried out for love and sex it would not get. Tonight he would not couple. Tonight he would witness the full joy of Sentinel and Guide as his people came together in his honor, to give him a safe and blessed journey. From this night on he would save himself for his true Sentinels. Waiting for the seed the gods woke to be fertilized in his womb. His first child would be from the ones who waited for him in the far land. He watched as his father arrived at the new warriors, stepping to them, touching their faces and whispering secret words of love. Oma watched as his father, still beautiful, wise and kind, made his choice.

When Oma returned in the future he would have a new brother to meet. He smiled as he watched Incacha bend down, what better incentive to survive the trials of his destiny and some day come home? Incacha had already told him the coming child's name. Athal.

Alpha Sentinels were not homosexuals. They did not lay down for other men. A weak Sentinel might become a Companion and submit to an Alpha Sentinel, that was only right. When a Sentinel did, he became less than a man, and less than Alpha. He became a beta, a second tier Sentinel, unworthy of rule or authority. The thought that his own son had such a future ahead was too much to bear.

Ruler Llewellyn was furious. His only son and thus his one heir had just told him he did not intend to wed the woman who had been selected for him. He hadn't come right out and explained why, but the Ruler knew. It was the most shameful of things. Abrys wished to lay beneath another man. He had taken Guides but none were pregnant, and here was the reason why. It was almost too much to be borne.

He'd always know his son had unfortunate tendencies. Grandmother Llewellyn had counseled him to be alert, and ready to stamp out unwanted experimentation on the part of his son, her grandson. She had caught the boy sitting on the lap of a low ranking Sentinel, listening to the tales the man spun. Allowing the man's hands to run through his hair. Even at seven years old he should have known better. Llewellyn had been young then, the heir, not the ruler yet, and to hear what his son had allowed had nearly crushed his heart. Abrys had never been un-escorted after that until he could be trusted to behave as befitted an Alpha Sentinel. Llewellyn had thought himself free of the worry after the harsh discipline of the Army Rangers. That was proving a vain hope.

While he fought to retain his composure, and to find a solution, Ruler Llewellyn carefully planned. He could not disinherit his son, that would call too much scandal down on the family. Nor could he take Abrys and leave before the reception honoring the newly discovered Guardian son of Ruler Ellison. Abrys was known to be the friend of the Ellison heir, his departure would be taken as an insult. He would have to stay, to find a solution later after they were back home. Abrys had fallen for the pregnant Guide of Ellison's, that at least showed he was a man, desiring to be a father. All that
remained was to re-educate his heir to the joys of laying with a true woman. Fatherhood would turn
him around.

If it did not there were ways to keep it quiet, with their aggressive natures Sentinels did not always
live long lives.

Jim strode along, Abrys at his side. He was still puzzled by what Abrys was trying to tell him. About
the feelings and desires he had. They were far outside of Jim's own frame of reference.

Abrys was an Alpha Sentinel. He behaved as one. He commanded respect. He smelled like an
Alpha. Everything Jim sensed about him was Alpha. His strength was that of an Alpha, his speed.
And yet, he said the same words Blair had said, as if Blair's words had freed his tongue. He said he
wished to pair with another Alpha Sentinel. He said he wished...he'd swallowed hard, fighting to
meet Jim's eyes,...to lay under another Sentinel. To submit. And the look in his eyes said he wouldn't
at all be troubled if the Sentinel he submitted to was Jim.

Jim was no more able to understand it the fifth and sixth time Abrys tried to explain than he had been
able to the first. They had turned to each other in the past when there was no alternative, but neither
had submitted, not that way. Jim struggled to imagine giving that part of himself away. He could not
wrap his mind around it. He could not see it. Could not picture, tolerate the idea, of being on his
back, or worse on his belly while another man....

He felt no anger, or revulsion, it just wasn't possible for him to understand the desire. In his
Companion, yes. In Blair, definitely. Any Guide would be no more beautiful than when he or she
gave up that part of themselves. And it was no more than a Companion's duty. It was only natural.
But not when it was an Alpha.

They turned the corner and found themselves in an unoccupied room, the shelves lined with books,
chairs and couches placed in groups around the massive floor. Jim took Abrys by the arm and
brought him into the empty room and closed the soundproof door. He spun the lock. Abrys wanted
to talk one more time, and Jim was not going to deny him, But the Compound was filling with
guests, and privacy was not so easily found, nor kept once found.

Abrys stood with the erect posture typical of all Alphas, his body straight and tall, always ready to
burst into action, visually he was without flaw, yet his head was bowed, and he was clearly in
thought, gaze clouded, it sent a very different message. He lifted his chin and met Jim's worried eyes
squarely.

"I know you don't understand. That is alright, I am not sure I would understand if it wasn't
happening to me." Abrys said at last. "It goes against what we've been taught, what our fathers told
us." He tapped his wide chest. "But in here, I know Blair is right. It is what I want, the only thing
I've ever wanted. I was born to be one thing, and circumstances have forced me to act as if I were
another. I want this, to be a Companion, more than I want anything else. And there is no way I am
going to be allowed to if my family has any say. They can't tolerate the heir of Llewellyn being
overtly homosexual." Jim fought not to wince on hearing the word, it clenched something deep in his
belly, his whole being rejected it, it was a word best avoided, and never spoken between two
Sentinels. Just the utterance made Jim cringe.

Abrys went on, with Jim struggling to listen. "I can claim others, I can fuck as many Guides as I
wish, as many women, and truth be told as many men as I want. Though I must be discreet if I fuck
men. But...if they hear I let one man fuck me, that is more than can be borne. They won't let me be
what I am."
Jim frowned, but felt a little more at ease. Fucking he could understand, they could talk about that. But Abrys was agitated, pacing the thick-piled carpet. Jim heard the tremor of his too tense muscles, saw the way he raked stiff fingers through his hair, smelled the faint tang of distress. Abrys let out a groan of frustration. "I have no where else to turn. I want to be happy, I want to have what I've denied myself. To stop pretending."

"Yes, I understand that much. I can't say I know how you feel, but I don't deny you feel it." It was about as far as Jim could go. It was a supreme test to sustain eye contact as he said it. This was Abrys, his friend, a man he had trained with, a man who he liked, admired, maybe even loved a little. Certainly still cared deeply about. But he was talking about things men didn't talk about. Jim was watching him change, literally before his eyes.

Abrys spun and advanced on him, his body, his step aggressive. Jim instinctively set himself to meet the assault, his entire being flowing into the preparation, his thighs flexing, readying to move, his arms lifting. Abrys' hands rose up, Jim's closed into fists, his body pivoting, calculating where the attack would come from, recalling how fast Abrys moved, his favorite moves, his weaknesses, his strengths.... Jim lowered his chin, let all the tension leave him, he was ready.... Then Abrys' hands settled on his shoulders, firmly, but not hard. Not aggressive. Not a wounding move.

Jim was confused, the adrenaline rush petered out, shuddering to a stop. He blinked. What the hell? Had he imagined the aggression? His fists dropped, he stood and waited for what else was coming. There had to be more. The Alpha assault he'd seen coming at him, it wasn't an assault at all? It was an embrace? How in the hell had he misjudged it?

"Jim." Abrys looked into his face. He licked his lips. He was nervous, Jim would swear he was, but it could be no more unsettling than the way Jim was feeling himself. Abrys' hands bunched Jim's shirt, pulled to bring them closer, close enough they shared each others breath. His eyes were intense, his words low but filled with need. "Take me as one of yours. I can be your Companion."

Jim found himself shaking his head. "I have a Companion who serves." Rafe was his, Rafe served. More than, if the truth were told, but the words were enough. Rafe served, it wasn't necessary to confess feelings like love as well. Jim fought down his involuntary blush. It was never good to examine emotions too closely. Rafe understood how Jim felt. He didn't need to be told. Jim never had to put it into words.

Abrys persisted.

"Where does it say that an Alpha may have only one? We take what Guides we wish, why not the Companions we want? I know I can give Blair children. He can bear my child, Jim. It is all I've ever wanted. I can feel he and I are compatible, more than I ever could with any of the Guides I've had before. That means everything to me. I will give you anything at all for that chance. I swear it. You wanted me once, in the past, and we are friends now. Please do this for me."

"What makes you think that I would let any Companion of mine father a child on my Guide?" Jim growled. He hadn't let it happen yet, he might never do so, he wasn't even ready to admit that he was thinking about it. Blair was his. All of Blair's children were his. He growled again, fierce and possessive.

"Then I will raise your children." Abrys changed tack. His body was close, warm, he smelled good, strong and receptive, Jim felt the tingle run through him, pool in his groin. Abrys would taste so good. It would be good to set his teeth in the sweet flesh of his throat. To lap at him, to turn him over, open his body and claim him, claim the powerful, deadly-skilled body, to command it, rule over it. Possess it for his own.
Jim snarled against the side of Abrys' face, felt him bend his neck to offer the long, lean line of his throat. He desired to sink tongue, fingers, teeth, prick into the body, into flesh, mouth, skin, the ass being offered, to surge into it and take what pleasure was there. Semen, blood, sweat, spit, tears, he could mark Abrys as his own, his to use. His if he wanted him. Who could stop him? Jim hummed, eyes narrowing, tongue flickering, teeth bared, fingers digging in. Yes, good, it would be so good. Jim inhaled, thought of Blair, of Rafe...

Blair who had said such puzzling things,'...it is the Sentinel who must be faithful....'

"I can't give you what you want." Jim said, the red haze of desire receding, trickling away, just enough. "I have what I need."

He stroked his palms up the muscular arms, all the way up to Abrys' shoulders, until his thumbs rested on the twin pulses of his carotids. Abrys' made no move to protect himself. He was placing himself entirely in Ellison's hands. It was erotic, it inflamed Jim like nothing else the man had done. His hips snapped forward, forcing Abrys to feel the hard length of his erection. Whether or not he wanted to admit it, or planned on using it, Jim was aroused.

"Abrys...." Jim only got the one word out before his friend tilted his head and moved forward to touch their mouths together. It wasn't unpleasant at all. Jim went from hard and conflicted to hard and hungry instantly. Neither was the kiss that followed, with open mouths and wet, hot tongues offensive.

Jim found himself holding the other man, forcing him backward until he was flat on one of the long couches. The shirt was torn away with a flick of claws, Jim looked down on naked skin, dots of blood from uncareful claws, tight nipples on the light haired chest beckoning his lips, all of it inviting him to taste.

Abrys didn't fight Jim's mouth on him, he was pliant, yielding, surrendering. Jim's hand went to his own trousers, to the zipper, and pulled it down, freeing his hard flesh, showing Abrys he was dominant, ready to take what he wanted. Abrys made no move to stop him, he relaxed his thighs, waiting for what Jim chose. Jim pressed a knee between his thighs, then another, giving in to the urge to spread him wide.

"I was happiest with you. The closest I've come to living as I wished was when we were in that hut, in the dirt, eating whatever we scrounged, grubs, animals, bark, berries. I would trade the fancy parties, the catered food, the wine, the power to rule. I was happy then. Give it back to me. Please." Abrys whispered, making no other move, laying back, letting Jim take the active role, letting Jim unbutton Abrys' fly, push a hand inside. Jim cupped his testicles in his hand, looked down at him, face flushed, eyes glittering. Abrys smelled the desire, the lust. He waited for Jim to stake his claim.

Jim closed his eyes, inhaled deeply, once twice. Then he opened his eyes and looked into his friend's earnest, hopeful gaze. "No," Jim whispered. "Not this."

He lay full length on top of Abrys, letting their bodies rest together. Waiting out the fierce surge of need, the pounding of his pulse that urged him to take what he could. He heard/felt the sing of their blood slowing. He scented the retreat of hormones, against his own chest he felt the shivering sigh, the catch of breath. He smelled the tears before they began, a blast of bitter-salt in his nostrils. He turned them onto their sides, held Abrys to his chest, rocked him. Stroked his hair.

He cradled Abrys, offering what comfort he could as the other wept.
Ruler Llewellyn frowned as he set aside his cup of steaming Earl Grey tea and sorted through the stack of mail forwarded while he was in Cascade. It was business correspondence for the most part, no personal mail. At least not for him. He flicked the other envelopes, the suspect ones, with a stiffened finger.

Yesterday there had been two envelopes delivered for his son, Abrys. The day before that, one. All were of high quality, rich stationary, the best available, expensive and hand lettered, one had been edged with pure gold, the other scented with true cinnamon. Each envelope had been lined with a thin layer of metal leaf, making its contents private, not even a determined Sentinel was able to hold it up to the light and see through to the words within. Ruler Llewellyn scowled.

This morning's post showed four letters, double the number of the day before. He contemplated the stack, running his sensitive fingertips over the smooth, thick cream paper that composed one envelope. He recognized two of the names. Heirs from the East Coast. He had not been aware his son was close to either man, certainly not close enough to expect this kind of formal, elaborate correspondence. He set the letters aside for when Abrys would join him at the breakfast table, though he itched to examine them, his curiosity piqued.

He would respect his son's privacy since opening the letters would be impossible to conceal. But soon, if they kept coming at the escalating rate, he'd demand an explanation. And expect a full accounting.

Oma did not travel to the North alone. Two brothers from the tribe accompanied him. Dressed in a combination of western and native clothing in deference to the sharply cool air here in the Northwest, they drew every eye where they passed, heads turning to look at the huge, dark complected Sentinels and the much smaller Guide who walked so proudly between them his long braids bouncing down his back, his stride quick and sure.

Alpha Sentinels stared as they passed, but did not approach, instead circling wide to keep the group in their sights, aware of the Guardians' positioning at all times but really far more interested in the little Guide than the Guardians. Still, they were all too cautious to approach, correctly interpreting the sharp glances from the protective giants. The Guide would be protected, and was not going to be molested by anyone they met on the road. They travelled on relatively untroubled by anything more than Alphas stalking around the edges of their path.

That made Semka and Impota happy, although their faces never showed it. The brothers heard the whispers, "Guardians out of uniform..."

"...how..."

"...where?"

"Not from around here..."

The trio ignored the questions, they knew the way, it called to their brother Guide and they walked confidently forward. Sentinels following the Guide as it should be. The Alphas watched them pass, mouths watering, bodies singing, wanting, but not daring to take.

The Ellison compound was vast, with a ten foot high brick wall surrounding the grounds and a large
metal gate. An Alpha Sentinel could easily spring to the top, but he would never gain access inside without encountering the Guardians who watched everything and everyone within. The troupe of three did not have to knock, security cameras and Guardian guards witnessed their approach, monitoring their progress.

The door opened when the three were ten feet away and a Guardian, impeccably dressed with buttons shining in the sun, and having recovered from his initial surprise of seeing the strangely outfitted group, stepped out to greet them. He was big and handsome and nearly white-blond in sharp contrast to the native Guardians' deeply browned skin and gleaming black hair. They examined each other closely, each seeing something very different than he was used to, as the blond man began to speak.

"This is the compound of Ruler Ellison," he said in his booming bass voice. "State your names and business." Behind him ranged other Guardians, watching. Some light skinned, some darker even than the visitors. All uniformed and all short haired. Impota and Semka shook their braids to draw attention to the hip length hair they were so proud of. Thick and glossy, heavy, wound with beads and scarlet feathers. The kind of hair a lover would want to run his hands through when it was let down in a sheet of soft silkiness. If they must remain in this too cold place, what was wrong with finding another body to warm them?

It was the Guide who took one step forward to answer. "I am Oma," he told the guard, standing confident and without fear, "and these are my Chopek brothers, Semka and Impota. We have traveled from the forest of the far Southland on the business of the gods. My father has sent me to the House of his friend, James, the heir to Ellison. I wish to speak with your Shaman." Oma waited while the stranger-Guardians examined him with their eyes and with the sixth sense that Guardians shared with Mother Guides. None took a single step closer, quite aware that Oma was well protected.

Finally the Guardian who was in charge of the gate completed his evaluation and nodded once. He sensed no danger from them. His orders were to keep out uninvited Alphas. But this was a wild Guide requesting the help of a Shaman and he was accompanied by two Guardian Sentinels, who posed no threat to any Guide, though they were not vetted members of the Protectorate. Turning away Guardians, no matter how strangely dressed, and a Guide needing consultation was not an option. "Come in," he told them, stepping back from the gate and making a path the visitors could pass through. "I will call my Captain. He may know this Shaman who you speak of." He knew what a Shaman was, all Guardians did, but he had no knowledge of one in Cascade.

Less than ten minutes later Captain Michael Rathe opened the nursery room door, Caleb, hair hastily smoothed, trotting behind him, trying to keep up with the long strides of his Mate. Arrayed behind Caleb was the contingent from Peru, followed by even more Guardians, huge and serious faced, but also blatantly curious. Michael waited in the doorway blocking it, keeping all from entering until Blair saw him. He waited a bit longer while Blair took in the persons behind him.

"They are here to see the Shaman." Michael told his brother's mate. To Rathe Blair was that person, but he'd never heard Blair acknowledge it. He waited. Rafe helped Blair rise from where he'd been sitting on the floor playing with his rapidly growing children who were looking up now, eyes large and intelligent, one pair of childish eyes blue another hazel and the third a dark brown. Blair looked past Rathe again, seeing the odd costumes and smiled in greeting, his interest engaged. He stepped forward to greet the visitors. He did not admit to being the one they sought, Rathe noted, but nor did he deny he was the one.

"Hi, I'm Blair," Blair said offering his hand. No one took it. Their eyes were on the children Rafe was quietly removing from the sight of the strangers, Rafe took the children into the next room and
left them in the care of Maire and Bella before returning to stand shoulder to shoulder with Blair, closing the inner door of the nursery behind him with a firm click. Once the children were gone, the smallest of the strangers seemed to relax. He stepped close and lowered his eyes. Blair made a sound of inquiry.

"Please," Blair said, "there is no need for that." He reached out again as if to touch the other Guide. Instead of listening, Oma sank gracefully to his knees bowing his head, knowing how one greeted a Shaman better than these uncivilized people, pressing his forehead to the lush carpeting. "Shaman Blair," he said with reverence filling his voice. "The gods have bid me travel from my home in the great southern forest to claim my Sentinels. My father, the Shaman of our village, has seen that you have touched the one who's pain calls out to me. Help me find him, Shaman."

"Please, stand up," Blair said, as he finally was able to put a hand on the younger Guide and tug him upward. Rafe moved to help, but the other Guide was limber and strong, so Blair did not have to actually lift any weight, unbalanced as he was by his large belly it would have been beyond him. For his part, he wasn't sure of whether to thank the gods or to tell them they were insane to send a wild Guide to a place with so many desperate Sentinels, a place where even in his own home, he could not walk alone. He spoke to the very interested Rathe who had stayed in the room to listen and watch the events unfold.

"Michael, how many know Oma has arrived?"

"Only Guardians at this point," Michael said, his hand rising to cup his mate's shoulder and draw Caleb near. The native Guardians had noted him, and sniffed in his direction, obviously thinking the young man was worth investigating. Rathe wasn't going to let them think Blue was unclaimed. "I thought it best to bring them through the gardens. No Alphas saw them pass. Though..it won't be long before they sniff him out. His scent is unique."

Rafe inhaled delicately. Indeed, the scent was nothing like the scent of a Cascade raised Guide. It was stronger, earthier, rich and wild, herbal and infinitely sweet. An Alpha would not turn away in disinterest from a scent like that. He would follow it, track its source down. Then he would Claim the Guide it came from, if he could.

"Good, we have a little time." Blair said with obvious relief in his voice. "I hate to ask it, but we must burn sage to cloud the scent, and confuse the Alphas who have already noted it. We can't let any of the visiting Alphas know a wild Guide has arrived, they would kill each other to get to him. If anyone asks tell them I ordered it because Alphas have been trying to get to the children when they are taken out to play."

Michael had gestured to two of the many Guardians, who peeled off the group. They would burn the sage though it would give them all headaches. And they would spread the rumor it was to keep the Alphas from hunting down Blair's children.

"Oma will have to stay here in the Guide quarters. But what to do with them?" Blair wondered aloud as he looked at the two bulky Guardians.

"They are my brothers," Oma said. "Sworn to bring me safely to my Alphas. They will stay where I stay, sleep where I sleep, eat where I eat." There was no arguing with that tone. Blair hid his smile, biting his lip and hoping he wouldn't laugh in pure joy. The Guide was stubborn.

Michael knew he would not be able to change the small Guide's mind on the subject of his escort. "If they stay here," Rathe said, "they will not be seen and no one will start asking questions we aren't ready to answer yet." He pointed out. "There is room on the far side of the Nursery, rooms that
haven't been used yet."

Beds and fresh linens could be moved in for the temporary residents. Rathe waited for Blair's nod and then gave another signal and a third Guardian left to see that the rooms be made up for the visitors.

"Do you know which Alphas Oma is talking about?" Michael asked. "If you know who they are, I can bring them together in privacy. That will solve the problem."

"I suspect I know one of them," Blair answered, without divulging the name. "But it is too soon for him to claim his Guide. He has to find his Sentinel mate first or he will never find him and his territory will never change its Guide laws." His face grew thoughtful. "There is a formal dinner to welcome new arrivals tonight. Perhaps the Sentinel who will mate to him will arrive for it. Until he does, we must be patient. And we must burn sage. I am sorry." Blair sort of liked the smell, it reminded him of Thanksgiving, turkey and stuffing. But he was sympathetic to the more sensitive noses of the Sentinels who would not enjoy it at all.

"My father has foreseen that I will meet my Sentinels at this place, at this time, they are here." Oma said with certainty. "It is why I have come now. The vision revealed that they would not come to me as is the tradition among my people. When I find them, I will lay my Claim and mount them before witnesses so no one can argue that they belong to me."

Oma stated it as a fact. Blair nearly choked and Caleb let out a faint squeak.

Blue was flushed when Michael looked down. But it was not exactly distress or embarrassment that Rathe saw. Nor was it upset he smelled. He grinned. His mate was horny. No doubt picturing what the Guide was prepared to do, and wanting to try it himself. Rathe considered the smoky grey eyes that pinned him, as well as the tip of a pink tongue visible between temptingly parted, wet lips. Well, they hadn't tried it that way yet, but there was no harm indulging his mate. It might prove very satisfying.

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Trent Soaring Eagle, member of the Sioux Nation and Captain in the Elite Special Forces of the Dakota territories walked into the well appointed buffet/cafeteria setup for visiting dignitaries and poured himself a large cup of coffee. The flight to get him here had taken nearly three hours, and he possessed an Alpha Sentinel's intense dislike for flying in full measure. His head ached, his ears were ringing, his tongue tasted like dried leather and he was in a seriously bad mood. Add to that, he was sure he smelled burning sage.

His senses were only just settling down from the spinning that always resulted from flight without a Guide to anchor him. He had refused to take a temporary Guide with him from his own people. It would not be right to bring one here, where this fucked up culture would leave the Guide open to ridicule and insult. So to keep him from bashing ignorant heads in the entire weekend, he'd come alone, and suffered for it. He rubbed his forehead. He hoped the strong black coffee would comfort his pounding head.

He looked around the room. He had never been among so many rulers and heirs at once. It seemed as if every Ruler from North America was present, most with their heirs in tow. It was quite a crowd, and he wished he wasn't here. He needed only five minutes of Ruler Kadyn's time to hand him the folder on the search, and he would be out of here. But those five minutes hadn't been scheduled with his convenience in mind. He had to wait until tomorrow afternoon.

Apparently the coffee was magic, because his headache was better and he was getting his appetite
back. He scanned the spread of food on the buffet table, nostrils flaring as he took in the delicious smells of spices and roasted meat, before deciding on a breakfast of eggs, sausage, and home fries full of peppers, mushrooms, garlic and a literal pile of sliced, fried onions. His mouth began to water. He stacked food high on his plate, and then walked to an empty table at the end of the room, putting his back to a wall and facing the doors. It was a perk he hadn't thought of when General Quinn had ordered him to Cascade to hand deliver a report of their hunt for Dr. Blair Sandburg. Real food, not MREs in some dusty training field, with live rounds cracking overhead.

Searching for Sandburg was not the kind of assignment Trent liked. If Sandburg was a wild Guide, and free, then he deserved his freedom. He shouldn't be found. If he was a claimed Guide then he was too far gone for Trent to help out of the situation. Even killing his Sentinel wouldn't do it. As a bonded Guide Sandburg would mourn the loss, suffer for it. And if he wasn't a Guide, then Sandburg didn't need help either. Plus, the guy was campaigning for Guide's rights, Trent was all for that.

But Ruler Kadyn had ordered General Quinn to find Dr. Sandburg and the General had ordered Trent, and here he was. At a goddamn party.

The hunt had to be done covertly, Ruler Ellison assured Kadyn that his people were looking, but Trent Soaring Eagle had found no evidence of any progress being made in their search. That interested him, made him wonder if the Ellison Clan was more enlightened than the rest of the Rulers. Or if they already knew where Sandburg was. No need to waste time looking if he was here, tucked away out of sight, under lock and key.

Each step he took to find Dr. Sandburg only fed more fuel to the tingling suspicion that was growing to the level of a shriek in his brain, that the elusive doctor _was_ a wild Guide who had been captured, kidnapped by Guide traffickers, and not an anthropologist, gone off on some dig in a remote jungle, up to his ass in mud and artifacts, unaware of the controversy that surrounded his disappearance.

General Quinn's men would follow the trail wherever it led. They were known for not giving up on a mission. The families of some of the suspected traffickers were located. That proved to be yet another dead end, the traffickers never returned from their "business trip" of more than two years ago and were presumed to have abandoned their families or to be deceased. Guide smuggling was high risk, even as it paid extremely well. The Captain knew from experience that traffickers, to protect their families and each other, did not carry any ID; if they were discovered by Alphas they would have been disposed of as "John Does". Pirates did not get marked graves. Enraged Alphas did not take the time to ask for names before they slaughtered.

Smuggled Guides would have been claimed as bounty or be sent to Guide Houses. The latter was pretty unlikely, however, in the current political climate. If the doctor was in a Guide House he would not be easy to get to. The Guardians had swooped down and taken over the Guide Houses, getting into one was a lot harder than it had been. Guardians were not the kind of opponents any one wanted to face. Not even an Alpha Sentinel who had his orders.

No, if Sandburg were in a House, Trent doubted if a siege would be effective getting him out. Guardians had brawn, brains and heart on their side when it came to protecting Guides. And you could just forget a substantial bribe, that wouldn't get you in anymore, it wouldn't get you an hour with a Guide to do what you wanted to him or her. It would more likely get you a whomping from the Guardians. Guardians were engineered to protect Guides. Nature herself had given them that purpose and they took the duty very seriously. He almost pitied anyone who had them as an enemy...almost.
Dr. Sandburg was most likely claimed, bonded and cloistered. Maybe even pregnant. But then that
didn't answer who was sending out meticulously researched papers in his name. Papers not
previously published and purported to be newly discovered. Insightful work, work that Trent actually
had read and nodded his agreement to. Whatever else you might say, the man knew his Sentinels.
His conclusions about the Alpha Sentinel...Trent read what Sandburg wrote and saw himself, from
childhood to adult.

The sudden silence in the room was the first thing to alert the Captain that something was happening.
He looked up from his breakfast, taking a swig of coffee to wash the food down. His eyes swept the
room. The whispered gossip started soon after the silence.

"...been with the pups, not his own..."
"Ellison's ~friend~, huh?" A nasty laugh.
"....pregnant guide..."
"...stinks like a beta...."

This last whisper was delivered with such disgust that even the breathy nature of the whisperer's
voice could not hide his contempt.

Trent gave a low growl voicing his disapproval. He had run across many Alpha Sentinels with
similar feelings toward Beta Sentinels, though none were disinclined to use them if the situation
warranted it. Still there was no mutual respect. The same Alphas who refused to take a Companion,
and took a Sentinel's daughter for a wife, accepting an arranged marriage. The same ones who had
Guides on the side to service the Alphas of a community, like whores in a brothel, without choice.
The same men who would not feel it was wrong to put a Beta on his knees. And yet they had the
nerve to ridicule one of their own for desiring another Alpha for a committed Mate.

Among the Sioux all members of the society were valued. There were Warrior Sentinels who
protected the territory, and Companion Sentinels who protected the home front. Without
Companions there would often not be a home for a Warrior to come back to. None were labeled
Alpha or Beta, all were equal in the eyes of the tribe. All fulfilled a vital role in the society.

A Warrior chose his Sentinel mate before he sought a Guide. It wasn't until Trent had left the tribal
lands he realized that was not the only way it could be done.

Leaving was not something Trent had wanted to do. The trials of manhood sent a boy on a vision
quest, and during his trial he'd met Otwaja Three Tails, his great grandfather. Three Tails told him his
way was to go out into the world. He would find his Mate and his Guide there. Together they would
witness the return of the sacred ways, the path that had honor.

Trent had gone, done as his vision had told him he must. He'd become a member of the Special
Forces. He became more like the others and less like the Sioux. He was still un-Bonded, and not
happy about it. If the Great Spirit truly did have a plan for him, Trent wished he'd hurry up. He'd
been patient, but even he could only wait so long.

The derisive whispers were brought to a sudden halt when Ruler Llewellyn's hand smacked down
on the table top. All around the room Sentinels jumped. Llewellyn stared them down, his gaze
circling, meeting each of whisperers' eyes with his steely glare. They in turn ducked their heads and
found other things to talk about, or food to dish up, or somewhere else to be. Interesting.

Trent resumed eating, keeping his eyes peeled for more action. He covertly examined the man seated
on the other side of the room.

The Ruler was good-looking, big, an Alpha Sentinel, older than Trent by as much as two decades. He exuded power. Presence. Unfortunately, for all his attractiveness, the Ruler didn't look like a man who would lay down for another, he was too stiff, too brittle. Trent preferred a man who would. Who knew how to surrender and yet stay a man. Ruler Llewellyn wasn't one of those. Trent would have liked to engage in a little romance while cooling his heels. It would make this trip less of a waste of his time. Since leaving the Sioux, Trent had learned impatience. Great Grandfather would shake his head if he knew.

The room stayed quiet after the Ruler's angry gaze finished its circle, a Ruler was no one to take a chance of angering, even if you were a Ruler or an heir yourself. It was as if the whole room listened and waited for something. Nervous, less scandalous and far less intriguing conversations burst out, plates were filled and coffee poured. The chastened gossipers headed towards chairs to eat their breakfasts.

Trent kept his hearing dialed up. Alpha Sentinels put teenaged girls to shame when it came to spreading rumors.

It wasn't much more than five minutes later when the buzz resumed, more excited, sharper this time. Trent raised his head and looked around.

A taller, younger version of Ruler Llewellyn entered the room, head held high.

Trent caught his breath. The younger man was beautiful, perhaps mid thirties. A man worthy of more than one night's games. He put down his fork, looking over at the table where Ruler Llewellyn sat glowering. Yes, they were related, those two. It was likely the newcomer would sit at that table, out of respect to his father. Trent stood and unobtrusively made his way over. No reason not to be there as well, sharing the table of two handsome men.

He zeroed in on a chair with an empty seat next to it across from the infuriated patriarch and stopped there. The irritated face of the Ruler spun toward him, lines of anger smoothing out as he took in Trent's impeccable uniform and the dozen medals pinned to the breast of his jacket. His eyes widened involuntarily. They always did. Trent had more than his share of medals, and he wasn't above using them to get his way in the world of the Sentinels-not-of-the-Sioux.

"May I share your table?" Trent asked formally, pinning the other with his black-eyed gaze. The Ruler nodded, then, as if unable to look away for long, his attention was turned back to his son. The Captain joined him in that pastime. The empty chair next to Trent's was the only logical choice for the man who was stacking eggs, potatoes and various cuts of meat on his plate with short jerky movements. The other two available spots would put him far too close to his father. No, Trent had maneuvered perfectly. The young heir would be sitting right next to him.

Grinding his teeth but too well trained not to be polite to a man with as many decorations on his chest as Trent had, Ruler Llewellyn turned back to his unexpected guest. His sharp eyes roved over the uniform picking out the signs of rank and regiment. His gaze widened. The Elite Forces weren't easy to get into, and a Captain's rank there meant more than a General's rank in other militaries. He extended his hand across the table. A connection to such a man might be useful.

"Llewellyn." He said shortly, jaw knotted, more than aware of the whispers resuming as his son progressed through the throng.

"Captain Soaring Eagle, Dakota Special Forces, sir." Trent offered half rising from his seat to shake the offered hand. He felt a shiver of... something, an attraction or connection of some kind as their
hands met. The other man must have as well, because he shot Trent a surprised look and disengaged
more slowly than perhaps he'd intended. Further conversation was forestalled, as the sound of a
disagreement across the room interrupted.

"Get away from me." The Llewellyn heir's voice could have cut diamonds, even as quietly as he
spoke. The man standing next to him, a hand resting at the heir's waist stepped back hurriedly,
gesturing placatingly. Trent sighed. He'd seen it before. With others who did not understand that an
Alpha who chose to accept a male lover, to submit to one man, didn't necessarily want to submit to
every other man with an itch he wanted scratched. He settled back to see what would happen. He
would help if it were needed, but he had a feeling, looking over that long, lean, tough body, the heir
could take care of himself. With or without violence if need be.

He was proven right when the man who dared to presume backed off fast, and headed out the door.
The heir, his face a mix of anger and frustration headed towards his father, and an even more
interested Trent. Trent liked his men to have balls. The bigger the better.

The plate slammed down next to Trent's and the man sat down, immediately tucking into his food
and not looking right or left.

"It is your fault for letting it get out." The Ruler hissed in the direction of his son, thinking he was
being cryptic, but Trent knew exactly what he meant. He kept the expression on his face neutral, as if
he hadn't heard or understood. The man seated next to him didn't even glance up, just applied himself
to cleaning his plate, jaw knotted as he chewed.

The Ruler stared at his fuming son, searching for the right words before giving up and turning to the
man seated across from himself. A real man, large, broad shouldered, tough, decorated. A soldier.
Not a homosexual. Not like his son. If only Abrys had turned out like this one. Obsidian eyes met
his, their color so dark it wasn't until a chance shaft of light hit them that Llewellyn saw their true
color was brown. The man nodded at him, and continued eating.

Ruler Llwellyn pushed the stack of mail over with his unused knife, until it came to rest in front of
his son. "More letters." He said, shortly, as if referring to refuse. Abrys ignored them.

Trent shifted in his seat. The older man was mad, was struggling to maintain his composure, and
failing. Trent wasn't sure what the shiver of electricity had meant when he shook the older man's
hand but he wanted to grant him the benefit of the doubt. He really hoped the man wasn't going to be
an asshole.

Under different circumstances Trent would have charmed the Ruler, maybe taken him to bed and
showed him just why some men were willing to lay down for others. But not now, not with the
younger man, the son so near. The scent of the younger man was intoxicating. Trent took his time
savoring it with each inhalation. He saw the heir draw a breath, turn his head, inhale again, then
instead of meeting Trent's gaze he scowled and speared a sausage and raised it to his mouth, biting it
savagely. They sat, side by side, sneaking sniffs, but nothing more. Of course it wasn't going to be
easy.

Finally Trent couldn't stand it, the not knowing. The scent was driving him crazy, tickling along his
nerves, stirring up an instinct that demanded he declare his interest, stake his Claim. Which he knew
wouldn't go over all that well here at this table, among people he didn't know and who for all he
knew, had no concept of fate, and fated meetings. The people here had far better understanding of
power and money, not the ways fate drew men together. Trent let his momentary frustration ease,
leaning just a fraction closer, knowing his body heat would be enough to warm the sensitive skin of
the other Alpha.
Trent heard a prolonged sniff, felt the movement as the other man shifted closer, too. He almost smiled. The other liked how he smelled, was drawn to him, he was certain, the tightness of those wide shoulders eased, and at last his head turned towards Trent. A good start. It certainly gave him something to work with. Maybe the trip wouldn't be wasted. Maybe he would have a warm body in his bed tonight. One who wouldn't leave in the morning. One who might not leave for the rest of his life.

Trent let his foot move under the table as he adjusted his seat pretending to reach for the salt. His foot nudged just barely against the other Alpha's heel. He thought it would be a beginning, make the other talk, say something, anything; he fully expected the man next to him to move away, to murmur a reflexive apology. But it didn't happen that way. The spark of electric contact caused both men to gasp. It traveled through their bodies tingling down every nerve. Their eyes met, they stared. It was the smallest of deliberate shifts that brought their thighs in contact, from hip to knee.

Dimly Trent heard Ruler Llewellyn speaking. He dismissed the words as inconsequential, every iota of his attention commanded by the look he shared with the heir of Llewellyn. His hand went out, and was met halfway by the other their fingers entwining, holding. They held on, two strong grips holding hard. Trent had to get closer, he pulled the other to his feet, held on to the square hand as if his life depended on it.

A hand slapped down on his shoulder, fingers digging in, shook him, the buzz of angry words in his ear. Trent snapped out a fist, punching both the voice and the asshole attached to it far away. The scent of coppery blood was a minor clue as to how hard he'd struck. He wasn't sorry, it would teach them to keep their hands to themselves. How dare they disturb this? He leaned forward, his eyes open, vision dialing in. There was a touch at his chest, stopping him. He stilled. Put out his own arm, took the second hand in his own.

They were facing each other now. Eyes traveling over faces. Abrys freed a hand, lifted it, until he could place fingers at the darker man's lips. Trent kissed those fingers. Tasted them, drawing them into his mouth.

Abrys let out a soft sound, the sound a woman makes when the strength of her lover is gentleness, sweetness and all the power she could ever desire rolled into one. Trent cupped the cheek of the man who's fingers he licked, who let him hear the beauty of that sound, the prayer of his surrender. The man who was his. For all time. Claimed, committed, bonded. With no more and no less than one moment's touch between them, they both knew.

Trent licked at the fingers. Tasted the salt of the skin, the taste of a man, an Alpha Sentinel. He turned his head enough to press his mouth to the man's palm, to slip his tongue over the rough surface, over the warmth, between each, smelling food, coffee, and the man himself. He heard the moan, felt exhaled air along his forearm, echoed it, letting his arm find it's way around the other, just as tall, just as hard, just as needing of more. He wrapped the other in his arms. His. He had found his Mate. His Sentinel.

He almost struck out at the second touch to his arm as he drew their bodies tight, pressed close along their full height. Almost but...he couldn't strike out. Couldn't hit...a...Guide? His senses skewed, he staggered, would have fallen but was held upright. He pulled back, looked down, stared into a face that was like no other he had seen. Red slashes of paint, ochre, green, and thumbprints of black. He blinked. Saw the serious eyes. The long braids. The strange clothes. The startling youth of the odd little Guide.

His mouth made the word, but he had no voice. "Who?" The arm around his body tightened, the heir of Llewellyn was near, supporting him with a strength equal to his own. Even sunk in confusion,
Trent rejoiced at that. A man. His man. Strong. Good. Right. He steadied himself, looked the question with his eyes.

The little youth understood without sound. He gazed up, raised his hand and touched Trent's cheek. Then the child-sized hands went higher, grasped both his ears and dragged his face down. The Guide kissed him with innocent authority, pulled back. They stared.

"You are mine." Oma said, sure. Trent heard the truth. Knew it. He belonged to this Guide.

Oma had stayed in the nursery for less than a half an hour before exiting its confines.

Blair was talking to the visitors when Oma got to his feet and started to walk away, back towards the outer door. Leaving Blair staring after him, momentarily dumbstruck. The foreign Guardians were after the small Guide with no hesitation, turning smoothly on their heels and walking away.

Blair closed his mouth on the call that would alert his Guardians at the door to stop the three from heading out. No. He would follow, but he wouldn't stop them. There was something that told him stopping them would be the wrong thing. If it could be done at all.

Blair hesitated only long enough to grab for an outer robe to cover his bare arms, and then he hurried out the door, Rafe at his side. He made no effort to keep up with the rapidly moving figures, buttoning the robe as he went, he knew without having to ask they were heading to the banquet rooms where breakfast was being served. Maybe they were merely hungry, but Blair didn't think so.

Something was drawing Oma to the large room, to the people in it. His steps were fast and sure, he looked neither left or right, just walked on.

They turned the corner and were gone from sight. Blair reached the corner at a far more leisurely pace, Rafe keeping a hand on him to prevent him from running and chancing a fall purely to satisfy his curiosity. It wasn't as if Oma would not be safe, he had two of his own Guardians and two more of Blair's who had kept up with him at Blair's quick nod. Behind Blair were three more.

Blair at last stepped into the breakfast room, to find a murmuring undertone but not much movement. As he entered heads swiveled his way and three dozen Sentinels were on their feet. The Guardians loomed behind him, and Blair's pace didn't falter. Tension crackled in the room.

His eyes swept the area and locked almost at once on the reason why. Two men, standing wrapped in each other's arms beside the table where Ruler Llewellyn was eating, or had been. He had gotten to his feet, fuming, and yet obviously confused. His son, Abrys was being held by a man several inches taller, with rugged features, short, "high and tight" cut black hair, thighs that bulged in his uniform trousers, and biceps that strained the confines of his jacket sleeves. He also had his hand sunk into the curls at Abrys' nape.

Abrys' eyes were half closed, exulting into the experience of his true mate. Their outlines seemed to waver under Blair's eye, a blurred image for only a second, as if the two men's bodies were melting together into one.

Oma made straight for the pair, pushing aside any who stood between him and them. Blair saw one man grab at the uniformed stranger, and saw him thrust away, his nose a bloody pulp. Another man reached for Oma, and Blair held his breath, but the guide was quick as an eel, evading the touch before the Guardians needed to intervene.

Then Oma was there, and reaching out, risking the same fate, a devastating blow. Blair opened his
Blair rushed forward, his mouth still open, only to have all speech leave him when he witnessed the flare of light that ignited between the three men. He threw up his arm, shielding his eyes, but the light was gone. Two Sentinels, one Guide, bathed in an instant of blue white light. Then they were only three figures, the light no different from normal, the two great Guardians keeping others back from them, perhaps the only ones besides Oma himself who had understood what had happened.

The big man's mouth moved, but Blair couldn't hear what he said. He barely heard Oma's response, a low reply, a whisper meant to answer only the man who had asked.

"You are mine." Oma said. The big man reached for him, curled his arm around him, lifted him, and Oma went up, his fingers dancing over the hard planes of the man's face, his small hand even darker than the tanned face. Blair saw Abrys open his eyes, dreamy, not truly aware of the room around him. He saw the small Guide notice, and loop his arm around Abrys' neck. Then Oma spoke loud enough for all to hear him.

"I am Oma, I claim you both as my own." The certainty in his tone defied dispute. Their forms shivered again, reformed if anything more clearly, solid.

Blair blinked wondering if he was hallucinating. The Sentinels in the room scented the air, their attention refocusing, shifting restlessly. One took a sliding step towards Blair, fixed on the robed silhouette, plump, roundness impossible to resist. Rafe moved uneasily. Another Sentinel stepped nearer. Rafe positioned to block the man. Blair was past noticing. He was staring at the new Bond.

Now the three of them stood together in a tightening ring of Alpha and Guardian Sentinels. Ruler Llewellyn was coming at them, his face twisted. Another Alpha cut him off, intent on getting to Blair. There was no violence in the act, until a third Alpha realized his path to the Guides was cut off. He shoved at the interloper. Ruler Llewellyn snarled at them both.

Abrys was red faced with a sudden flush, noting they were the center of attention, but he looked defiantly pleased. The other man, one who Blair didn't know, was expressionless, and yet he was happy, Blair had no doubt, his profile proud, formed of powerful sculptured lines. He was the first to recover, to take in their surroundings again.

"My great grandfather was a wise man. I did find my Guide and my Mate." Trent went to one knee pulling Abrys with him as he bowed his head. "I am honored that you have accepted us as your own." Rafe took advantage of the diversion to tug Blair behind a pair of Guardians. The tension in the room lessened. He heard the voice of the newly arrived Guide.

"Then I will Claim you here," Oma said, wriggling until his feet were on the floor, as he began to pull off his clothes. Again the crowd surged, their interest palpable. "So that all will bear witness that you are mine." He got no further than baring his torso before Abrys' stopped him. He did not want other eyes on his Guide.

Abrys shook his head. He dared to pull the Guide closer to him, feeling fierce and possessive, pleased when Oma went into his arms without resistance. He showed his teeth to the watching Sentinels surrounding them. He growled a warning. Then his gaze settled on Blair, who was gripping Rafe's arm with both hands. Blair stepped forward, spreading his arms wide, holding his robe out to shield the newly bound men. "Oma, that is not the way of these Sentinels. Your Claim is known to all. Come with me and bring your Sentinels."

The door crashed open behind them and everyone turned to see the heir Ellison striding into the space, his face ominous, his brows drawn down, his teeth bared as he headed for the men who dared
stand so close to his Guide. They melted back and away like water receding, giving in to his prior Claim and his rank. The allure of the pregnant Blair was not enough to combat the consequences now that Jim was present.

Blair turned as quickly as he could in his ungainly state and held out his arms in the direction of his Alpha Sentinel; he let himself be folded into Jim’s embrace, pleased to hear the growling stop, change until his ear heard the deep purr of the man who held him, rumbling in his chest. Jim glared at the tall stranger who was behind Blair. He took in the way Abrys was holding onto his arm, and then he saw the tiny Guide who had put himself protectively in front of the Sentinels. He blinked.

Braids. Paint. His eyes narrowed. His mind traveled back a decade. Into the hot, humid jungle that had been his temporary home. Incacha. The Shaman's children. A small, small boy, thin, with huge dark eyes that followed the white Sentinel every where he went.

"Oma?" The heir of Cascade asked.

"Ellison." Oma smiled.
Chapter 45

Stephen Ellison was not a happy Sentinel when he burst into his father's office.

"What's going on?" He demanded, rubbing at his nose and itchy, red eyes. "The Guardians are burning sage in the gardens. We are all sneezing. I told them to stop, but they claim Blair ordered it because Alphas were trying to get to the children." He was tense, worried, a father himself, and no one had mentioned a danger to children in the compound to him.

Jim, who had been reclining, reading yet another letter that was proving to be little more than a tirade of reasons why a Guide could not be declared fully human, was more than happy to have his attention drawn elsewhere. He jumped out of his seat. "What Alphas, when?" Jim asked, with a growl. He looked big and mean, the expression on his face anything but friendly.

"The children are fine." Stephen said, "I checked on them myself. Rafe left them with Bella, Dahl and Andy and plenty of Guardians." He explained when Jim's face darkened further, "but Blair and Rafe aren't in the nursery and ~his~ Guardians are gone, too."

Admiral Bellingham sat at a second desk which William had had delivered to his office last week. He and the ruler of Cascade had become close friends and were working together on the Guide reforms and the new family and Guide housing being built in the compound. There was hope that the new housing would prove to be a template other Sentinels and rulers would adopt all around the country. An open notebook, full of scribblings, lay in front of the Admiral. He preferred to write longhand rather than type into a computer using the keys that were too small for his over-sized fingers.

"Jim," the Admiral called, turning in his chair as the Heir made his way to the door, already sniffing the air. "There would have been an alarm by now if anything were wrong." The large man was still sitting, not bothering to get to his feet.

Jim didn't slow down or turn as he spoke. "Blair wouldn't have the Guardians burn sage without a reason. He knows what it does to a Sentinel's senses. I'm going to find him." He was out of the door and down the hall that quickly, leaving his stack of papers spread out on the floor and table next to his abandoned seat.

"So," Stephen asked again, thinking how Jim, his brother, was always spoiling for a fight. He supposed it was normal for the heir to feel more aggressive and territorial than he did. Then again he'd already checked on his Guides and Companion and knew them to be perfectly safe. "Neither of you know what this is about?" He looked around, meeting William's eyes, then he scratched vigorously at his nose. The Ruler of Cascade shook his head.

Bellingham gave a shrug, his gaze fixed on whatever he was reading, Blair was with Guardians, he would sense any danger, what ever was going on, the Guardians hadn't put out any call for backup.

Christopher stepped into the office, face showing curiosity and a little worry. "I just saw Jim sprinting down the hall. Is there trouble?" He asked coming over to William's side. He rested his hands on the back of William's chair, wanting to touch his Sentinel, but as both were reserved and formal in public, he settled for letting his fingertips just brush the back of the other man's shoulders where the touch wasn't visible to anyone but himself.

"Jim's going to find Blair," William said, looking between thoughtful and moderately concerned. "He ordered the Guardians to burn sage; I can smell it. Something is going on. Perhaps it isn't all that
dangerous, but I'm going to call Michael and see if I can get some answers." He raised a brow in Bellingham's direction, but the big man was still scanning the piles of new documents that had been recently delivered. The Admiral was the head of the local protectorate, yet he fully trusted the hands he'd left running things. He seemed content to have the ruler deal with the call.

Stephen moved aside the stacks of documents and sat down in one of the leather chairs and waited. He resisted rubbing his eyes, though they were now itching to the point he almost wanted to scratch them out for a little relief. Jogging through the sage smoke had made them burn, the burning sensation had morphed to a very persistent itch. He knew from experience that rubbing them would only prolong the agony, still it was annoying that his sense of sight had been reduced to somewhere in the vicinity of 20/40. He sniffled, testing to see if his sinuses had cleared and was immediately overcome with a powerful sneezing attack.

Christopher stepped up to William's desk and was rummaging through the drawers. He found what he was looking for and straightened with a small bottle in his hand. Stephen heard pills rattling inside and made a face. He recalled the tablets from childhood when he seemed to be allergic to everything under the sun. He'd outgrown most of them, but sage.... Christopher shook out a tablet and walked to the sideboard pouring a glass of water before walking over to his Sentinel's son. He held them both out. Stephen's mouth turned down at the corners.

"They'll make me tired." He complained, reverting back twenty years to a small, sulky boy.

"And if you don't take them, you'll sneeze until you have a bloody nose." Christopher reasoned with him.


"I'll get you some iced tea, perhaps it will help keep you awake." He soothed. Stephen did not appear mollified, but he took the glass when it was offered. It had a slice of fresh lemon in it, and his mouth began to water.

Ruler Ellison tapped his finger on his desk as he waited to be connected. It seemed that Michael had returned to his quarters to attend to his mate's needs. Another odd occurrence, Michael would not leave his duty in the middle of the morning unless the need was urgent. He didn't like not knowing the goings on in the compound and he planned on having a firm talk with Blair about giving orders without checking with him or Jim first. The fact that Blair had left the children with Bella and Andy was the only reason that he did not put the whole Compound on alert. Neither Blair, Rafe or the Guardians would leave the children if they were in any danger, still...something was wrong, the burning herb proved that.

Just as Michael came on the phone, a very angry Ruler Llewellyn burst into William's office. He levelled a finger in William's direction, his face contorted with fury.

"This is all your son's fault and that meddling Guide of his," he spat out as he advanced on William. He brandished a sheaf of stationery at William as he stormed across the room. "These are proof. Offers of liaisons, solicitations, asking that my son prostitute himself to other men. This would never have happened without your ridiculous reforms. These men should be arrested! They are a danger to the fabric of society!" He threw the letters onto William's desk.

Admiral Bellingham reached across and picked them up, reading the page that was uppermost. He raised his brows and read the second one. Llewellyn didn't notice. He was leaning forward his fists planted on the desk. William gently cradled the phone. Michael would have heard the accusation and someone would be on the way.
"Please sit down." He said as mildly as he could. He didn't much care for anyone, not even someone he knew as long as Llewellyn, barging into his office without an invitation. Despite his neutral tone he knew that his displeasure was not concealed. Llewellyn however, ignored it. He pounded on the table. His eyes were wild.

"He is my son, my heir. You may have two sons to chose from, but I have only one! And now this...this...scandal." His lips pulled back from his teeth as he snarled. "Your son has turned mine into a laughingstock!"

"I have ~three~ sons; only one is my heir." William said quietly, casting his gaze at the empty chair in front of his desk. "Please. Sit."

Llewellyn spun on his heel, gesticulating wildly. "Our family has ruled for ten generations. But this is beyond the pale. We will be tossed out. When word gets back to the Sentinels of my territory, they will demand we step aside. A homosexual ruler? It will not be tolerated. The new laws have caused this. Abrys could have kept it quiet, he could have married, had a son to inherit, kept control of himself. He owes it to the family. He has responsibilities. I have lived all my life without...." He stopped abruptly. His face went a dull red, part fury and part humiliation.

William felt shock rip through him. Did Llewellyn mean what he thought? Did he have the same urges as his son, but had he suppressed them all his life, forced them down and hidden them? William didn't understand those feelings, not personally, but he did feel sympathy for anyone who did. It wasn't the same feeling by a long shot, as he'd felt on discovering he had a son, one he'd not had the pleasure of raising or knowing. But there was the same ache he heard in the tone of the other man's voice. Because the boy's mother had been a Guide, William had not even looked to see if there was a child. Would likely not have believed it possible at the time. He'd been sowing his wild oats, and the Guide whose face was long forgotten, had merely been a warm place between widespread legs.

Llewellyn was pacing faster, and William had lost patience. "Sit down." He said flatly. "We will talk about your concerns, but I will not tolerate being yelled at, or accusations being thrown around regarding my heir."

"You won't tolerate....? Llewellyn's eyes bulged. Christopher wondered how long it had been since anyone dared say those kinds of words to the man.

Bellingham had completed his survey of the letters, and set them aside. They were romantic, perhaps a little suggestive, sexy, and not at all objectionable in his opinion. They were explicitly homosexual, and he suspected that was the 'perversion' being alluded to by the irate man standing in front of William's desk. Well, that would mean that Bellingham was a pervert, too. And all the Guardians for that matter. And it would mean Ruler Llewellyn was a bigot. He was not the only Alpha Sentinel to feel that way.

While the Admiral was watching the Sentinel, the unexpected occurred, the man leaped. Straight across the desk where William sat, also not expecting the move. Rulers did not resort to physical violence often. Bellingham had never heard of it when there was no issue of Guide possession or Territory at stake.

Christopher moved fast to intervene, but he would never get to the man in time. Bellingham found himself totally out of position, seated behind his desk, only Stephen was between his father and the out of control ruler.

Stephen jumped to block Llewellyn's way as he tried to get over or around William's desk, automatically smelling the air to judge the intruders emotional frame of mind, his nose protested and
Stephen was immediately taken over by a sneeze. He barreled into the ruler, knocking him off course and keeping him from reaching William. But Stephen was rendered otherwise helpless by the sneezing that wouldn't let up. Llewellyn swung a fierce, clawed blow, catching Stephen across the chest, and everyone in the office heard the sound of tearing cloth and flesh. An instant later Bellingham was there, picking Stephen up off of the floor just as a second blow was launched, narrowly missing Stephen's throat. The collar of his shirt ripped free, dangled from Llewellyn's claws.

Llewellyn, face contorted with rage and frustration, turned fully on the Admiral. Bellingham wasted no time, he tossed the bloody man in his arms at the Companion who was flying at them. Christopher's motion changed from a defensive attack to catching his Sentinel's injured son. Stephen's eyes were wide with shock.

Bellingham winced as sharp claws penetrated his uniform sleeves and into recently healed flesh. He shoved Llewellyn from him, and placed himself between the ruler and the rest of the room's occupants. Right now he wouldn't mind snapping the man's neck. He was damn tired of Alpha males who could not control themselves and in fact, were hardly expected to by the society they'd created. Nature herself seemed to have given up on them and responded by providing Guardians. He flexed his own clawed hands, but instead of attacking, he waited for the other man to make the choice.

Christopher steadied Stephen, going to work on his torn shirt, barely suppressing his urge to growl. If the intruder was not a ruler he would have snapped at him with bared teeth. As it was, he concentrated on getting down to Stephen's skin and seeing the damage done. Stephen was straining to get back into the fray, not cooperating much with the exam, intent on protecting his father, all his fighting instincts raised to fever pitch. He batted irritably at Christopher's hands, and tried to work himself free. Christopher prevented that by sitting on him.

The Ruler, cut off from any possibility of reaching William, rushed at Stephen again, claws extended. Stephen was young, strong, but the Ruler was crazed, and powerful. Luckily he hadn't reckoned with Christopher, who while not an Alpha was a very big man. Christopher spun, rising from his seat across Stephen's thighs, his own leg sweeping out, and planted his foot into the charging man's gut. It slowed the ruler but failed to stop him for long, he surged forward again.

It was Admiral Bellingham who grabbed Llewellyn from behind, and restrained him. William was by his son's side in a flash, forcing him to sit him down when he would have gotten back to his feet and attacked the other ruler. "Stop it this instant. Both of you." He snarled at the man struggling to get free of the Admiral's grip. There was no way that was going to happen, but Llewellyn had managed to rake Bellingham's arms with his claws yet again.

"Michael," Christopher snapped at the man who appeared in the doorway, "Stephen is wounded, bring Dr. Ashley. Now!" Bellingham's injuries were minor in comparison, and the doctor could address them later. For now, Stephen was in urgent need of care. His chest was torn rather spectacularly, and the bleeding had accelerated while he struggled.

William turned to look at Llewellyn, still fighting helplessly against the Admiral's firm hold. "What the hell is this about, Llewellyn?" he asked. "Do you think you're going to get away with coming into my office and attacking my son?"

Llewellyn spat on the floor. "That's what I think of you Ellisons and your Guide reforms. After what your heir did to my son, he's lucky I don't kill him."

"You'd be dead if you tried," Stephen said, his voice seething with anger. "Jim would tear you apart...."
"Quiet Stephen," William said. "Don't try to move, we have to get the bleeding stopped. Where the hell is that doctor?"

"Tell us Ruler Llewellyn," Admiral Bellingham commanded, dangerously soft. "What exactly did Jim do to your son?"

"My son spent last night in Jim's bed," Llewellyn answered. "When he came back to our quarters he stunk of Ellison and his pups. Everyone knows. They are speaking of it in front of me. In front of everyone. He is not hiding his perversion any longer. He is...he is.. proud of it! Now he's laughingstock and there is no one who doesn't know he's a homosexual."

Despite his honest attempts to free himself of prejudice, William felt a surge of horror. He quietly thanked god it was not one of his sons who had declared himself submissive. Homosexual. He suppressed a shudder.

"Abrys has been claimed by an Alpha, and a wild Guide. The creature is painted like a clown and had the audacity to try and ~mount~ my son in the cafeteria. He announced his intention to all who wanted to hear. At least your son's Guide had the presence of mind to stop him. Then ~it~ ordered me to stay behind when they left the cafeteria and those damn Guardians blocked my way. What the hell is this world coming to when Guides give orders to Rulers and the Guardians back them up?"

"I would say it is coming to its senses," Admiral Bellingham answered just as Dr. Ashley came into the room accompanied by Captain Rathe, Blue, and two other Guardians.

Michael kept Blue behind him, and a sharp eye on the fuming, foaming man in Bellingham's arms. Blue was not large, and though he had the heart of a lion he was not sufficiently trained. Llewellyn could take him out with a single swat. And if he did, Michael would beat him to a pulp. Which he doubted would be diplomatic. So, he kept his mate far from the irrational Alpha. He nodded at two of his men, who firmly but gently removed the ruler from Bellingham's arms, and held him.

"Get him out of here, and keep him confined." William ordered, having had enough. "I'll deal with him later. If anyone asks, refer them to me. He is to be released only on my orders." He waved them away. He was far more worried about his own son. He made his way to Stephen.

Michael turned to observe the others. Blood dripped from his superior's arms, but the wounds were not immediately crippling. Stephen was in far worse shape. Stephen, his brother, who had never been meant to be the first line of defense for any encounter.

Dr. Ashley pushed past the Guardian escort that had brought him here, dragging him away from a perfectly delicious breakfast, letting his sharp eyes scan the room.

"Over here, Doctor," William said, calling him to Stephen's side. "We need to get this bleeding stopped." Ashley didn't waste time asking what had happened, he wadded up a towel Michael handed him and pressed it to the open, bloody gashes.

Michael was frustrated. There were too many visitors here in the Compound, irritable, on edge and ready to fight at the thinnest of reasons. Stress and change had reduced what control they did have. They imagined insults where none were intended. Alpha Sentinels valued physical force, power, and aggression. They admired a man who took what he wanted, and kept it. Whether it was power, territory, a wife or a Guide.

It was, in a way, very unfortunate that it was not Jim who had been attacked. Protocol would have
made it a far more serious offense. Attacking the heir of a territory where you were a guest was a grave violation. Besides which, Jim would have taken Llewellyn down, ruler or not, and would have been permitted to without his action being questioned. Stephen, however, was a different story.

"What has happened here?" Michael asked keeping his voice even, though he felt the rage that was just below the surface beginning to grow. Did these men have no self control at all? "Why was Stephen injured?"

"Llewellyn's a coward," Stephen said, as Dr. Ashley cleaned his wound. "He attacked me while I was sneezing." He seemed angry more at the lack of sportsmanship rather than the idea of being attacked at all.

"He blames Jim for his son being...openly homosexual," William said, managing to suppress his wince at the word, "and there was some complaint about a painted person? And mounting....?" William truly was confused.

Michael understood exactly what was being referred to and he enlightened his father. "Oma and two of his Guardian brothers arrived at the compound gate early this morning asking to speak with our shaman. I believe Jim knows the Guide from his time in South America. I took Oma to see Blair. We agreed it would be best to disguise his scent by burning sage. We feared the Alphas would kill each other trying to get to Oma. The young Guide stated that he had come on the business of the gods to claim his Sentinels."

William made a face that looked like someone had pissed in his coffee, but he said nothing, listening as Michael continued to explain.

"Abrys Llewellyn was in the cafeteria eating when he encountered a man, a highly decorated Alpha Warrior, who claimed him, apparently. Oma, sensing his Sentinels were near, went to the cafeteria and claimed both of them immediately thereafter. It is the tradition of his people for Guides to claim their Sentinels by putting them on their backs in front of witnesses and mounting them." Michael said, his expression neutral.

"My god." William stared. "All this happened in the middle of breakfast?" His horror at the thought made it necessary for Rathe to swallow a laugh and look away for a moment. Especially in view of what Blue had done with him a short time ago. Being on his back had been anything but humiliating. But he was positive his father didn't want to know that. None of his personal thoughts showed on his serious face. Caleb had moved completely behind him, and was resting his head against his mate's back.

"Blair and Oma's Sentinels stopped him before any public mounting took place," Michael told his father. "The three have been given a private room to formalize their bond."

"Thank god." William said, sinking into his chair. Christopher looked equally relieved. Admiral Bellingham looked suspiciously like he might break out into a grin. Michael narrowed his eyes at his superior.

Dr. Ashley sighed as he closed the door to Stephen's room. It was nearly noon, and he had finally managed to get the extended Ellison family out of the infirmary, everyone that is except Bella who was curled up beside Stephen in the bed. The doctor never thought he would be grateful for nausea, but Dahl's pregnancy made him overly sensitive to his Alpha's injury, the smell of disinfectants and blood, and Andy realized, without much prodding that the prudent thing to do was to get Dahl back to the nursery, in spite of his very strong desire to stay with and watch over his injured Alpha.
Dr. Ashley wanted to keep an eye on the injured Sentinel. The combination of the allergy medication and the chest injury demanded it. Luckily the cuts did not go deep enough to hit any vital organs but the Ruler's youngest son would have some impressive battle scars to show for the encounter. Ashley shook his head. It had taken sixty stitches to loosely close the cleansed wounds. A touch of pain medication, not enough to aggravate the side effects of the allergy tablet, and now Stephen was resting, snoring actually, under Bella's sharp eye.

There was however still one more patient to deal with. Dr Ashley turned to the man who was sitting in his uniform trousers and nothing else. The admiral had showered, washing the lacerations well with soap and letting the water irrigate them copiously. Now he waited patiently to be treated. But Ashley found he was having trouble maintaining a professional distance. He couldn't bring himself to look at that wide, muscular chest, bared to his sight. Or the impressive biceps. Or the big, capable hands.

"Let me tend to your arm," he said, breathlessly, striding purposefully toward the Admiral, not focusing his gaze when he looked up.

Bellingham smiled as he watched the doctor come toward him. The man was lovely, efficient, and skilled. He smelled good. And those blond waves of hair made Bellingham's fingers itch to card through them. He murmured his approval. Seeing the doctor stumble a little, then resume his progress.

Caught by surprise by the tone of the sound, Ashley looked up into two of the most beautiful eyes he had ever seen. "I need to do my work, Admiral." He almost begged. He curled his fingers into his palms to keep them from reaching out and stroking the big man's skin. Just how warm would the hollow beneath his clavicle be? Ashley nearly groaned. He shook his head to clear his brain.

Bellingham it seemed had no such problem, he let his fingers smooth across one of the doctor's hands. Dr. Ashley looked disconcerted, he licked his lips, his eyelids fluttering rapidly. His breath came out as a hiss.

Bellingham reluctantly pulled his hand away. "I was just thinking about how perfect you are," his voice was soft, sultry and, the Admiral hoped, arousing.

Ashley wet his lips, trembled then stepped fractionally closer, reaching for one of his patient's arms. He ducked his head and examined the wounds. Not as horrific as Ellison's had been, but bad enough. Nearly on top of the last set of wounds that were now just scarred reminders.

"Doctor." The Admiral's voice was low, comforting, reassuring. Ashley made a sound of recognition but didn't dare look up, back into those all seeing, beautiful eyes. Eyes that peered all the way into his thudding heart. Which no doubt the other man could also hear. "Do not be afraid of me. I would never harm you. Or force you into an association that you don't want. But if you are open to it...." Bellingham let the sentence dangle into a question.

Ashley gave a little sigh as he applied a local anesthetic to Bellingham's wounds. The words calmed him. "I'm far from perfect, Admiral." He said quietly. I am not always...I don't always make the right choice. I've made mistakes, everyone has."

"Don't sell yourself short, Doctor," the Admiral said. "The way you handled the Ellison family, with such firm poise, the way you know when to stand your ground and when to yield. I admire you."

"Ahh," the doctor said, not looking up from his work. "So that's what you find so appealing, the fact that I know how to yield." There was a flush to his skin, his scent intensified. Bellingham inhaled it.
"It's not that you know how to yield," the Admiral said. "But that you yield with grace and strength; you don't let submitting weaken you. There are many Alphas who could take a lesson from you," he said, remembering Ruler Llewellyn's tirade about his heir. "And yes, we all have made errors, we are human. We will make them again. But this," He gestured a hand between them, "I do not think we would be making an error."

The doctor looked up into the Admiral's eyes. Bellingham was relieved when the other man met his gaze, less afraid than before, if he was any judge. "Now that would be the day," Ashley replied with a laugh, sounding honestly amused. "With all the changes that are going on around here I doubt that an Alpha taking lessons from a Beta will be one of them." They both knew that was the case.

"A pity," the Admiral said with a sigh, "but you are probably right." Bellingham fell quiet, letting the doctor finish stitching up his wounds before speaking again. They sat for a while simply patient and doctor, while the wounds were tended, sewn where they were deep and dressed. Ashely put the last strip of tape in place before Paul Bellingham drew in a breath and said what was on his mind.

"Dr. Ashley," he began his tone formal, controlled and sincere. "Would you do me the honor of accompanying me to the reception for Captain Rathe and his mate?" The silence was only a few moments in duration, but it felt far longer to the Guardian sitting, waiting for an answer.

"A date, Admiral?" The doctor asked, his voice faint. "Or the beginning of a formal courtship?" He licked his lips, his gaze seeming frozen onto the other man's now.

"Please call me Paul," the Admiral said. "I would very much like it to be the beginning of a formal courtship," the Admiral answered.

"I...I don't know what to say," the doctor stammered. "I couldn't call you...not...I don't think...." His objection petered out. Then, "...a formal courtship?" He asked.

"I know you find me attractive, why do you hesitate?" Bellingham wondered out loud.

"It's not you Ad...Pa...Admiral." the doctor answered. "It's just that I am very happy in my work, especially now, and Guardian's mates... Well they always seem to be at their Guardian's side, being a doctor is part of who I am. I don't want to give that up."

"I see," the Admiral said. "You have a skewed point of view. It is true that once mated to a Guardian, Betas become members of the Protectorate. But times are changing. There is no reason not to make one more change among many. I would never keep you from the work you love. Becoming my mate will not mean the end of your medical career, I give you my word. So," the Admiral asked as he stroked the doctor's hair, marveling at its softness, but allowing only the lightest of caresses so as not to further spook the other man. "I ask again, will you accompany me to the reception?"

"Yes." Doctor Terrance Ashley agreed. "It would be an honor."
Chapter 46

The day of the reception had arrived. The compound was quiet as each of the Rulers, their Heirs, and in a few cases their favored wives or Guides, got ready for the event they had all come to participate in. They were all resplendent in gowns and robes, official uniforms, with marks of station and rank displayed with arrogant assurance. Together they represented half of the Sentinel kingdoms in North America with a smattering of European and South American royalty.

A steady stream of the visitors arrived in the great room. The activity growing, the conversations, the renewed acquaintances. And it grew increasingly noisy.

William Ellison greeted each new arrival, his guests and visitors, he was elegantly austere in traditional Sentinel robes, simple, black and adorned with three small symbols culled from the far past; ancient runes, representing Alpha, Companion and Guide combined in unity. They flowed down the left breast of his robe in gold, over his heart. He was gracious and reserved, as always; welcoming them into his compound, letting himself be seen with Christopher, similarly attired, towering and impeccably handsome at his side, the gleam of his pale hair, his bright blue eyes, the width of his shoulders, and his great height drawing appreciative notice from more than one visiting ruler. Christopher was still quite a catch.

William met them when they entered, spoke with them, assuring himself of their comfort, invited them to the premixer which was taking place informally during the whole afternoon, then he turned them over to his more than competent staff to be made comfortable, refreshed and plied with whatever their pleasure demanded. Within reason.

For one of the first times in recent history, Sentinel Rulers were going to be entertained, wined and dined, without pliant Guides being offered to share their couches or beds. The only Guides present within the Compound were bonded, robed and safely attended by their appropriately attentive Sentinels, along with Guardians a discreet protective presence, roaming among the growing gathering, ready to move in if the need should arise.

Maire had taken one look at the mass of bodies, the noise and bustle, and balked. Two Guardians had escorted her back to the Nursery, she trembling and nervous, pale under her thick veil, her hands gone icy cold with reaction. The thought of all those bodies, all those strangers had been too much for her to even attempt. William understood, and made no effort to coax her into staying, gently squeezing her hand before she left, for the first time in memory not concealing his affection for her in semi-public.

Christopher had been torn as he watched her walk away. On one hand wanting to see her back to her rooms, on the other knowing that today his place was at William's side. It was a close decision, but ultimately he chose to stay with his Alpha, knowing Maire was safe and suspecting she would like a little solitude.

There was a dangerous note in the air, not unexpected given the numbers of Alpha Sentinels gathered in one place. The Compound was too large to be crowded by the visitors, numerous though they were, but the reception wasn't sparsely attended either.

Maire would have come into contact with many new persons, and William was pleased she had been brave enough to try and had had the confidence to decline his invitation, even at the last minute, without fear of his reaction. Not long ago she would have merely obeyed, discounting her own wishes and comfort.
As was natural, every Sentinel was interested in each Guide, sniffing, assessing, showing interest, sometimes more than seemly interest at that, despite better intentions. Instinct won out. And the posturing and not so subtle displays of ownership started early, with the first encounters between arriving Sentinels. Teeth and claws were being politely and not so politely displayed, as personality dictated.

Jim was there, Rafe at his side, Blair tucked between them, his belly the first thing any of the visiting Sentinels looked at, despite the fact that Blair had daringly chosen to go unveiled, his brilliant, dark blue eyes captivating in his beautiful face. The filmy material of his veil was thrown back to lay draped over his long curly hair, but not hiding any of his features from any who looked. Still, eyes were drawn to his most obvious pregnancy, and only belatedly to his face.

William observed Rafe's hand under one arm, offering both physical and emotional support as they made their way through the throngs. William could also see the very sharp tips of Rafe's claws, as if the Companion could not quite fully sheathe them. His Heir and Jim's mates were here for a brief show of force, then they would withdraw to rest before the evenings entertainment.

Rafe was not the only Companion or Alpha so affected by the many new faces and territorial posturing, and William knew at some point in the proceedings tempers would flare. He only hoped that the outbursts could be dealt with quickly and with minimum bloodshed.

Faced with dozens of interested rivals, William was hardly surprised Rafe would make the show of his ready claws in hopes of forestalling any unwelcome advances towards his deliciously fertile Guide.

Jim knew more than a few of the attendees very well. He had been an acknowledged heir for most of his life, a decorated soldier, and William's hyper-conservative roots had not hindered Jim from relating well to other heirs of his age group with more liberal or adventurous views.

William knew his son had not been above bedding many an offered Guide during his youth, probably quite a few, and he'd always been searching for a Companion. It wasn't until he was older that he looked for something more permanent. When he found Rafe, Jim had stopped his search for a Companion, virtually uninterested beyond a look or two, in other candidates who made their availability known. Yet, it wasn't until Blair himself that he looked at no other Guide.

Abrys Llewellyn had been an exception. Jim's friend, and newly professed Alpha/Companion. Lew had been able to tickle Jim's concern and interest. But never enough that he'd abandon Rafe. Rafe who was Jim's perfect Companion. As Abrys was not. Not quite.

William understood why his son had been interested in Abrys. The man was exemplary, a friend, loyal, standing strong despite public opinion that was for the most part set firmly against him. Homosexuality was too controversial to find support in most of the Alpha Families. Even an inkling of it could condemn an Alpha to being excluded from most invitations. William would have been quietly applauded if he had ejected the young man from his company, from the gathering, from his home. But he had not. While he didn't understand such a desire, he managed to accept it was what Abrys needed. It was necessary to Abrys, he who had been recognized as an Alpha all of his life, to actually behave as a Companion in this one way.

Abrys Llewellyn had been a beta Sentinel. William's senses, his well honed instinct told him that. Abrys was Alpha. He was also homosexual. And sexually he was receptive. While William shuddered at the idea of being so himself, he understood how his son, Jim, was attracted to the possibility of bedding a submissive Sentinel who wasn't quite a true Companion, but on the other hand...was. It was forgivable, if uncomfortable to consider so long as one didn't exchange the roles. There had not been
even the hint of that in all the rumors, much to William's relief.

He felt the profound gratitude that he himself had not been in Ruler Llewellyn's shoes, having to hear from wagging tongues that his son had chosen to lay beneath another Sentinel, to lavish his attention on another man's claimed children. William wasn't ready to be that understanding. He loved his son. But he wasn't ready to deal with a son who was...like that. Worse if it were his Heir.

Yet, where was the disgust in him when he took Christopher to his own bed? His Companion. Who he loved without reservation, for all their formality in public, it no longer extended into their private lives or into their bed. He no longer expected Christopher to be piously celibate, sacrificing his sexuality on the altar of their traditionalist beliefs. Their intimate relations were passionate, loving. He enjoyed them. How would he feel if Christopher had expressed a desire to...be the aggressor? To penetrate him, instead of the other way around? No. He felt an instant surge of revulsion.

No, William wasn't ready for that. He was pretty sure he never would be, despite his position on Guide reforms he was still a happily conservative, ~dominant~ man.

For Abrys Llewellyn it was a bittersweet time. His father lay in the hospital, after going rogue and then falling into a zone coma while in the Guardians' lock-up. The older man remained unresponsive, surrounded by his frightened, ineffectual Guides, under constant watch by anxious physicians. He was in a state of sensory depression, reacting to little; not even to the company of Guides, his or others paraded in by hopeful doctors.

Abrys' new bond, and the future the unusual relationship promised, hung just out of reach, overshadowed by the state of his father's declining health. The time Abrys had hoped to spend in virtual seclusion, affirming the new relationship, learning and understanding the bond they shared, was not possible in the circumstances. Abrys' had to take over at least the acting duties of ruler-ship while his father recovered. There was no time for anything else.

If he recovered.

Nothing had altered Ruler Llewellyn's level of consciousness except when Trent shook his head and put a hand on his arm, stating, "Poor son of a bitch."

There had been a blip on the heart monitor then, a tremble of heretofore immobile limbs, and the Ruler's hand had spasmed, fingers extending, almost as if he were searching.

Raising his dark brows, Trent looked over at his mate, seeing Abrys' consternation at the reaction, then slowly moved his hand to the Ruler's seeking fingers. The man had fastened on to him with a grip like steel, eyelids flickering madly.

Trent had no real choice but to sit at the older man's beside, his hand held captive in the almost violent, desperate hold. He could feel/sense the man's distress, a potent siren's call to his psyche, he would have to fight not to answer it. He itched to reach out with his other hand, to smooth the grey-streaked blond hair back of the sweat dewed forehead with his free hand.

There was little doubt that if Llewellyn were fully conscious and in control he would draw the line at holding hands with anyone, including his son's new mate. ~Especially~ his son's Alpha mate. And he wouldn't want Trent to touch him in any other way, either. In the partly aware state however, he held on. And on. A thing Abrys rapidly tired of witnessing. Trent was ~his~ mate. Not his father's.

Trent's conviction that the Ruler was an Alpha Companion, much as his son was, grew. That was
well and good, but it was a far cry from sympathizing with the suffering and denial the man had to go through, to making the leap to encouraging a bond to grow between them. Trent had heard of it, seen it in his own tribe more than once, but it didn't appeal to him. An Alpha with two Companions. He knew it was a rocky road, that kind of arrangement. Prone to loud fights and altercations and very little dignity. It was a path he was not interested in following. Certainly not with a father and a son. But he felt drawn to the ill man. The seductive call of a Companion reaching out to him in need.

This was not good. Not good at all. That assessment was only confirmed by the look in Abrys' eyes when Trent glanced up as Abrys shifted restlessly. Abrys Llewellyn was not happy with things as they stood. Their new relationship was not yet secure. He was watching his father holding onto his new lover. It didn't take long for that sight to wear thin for the younger blond man.

The Ruler had never established a deep bond with his Guides, choosing to keep them at a more impersonal distance, perhaps if he had..., but... Abrys shook his head, it was impossible to know what might have been. Now, because he had denied his true nature, because Llewellyn had not searched for the Alpha Sentinel he needed to balance himself, Abrys' was watching his own mate acting as a substitute. His mate. Who should be his, faithful to him, to Oma, their Guide. Holding hands with his father. Jealously roared through him. He had to leave. He could not watch his father stealing his mate from him. If he stayed he would kill one of them. Or both.

Trent felt it when his mate lost control of his jealousy, the scent hit his nostrils like a thousand sharp barbs, clawing through his sinuses, a harsh assault making him want to sneeze. He turned from the man in the bed, his eyes watering with the odor, riddled with frustration, torn. Abrys wasn't even going to talk to him about it.

Trent watched helplessly the sight of the stiff back of his mate striding out of the hospital room. Abrys ignored his name being called as he left.

Abrys' abrupt departure was followed by the arrival of Oma, who entered before Trent could extricate himself without breaking any fingers and go off after his sulky mate. Trent opened his mouth to speak, then hesitated as Oma was accompanied into the room by another man. An Alpha Sentinel. Then another. And another. Trent watched until all six of the strangers had entered the room, his brows rising higher with each entrance. The door was eased shut. Trent turned and caught the Guide's eye, a very pointed question in his own. Oma surely must have a very good reason for bringing half a dozen Alphas into the sickroom of the ruler.

Trent waited to hear just what that reason was.

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Rafe dialed up his hearing. Then he straightened up, looking worried, and yet... Blair narrowed his eyes. "What? He demanded.

"Abrys has stormed out of his father's sickroom. The Sentinels at the hospital said he was upset." Rafe listened a little longer. Blair was chafing to hear more, impatient. Perhaps they should go to him, to Abrys, help him cope with the potential loss of his father. Blair looked around. Maybe the reception should be delayed. It was hardly appropriate to be festive when one of their own lay so gravely ill.

Rafe bent low again. "Trent remained in the room. No one could see why. There is speculation that he has hopes of being named Heir as he is dominant to Abrys." ~That~ idea had not occurred to Blair at all. But it did have some merit. From the short time he'd known Abrys he'd learned the man didn't have any wish to rule. Abrys had experienced many of the detriments of Rule, and few of the benefits. After all it had been his position as Heir that had kept him from admitting, or being able to consider that he was a Companion.

And yet...Trent did seem an honest man, one aware and caring of his Mate's needs. Would he actually make a bid for the Llewellyn family throne? Alphas valued power, they took it when it was offered, and bowed to it. Their lives revolved around status and territory. It ~was~ possible Trent wanted to rule, had chosen Abrys because he was an heir. But Blair wasn't sure just how much influence Trent held over Abrys. Was it enough to take Abrys' place as heir?

There was no doubt that in at least one facet Trent was dominant. And now, the whispers...did Trent want to rule? Would he ask it, would he insist that he be confirmed as the Heir, taking the place of his new mate? Blair wondered if that would work. Abrys was no shrinking violet. He might be sexually submissive, and he might want to care for children home and hearth, but he was an Alpha Sentinel at the same time. Would he just back away and give Trent what he asked for?

If that rumor was actually true, that Trent wanted to be king. It might not be. Gossip wasn't often entirely true. Rafe bent down after a longer pause. Blair felt his Companion's agitation.

"Oma has taken six men into the sickroom. All Alpha Sentinels. They have not come out. They are not rulers. Nor representatives sent by William. One may be a law officer, but the others...one is a physician, there is an owner of a private security company, and an academy instructor. The others..." He shook his head. "They do not know them."

Blair was burning with curiosity now. He tugged at Rafe's sleeve to interrupt. "I want to got to the hospital." Rafe looked at him, not trying to hide his surprise.

"Now? But Jim..." Rafe said in an effort to remind Blair they were waiting on their Alpha Sentinel, who had just stepped away and was out of the room for a moment. He looked around hoping to see Jim coming towards them.


"Fine. Let me go tell...." He began, but Blair had headed towards the door, leaving Rafe to trail in his wake. Blair was fast, he waddled but he really moved. Rafe hurried after him, gesturing urgently at the Guardians grouped in the hall. Three broke off from the group and followed, discouraging anyone from following the Guide and Companion as they headed towards the garage.
the Reception. Spending time talking with men he hadn't seen in years had its good points, but he'd had enough time away from his mates. He was looking for his Guide and his Companion. His eyes swept the room. They were not immediately visible.

Jim focused his hearing, searching for the familiar heartbeats that lulled him to sleep every night. A scan of the nearby area yielded no Rafe and no Blair. Still Jim was more irritated than concerned, feeling a strong urge to be with them, an urge that he was unable to satisfy immediately. His growl was sotto voce, but heartfelt. He extended his hearing further, making a wider sweep and coming up empty.

Perhaps Blair needed to go back to the Nursery for something. Rafe would have taken him of course and he would have taken a proper escort, Rafe being even more cautious with Blair's safety than Jim. Still a sense of unease was growing in the Alpha Sentinel as his search yielded no results.

Jim turned towards the hall leading to the private Ellison rooms, easing his way through the throng, delayed only slightly by the need to respond to greetings and questions as he went. His father's conference and reception were being attended by many powerful allies. It boded well for the future of Guide reform, and once Guide reform was well established, Guardian reform. Impossibly, it seemed that more than half of the Sentinels in power in the North American region supported at least some of the reforms and looked to William Ellison to lead them.

It was a triumph for William, Jim had to admire his father's resolve. William had made up his mind and stuck to his guns. There had been threats, and the unkind words of friends as well as opponents. Neither had swayed him from what the older ruler had thought the honorable and true path. The right thing to do.

Jim had just made it past the door to the hall, let through by the pair of big men keeping watch there, when he heard it. The sound. A deep rumble that grew into a roar so vast it overwhelmed everything, all his senses. Then something struck him, a powerful body blow all along his back, throwing him forward, the roar continuing to grow, forcing him to instinctively shut his hearing down. His military training kicked in and he tucked his body, diving, rolling to his feet behind the intact inner wall in the wide hallway, even as debris slammed into the wall next to him, a rapid staccato.

His head was ringing, his skin smarting, his ears buzzing. He fought to catch his breath even as he moved, two incredibly long, disorienting seconds before oxygen filled his stunned lungs. When air finally made it into his chest, dust and smoke came with it. He coughed, putting a hand over his nose and mouth, then he looked around the corner, already knowing what he would see. The sound had been familiar, too, though from an earlier time in his life. He recognized the smell, the sound, and the destruction... C4. A lot of it.

Sentinels were getting onto their feet, staggering in a hell of broken plaster, wood and smoke, but moving as quickly as they were able, driven by thousands of years of instinct, the Blessed Protector Syndrome burning through their adrenaline soaked brains, forcing them beyond endurance, beyond injury to rescue those around them, ignoring their own bodies and wounds. The Sentinel at his best.

Guides and wives were being lifted and hurried towards the many doors, thrown over shoulders and carried in powerful Alpha arms, dragged as gently as possible if lifting wasn't possible. Guardians were wading in, picking up seriously wounded people and carrying them to safety, having materialised in the area in the few moments it took Jim to orient himself. They looked strange, the only things not covered in dust and debris. That wouldn't last long.

Jim looked further into the room. The entire outer wall of the huge room was gone. He saw smoke and sky, fire and devastation. He saw things he refused to focus on. Parts of things. He deliberated unfocused his gaze as he saw them.
His Guide and his Companion were not beside him. He did not know if they were safe. He had to find them. He looked again, seeing blood, damaged bodies, his hearing returning in a rush, necessary to him to find his lovers. His pupils dilated, his lungs expanded, ignoring the harsh, hot air, refusing to cough again. He smelled burned flesh, cotton, singed hair, fresh blood, and coppery, boiled blood, fried skin.

He heard cries, moans. He did not hear Rafe. He did not hear Blair. He wanted to go, to leave and find his mates if it meant he had to tear down the Compound's very walls himself. He wanted with a want that went beyond desperation to go look for them. But here there were injured men, Guides and women who needed his help. Who would die without it. He didn't think. He moved again. Into the chaos and confusion.

If they were in this mess he would find them. He prayed they were elsewhere, if he found them here.... If they were not, then they were safe. Grimly he overrode his genetic programming to go locate his mates first, his body screaming in protest, and joined the rescue efforts. He heard his father's voice shouting orders. He heard Christopher, and Stephen, Andy, and distantly the booming tones of his new brother Michael. He saw, when he looked, Michael tall and amazing, heaving chunks of masonry aside, the sweat running down his bare skin, soot dotting his chest and back, mixing with trickling blood. He did not see Blue.

He did not hear or see Rafe. Or Blair. His heart tore wide open, but he lowered his head, and drove himself on. He had to believe they were safe. Somewhere. And he would find them.

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Trent’s head flew up. He whipped around, focusing on the waiting room outside. He extricated his hand from the desperate grip Ruler Llewellyn maintained on it. Spinning on his heel, he hurried out into the hall, letting the door slam behind him. attention grabbed by the television report he had heard.

Abrys was frozen in front of the big screen TV. Trent moved over to him, grabbing Abrys' arm in a hard grip, keeping him from running away even as he focused on the news. As they listened Trent forgot the men that Oma had brought into the room. He was intent on something else now.

The pictures and video were shocking.

Abrys' made a sound of protest, stifling it when Trent actually growled at him. They watched together, in growing disbelief at the wreckage being shown. It was a scene from the apocalypse.

The screen showed flaming ruins, the announcers shouting in their excitement and to be heard over the sounds behind them. The destruction was massive. Ambulances and firetrucks dotted the scene. Men ran everywhere.

Abrys had little trouble recognizing the place. It was the Ellison Compound. Where his friends were. Where the preparations for the Reception had been nearly complete. Where the reporter was saying there had been casualties in the range of thirty people so far, and many more expected. They gave no names, but Abrys felt his heart seize.

Trent was still as stone next to him, he felt the soft touch of Oma, at his elbow, the Guide somehow having been drawn out after them. Abrys turned, fiercely holding onto his Guide, clinging, grateful he was safe, his cheek resting on the dark, flowing hair, his arms holding so tight he heard Oma grunt, but there was no protest, no demand to be freed. If Oma wasn't here...he would have been there, in all that chaos and death. Abrys groaned. This was...terrible, so terrible. It was unreal. By mere chance he had missed being a victim, missed his own death or the death of his new bond.
Abrys had never been so grateful, nor felt so guilty for his good luck.

"Let's go." Trent said as if reading his mate's mind, he pulled them with him. They said nothing else, just marched for the hospital's parking lot and their car. Ruler Llewellyn would keep, he was under the care of the best physicians and nurses. Others were not so fortunate.

Admiral Hawley and his Captain were there beside Abrys and Trent. Running.

There would be things needing to be done, and Trent knew exactly what to do in the aftermath of an explosion. He'd been in the situation often enough. He knew his skills and Abrys' would be in demand. Oma...he didn't want his Guide out of his sight. Finding an Alpha mate for Ruler Llewellyn would have to wait. Oma would be with him, within arm's length at all times until such time that Trent knew it to be safe to let him wander. He suspected that this action was not an accident. Not a natural gas leak. Not anything so innocent as all that.

This was deliberate. It was domestic terrorism. His new friends were in danger. And more than that the future of Guide reform hung in the balance.

Blair let Rafe help him out of the car as the Guardians held back a respectful distance. It was more difficult for him to move every day. He felt a twinge in his belly at the effort. Gingerly he straightened, stretching his back upright as carefully as he could, but the twinge didn't repeat. He drew in a steadying breath. Once upright he could move well enough. It was just getting up that was the challenge.

"I'm fine." He told the Companion. Rafe's eyes measured him, assessing the truth of that. Rafe held Blair's elbow helping him across the parking lot, up the curb and into the hospital lobby. He did not let go. They hurried towards the door to the entrance.

"Blair!" Abrys yelled surprised to see the pair in the lobby as they stepped off the elevator. "Are you all right?" He asked rushing forward, not thinking, only wanting to protect the Guide who had saved his soul. He grabbed Blair running his fingers through his hair, sniffing as he did, checking for the scent of blood. He began to unbutton Blair's shift. Blair's hand flew up to grasp his, stopping him.

Rafe, growling, claws extended reached for the offending Alpha. Prepared to attack he was halted by an iron grip. Blair's Guardians moved in determined not to let the situation escalate into a brawl, making their presence known. Their first job was to protect the Guide. But Blair didn't seem to be in distress over being touched by an Alpha he was not bonded to. Trent was gentle, he did not fight, though he also didn't let go right away.

"It is okay, Companion," Trent whispered, pulling Rafe well back. Rafe felt the overwhelming urge in himself to listen and to do what the Alpha told him to. The hands were gentle, strong, they felt good on him. They reminded him of Jim's hands. "Abrys has touched your Guide before with your Alpha's and your Guide's consent. He only wants to make sure he wasn't injured in the bombing. Stand down, you have my word no harm will result from this."

Blair held Abrys' hands and stopped him from going any further. "Rafe, it's all right," he said, turning toward his Sentinel. "Abrys is my friend, I have no problem with him touching me, but undoing buttons is a step too far, I know Abrys will respect my wishes." Blair turned to Trent. "You can let go of him. Rafe won't hurt your Companion."

"Where's Jim? Was he hurt in the bombing?" Abrys asked, taking a step backward, and pulling his own Guide against his side. He was a bit embarrassed by his behavior with a Guide not his own, and
he was very relieved that Oma seemed to take it all in stride, without the least indication of jealousy. But the sound of an ambulance approaching the hospital drove the embarrassment from his mind. "Is he...?"

"What bombing?" Rafe interrupted sharply, something was going on, and he didn't like not knowing what it was. "Where?"

"The main house of the Ellison Compound has been bombed," Abrys said. "We're on our way to help with the rescue."

"Jim was going to meet us there," Blair said, worry clouding his face, he turned with amazing quickness, and headed for the parking lot and the car. "We have to get back. He could be injured or frantic trying to find us." Rafe was right beside him, suppressing his need to keep Abrys further away. He did managed to interpose his body between that of the other Companion and Blair.

Trent watched the exchange. There was something odd about the way the Guide accepted Abrys' touch without a second thought and the way he took command of the situation, ordering his Sentinel without a hint of doubt that his wishes would be followed. No House bred Guide would behave like that. The Guide had grown up wild and more... he had been someone who understood and was comfortable with the use of authority. There was no other explanation for his behavior. And then the realization hit him. As absolutely impossible as it seemed it had to be the answer. "Blair Sandburg," he said out loud.

Oma's hand tightened on Trent's arm, his fingers digging in. "He is Shaman." He said to his Alpha Sentinel, quellingly. Trent looked down at him. Oma's eyes had never been blacker. He did not want the discussion to go further, but Trent had a duty to find out if what he suspected was true.

"Sandburg. He is Doctor Blair Sandburg, the man I've been looking for. I am sure of it." And Trent was. How many Blairs were there in Cascade after all? No, this was the Sentinel expert everyone was searching for. Trent was positive.

Blair never stopped, ignoring the exchange, he just kept waddling in a rush toward his car with Rafe quietly growling at his side. He saw the Guardians reach the car, open the doors and wait. He responded to the question without slowing.

"I am Blair, Guide to Heir Jim Ellison and his Companion Brian Rafe. That is who I am and all I wish to be." He muttered as he went, flinching as another twinge hit him, right smack in his lower back. He winced. He didn't try to raise his voice, knowing Abrys and the dark haired Alpha Sentinel could hear him. He wasn't Doctor Sandburg any more. He was something else. Some one different but not less than he had been. They had reached the car, the Guardians holding open the door to the back seat, and Blair turned to look at Trent before he got in. "If you have a problem with that, Sentinel it's just too bad."

"I have no problem, Shaman." Trent replied lowering his gaze respectfully. "I had planned to offer you sanctuary with my people when I found you, if you needed it, but I can see that is not the case."

Oma stepped forward and got into the car next to Blair, reaching out for the other Guide's hand. Rafe unhappily ran around to the far side and got in. Oma squeezed Blair's hand prompting the other Guide to look at him.

"Shaman Blair," he said head bowed and then he looked up into Blair's blue eyes. "You can not hide behind your Sentinels forever. You are needed. Your words must be heard or all that you are, all that you have been, and all that you could be will be lost."
"That time isn't now," Blair said, as the Guardian driving pulled away from the parking lot with squealing tires. "I have to get back to the compound and find my Sentinel." They were all thrown back in their seats as the car sped down the road.

Nothing was more important at this moment than getting to Jim.

Admiral Bellingham smiled as he walked slowly through the garden, arm and arm with Dr. Ashley. They were taking their time getting over to the premixer. The only lure being the smell of delicious food that awaited their arrival. As for the rest, they'd rather spend time alone, in each other's company if it had been a choice. But politically it was wiser to attend.

The time they had begun to spend together was enjoyed by both men. They still had not been to bed, nor had sex. The talked, they held hands, they teased each other. Admiral Bellingham was open to taking things further, knowing his mind when it came to the man walking beside him. But Ashely wanted to trust before he gave himself. Bellingham would let him have that time. A bonding was far more than physical contact and sex. It was love, tolerance, companionship, caring. And yes, it hinged on trust.

The Admiral knew that these few minutes would be the only time they would have alone with each other this particular evening, so he took a circuitous route through the garden and into the orchard. They were near the south wall about half a mile from the main house. A light breeze ruffled the trees and there was the sweet smell of fruit in the air along with the appealing scent of Dr. Ashley.

They were silent as they walked, but it wasn’t an awkward silence. Bellingham looked over at the younger Sentinel he intended to claim for his mate. He was a kind and caring man, a man of value; he had become a doctor to end pain and suffering, not to become rich by trading in infant Guides. The Admiral was not blind to the treasure he had found.

They had been moving slowly in the courtship, exchanging only soft, mostly chaste kisses. But the warmth and rightness of the touches had been clear to both. Bellingham had no doubts. More and more he was growing sure that Ashley felt the same. But Ashley would have to make the first move, Bellingham was going to be certain he was ready before anything happened.

Bellingham stopped and turned, looking down into Ashley's eyes and Ashley looked up into his. The doctor had beautiful eyes, they were open and honest, the kind of eyes that didn't try to hide. Bellingham could see the emotions play out as the younger Sentinel looked up at him, attraction, admiration, desire and questions of what the future would hold for them.

The Admiral lifted his hand and stroked his intended's face, "I cherish you," he said and leaned in for a kiss. Just as their lips touched he heard the explosion. He saw the shock on Ashely's face, sure that his own expression was identical.

They looked toward the sound and could see the faint glow of fire seconds before the breeze brought the acrid smell of smoke. They didn't have to speak they both broke into a run. The Admiral pulled out his phone, dialed and talked with out breaking pace. He called his secretary, and barked out orders.

"There's been a bombing at the Ellison compound. Get a bomb squad here, we'll need firetrucks and ambulances. Put The Protectorate on alert, I want every man here now." He rounded a corner and the devastation came into view. "It's the main house. Get as many Guardians as you can here, fast." Admiral Bellingham snapped his phone shut and stuffed it back in his pocket and then he picked up
Ashley, clutching him to his chest as he ran even faster toward the sight of flames and cries of the injured.

Michael dug a shocked but mostly unharmed Blue out of the rubble in one frantic burst of superhuman exertion. He held the much smaller body to his own blood and grime spattered one. Blue clung to him, not demanding to be set down, not caring if he looked like a child in a parent's arms. He was shocked and scared. He wanted to be held, his wide grey eyes roved over the piles of destruction all around them, unbelieving.

The Guardian's big hands traveled rapidly but thoroughly over the body of his mate. Squeezed his shoulders, felt along his back, over his buttocks, down his legs, his arms, his hands and feet, careful fingers ran through thick, now dirty hair, and gently pried the limpet-like young man away to do a visual check and to assure himself the front of the beloved body was equally undamaged.

Ruler Ellison stood at the periphery of the damage. One arm hung useless at this side, broken by a huge chunk of falling plaster in the initial blast; there was a large gash from his forehead across his cheek and blood ran down onto his dress robes. He snapped out orders, even as he tried to drag aside heavy wreckage with his one good arm. The first thing to do was to get as many people as possible away from the fire and put the fire out before the trapped people burned to death or suffocated in the smoke.

Christopher ripped a piece of his own shirt off and tied it over the laceration on the ruler's head. William tried to shake him off, irritably shrugging out of his Companion's reach. "I'm fine," he snarled, "get the trapped people out."

"You won't be fine if you keep losing blood," Christopher growled back refusing to be budged. "You won't be able to stand up in a few minutes if I don't get this bleeding stopped." His jaw was clenched, his eyes taking in the ruin that was the left side of William's cheek. The skin was torn, lacerated and burned. He moved the improvised bandage lower to cover the ugly wound. It would scar with even the best of care. And it was bleeding heavily as head wounds were wont to do. He applied pressure, knowing it was even worse than he thought when William didn't even wince.

"Andy, Jim, help me with this," Stephen called. "Bella's under here, she's still alive." His voice broke on a sob. "I can hear her heart beat."

"Christopher," Michael yelled as he made his way toward his younger brother, Blue still in his arms. "Help us, Stephen will rip his stitches open if he tries to lift that heavy debris." Christopher was saved from making a choice by the arrival of the third brother.

It was Jim who got to Stephen first, pulling him away. "Let Michael and I do that," he said. They wasted no time in shifting the weighty wood.

"Fuck you, Jim, she's my Guide," Stephen yelled. "I have to get her out of there." He went onto his knees and crawled on his belly under the rest of the wood to his unconscious Guide. She was dirty, but otherwise looked untouched. There were no wounds visible, and no blood. But her eyes were closed and she didn't react when Stephen put trembling hands to her face. "Bella...." He moaned.

Christopher got William settled into an undamaged chair that had been dragged over and had a smaller Sentinel hold the makeshift bandage to the Ruler's cheek. He hurried over to Stephen and wrapped his arms around the frantic Sentinel. "She is family, Stephen. They'll get her out." Without waiting to hear what else his youngest said, he lifted him out of the hole so that Jim and Michael could clear the remaining chunks of plaster and smaller boards away until they could see all of Bella
lying unconscious beneath.

"Careful." A softer voice said. "Let me examine her before you move her." Christopher felt Stephen relax when he saw who was speaking. It was Dr. Ashely who went down on his hands and knees next to her. His hands moved over her from head to toe, quick and efficient. He checked her eyes, gently teasing open the lids to examine her pupils. Then he dusted off his hands. He pointed to a board about a foot wide and several feet long. "Bring that over here." He ordered. He directed the men where to put their hands to lift the Guide and slid the board under her before he allowed them to lift her out. Then he led them outside.

"Dr. Ashley has triage set up on the lawn," Bellingham said in explanation. "Take Stephen out there." And then he turned, listening for heartbeats and calls of other trapped people
Chapter 47

Every chair was occupied and still more grim faced men stood around the periphery of the large room, leaning against every wall, a hundred men, and no smiles among them. All eyes were turned to the screen at the front of the room where a tape of the devastating explosion that had riddled the Ellison Compound was being played. Hard jaws became harder, gazes turning bleak.

A low murmur of sound, not quite one of approval but certainly one of regret and pain made the rounds of the room, not loud enough to disturb or overwhelm the sounds from the TV monitor, especially not in a crowd of Sentinels. It was tragedy unfolding, but it was...necessary, too. They had only done what had to be done.

On the monitor fire curled up over the broken stone wall, licking at hefty wooden beams that had at one time held up one of the walls of the great house, now they poked upwards like fractured bones, giant matchsticks charred black.

Further back the family housing, where the Guides would be, the ones hidden from the rest of the world, hoarded away; dozens of Guides said to be all fertile, all young, all pregnant, that area had no damage. That had been strategic, carefully planned. The Guides could not be harmed, they would be liberated from the harem, shared out among the Sentinels who were in this room now. Each man would be allowed his time with the Guides, allowed to lay with, sink his flesh deep within a fertile Guide and spread the fertility to other Guides they mated with.

Only the Sentinels had been harmed, those who had broken ranks, who sought to keep deserving others who were not in power, who were not wealthy, from owning their own Guides.

Rumor had it that somewhere within the Compound, Dr. Sandburg was imprisoned, punished for speaking out, for giving a voice to the struggles of the men in this room. Sandburg, who had shown he understood what it was to be a Sentinel. Who wrote from the heart with blistering honesty on the needs of a Sentinel, of the reality of being a Sentinel in a modern world where it was not animals, not weather, not feeding the tribe that occupied a Sentinel's time.

No, in the modern world it was the struggle to find a niche, a territory within the territory ruled by the more powerful, that made a Sentinel a man rather than a slave, a mere cog in the machine of the more powerful.

There was not one man in the room who had not been touched, soothed, comforted or healed by the knowing, understanding words of Sandburg. Sandburg knew what it was to be a Sentinel. He knew, and he helped every other Sentinel to accept, even celebrate what they were, he let them know they were not animals, driven by instinct; rather a Sentinel was a thinking, rational being, human. Sandburg must be freed to speak his wisdom, his words, to the rest of the world's Sentinels. To confine him was treason against all it was to be a Sentinel.

Every man in the room who watched the destruction unfolding on the screen felt regret that the bombing had been required to achieve their ends. But months had gone by since the last published work by Sandburg. He had made no public appearances, had not been seen at all. Every search had come to a dead end. The last clues, fruitless though they had been, had pointed to the Ellisons.

Some men came forward, saying they had known Sandburg, that he was a professor of Sentinel Studies at Rainier University, that he would never speak out in favor of Guide reform. He had been silent on that issue, knowing that it was best left to the Sentinel to decide for the Guide. So, having his pen now raised in support of the new laws freeing Guides...it made men question the truth of
what was written. Had he been forced?

And who had seen a Guide on the street since the new laws went into effect? They had all vanished, were rarely sold even in the stalls of the illegal markets where they were once plentiful if expensive. A man had to dig far deeper into his pockets to buy a Guide now, they were scarcer than they had ever been. Brothers and fathers had to share their Guides now. Cousins and friends. All because the powerful had made it legal to claim the Guides for themselves, by granting them freedom of choice. It was no longer the Sentinel’s rightful business to decide who a Guide belonged to.

Instead of the almost preternatural understanding Sandburg had for things Sentinel, the writings on Guides and reform were more introspective, thoughts more than facts, wandering ruminations, and there were few in the room here tonight, who could accept that the writings were true, and from Sandburg. The consensus was that they were forgeries and that Sandburg was a prisoner of the Ellison Ruler’s Clan.

Sentinels had owned their Guides for as long as any here could recall. Their fathers, their grandfathers, uncles, all had owned Guides. Tales from the far distant past were that, simply folk tales, without evidence that they were true, or better, or even possible. And the idea that a Sentinel must be faithful to one Guide, while that Guide could choose however many Sentinels he wished to mate with? That rang of impossibility, of disaster, of mad imaginings, and not the clear, precise, so insightful way Sandburg wrote on the Life of Sentinels.

The Brotherhood of Sentinels really had no choice, other than to act, and without wasting time. The plan was brutal, but they had to move fast, taking time out for a more elaborate approach put Dr. Sandburg at risk. Those who held him had to be compelled to release him. Dr. Sandburg’s captivity was clearly becoming more restrictive. The greatest Sentinel mind ever was being stifled, suppressed, perhaps worse, was being twisted to speak out untruths. He had to be freed to join them, to be allowed to speak his mind, the truth. To speak for them.

No one celebrated the loss of life, the violence, or the destruction. But the cause was a just one, one that transcended what had been done; ~Sentinel~ Sandburg’s imprisonment had to end. The action taken this day was only the first step in the plan to win his freedom.

Every man in the room had taken the vow. They would not be stopped until their brother was free. And may god forgive them for what they had to do.

Stephen had refused food, water or tea until Dahl, fighting his nausea, had come to the hospital and hand fed his Sentinel. Stephen did eat then, unable to refuse the intent look, the pale, drawn face. Andy’s fierce scowl had made little impression, but now Stephen nibbled the bread and cheese that Dahl broke off with determination despite the odor of the food sending his stomach reeling.

Bella, his dear sweet Bella, had not yet woken. She was under mild sedation as the scanner moved over her, looking inside her brain for a reason why. Stephen never looked away for more than the time it took to blink. Not even Dahl had been able to coax him from the room to rest. He had followed the gurney from Radiology, to Nuclear Medicine, to MRI, his own injuries bound with fresh bandages after he had not heeded the warnings of his brothers and torn the stitches open in a frantic attempt to get to his injured Guide buried in the ruins.

He would wait by her bedside until she woke, or until the doctor gave him word of why she slept on. Only then would he rest.

Stephen feared he would lose her. She who had been his first choice, his only choice, who was the
mother of his children, who had been his heart, his life, his savior, and his very breath. She who had chosen him. He loved her. He could not face losing her. If she did not recover...what would he do? Would anything be worth living for? His shame was great, but he knew his first thought was no. Nothing meant more to him than she did. His Bella.

Andy had managed to get a cot brought into the room, then a second. One for his Alpha and the other for his distressed, pregnant Guide. He was content to sit in the reclining chair and doze.

Stephen allowed himself to be coaxed into bed as long as the cot was drawn up to within inches of Bella's hospital bed. He fell into a fitful sleep. He missed the first twitch of the slim fingers over his head.

Bella's hand trailed off the side of her bed. The delicately polished nails brushed Stephen's golden hair. They twitched again. Andy levered the recliner upright and stared, afraid to hope. Had Bella moved? He watched for long moments as nothing happened. Then there was an undeniable spasm, and the fingers brushed through the exhausted Sentinel's hair. Andy was up out of the chair, one long stride closer to Bella and Stephen, when he heard Dahl move.

He changed his direction instantly, rushing to catch Dahl as the Guide toppled forward off the narrow confines of the cot and was spectacularly sick all over the floor. Stepping with careful haste Andy avoided the spreading pool, and knelt in a dry spot next to his Guide. Dahl's skin was dry, too dry, his eyes listless. Andy reviewed the young man's intake over the last few hours. Not enough he decided. He stepped over to the wall and depressed the call button. If Dahl was conveniently in a hospital, he could just as easily be given some fluids intravenously, and whatever mild medication might be able to calm his stomach without harming the babies. He was too thin and too dehydrated.

Andy was not pleased. He was not pleased with anything that had happened, and if he could just get his hands on whoever was responsible for the bombing, he would happily rip them from limb to limb. In fact he could hardly wait to get his hands on them. He stroked the dark soft hair back from Dahl's milk-pale face. Not even the Guide's normal olive tone gave him any color beyond a sickly beige. He hung limply in Andy's arms.

A noise from the direction of Bella's bed drew his attention. Stephen was sitting up, staring at Dahl and the puddle. He looked every bit as green around the gills as Dahl. Probably too traumatized by Bella's injury to dial down his senses. He swayed as he sat, his hand covering his mouth. Andy threw a blanket over the mess and went to get a cool, wet towel. While in the bathroom wetting the washcloth, he heard the outer door open. And then a cry.

Rushing back into the room he saw his Alpha on his feet bending over Bella's bed, arched painfully over the railing, the metal of the bar digging into his abdomen as he tried to crawl over it without lowering it. A nurse was attending to Dahl. Stephen had secured Bella's hand in his own, and was holding it to his lips. And Bella...she was looking up at him. Awake at last, if drawn and weak, laying flat on the mattress, exhaustion etching deep lines into her features. She looked old and ill, but she was alive, she was aware.

Andy let out a sigh, sending a grateful prayer to the gods. Bruised, battered and concussed, Bella was going to live, they would be OK. No matter what it took. He lowered the rail and watched the other Sentinel, his Alpha, drag himself up next to Bella. Andy helped by boosting his feet as Stephen struggled to pull himself up onto the mattress with one arm in a sling. Andy tuck him under the covers next to Bella, Stephen's body curled around her, fidgeted, settled. He let out a sigh, and then went limp, his eyes shutting, his face relaxing, finally asleep.

A doctor was supervising a nurse who was collecting the equipment for an IV line. Andy nodded his approval when the nurse and doctor both warily stepped out of his way as he neared Dahl.
Obviously experienced working with Sentinels and Guides they waited for his permission before relaxing and quickly sliding the IV into the too flat vein at Dahl's elbow. Andy felt his alarm grow when the Guide didn't flinch as the needle went in.

"The Guide is seriously dehydrated." The doctor ventured with careful caution. "The Guide will need a few liters of fluid before she perks up. And I'd like to run some lab work. Has she been ill?"

He waited for the response.

"Yes, do it. He is pregnant, and he has been vomiting." Andy said. "Give him whatever he needs."

The doctor took note of the pronoun, nodded. "We will give him the care he needs. A urinary catheter will help us monitor his hydration, his kidneys...." This was often a difficult subject to broach when speaking to a Sentinel. Not to mention difficult to place the catheter depending how much genital modification the Guide had endured.

"Fine." Andy did not like the idea of anyone but himself, Bella, or Stephen touching Dahl that intimately. But he agreed, for Dahl's sake.

"Do you wish to stay, Sentinel?" The doctor asked.

Andy's growl gave him the notice that short of a nuclear explosion no one was going to pry him from Dahl's side. The doctor's sigh was only a faint sound, as he looked over at his nurse. He read her own resignation in her gaze. Together they set about doing what needed to be done, and working around the hyper-vigilant Sentinel in attendance while they did it.

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The ruins were still smoking here and there. Heavy beams had been shifted by cautious hands and anxious men. The heat was far less, and there were no other live bodies trapped according to Sentinel inspection. The living had been removed. The dead...their recovery was in progress.

Jim rubbed at red rimmed eyes and looked up into the unmarked sky. It was a rare day when there were no clouds in Cascade. This was one of them, and the heavens stretched so blue it almost hurt to look at the color. But it could never hurt so much as not finding Blair or Rafe. They were still not here, he had not found them. His mind sent him a picture of them when he'd last seen them, they had been here, right in this spot as he walked from them. Since then, since that moment, there had been nothing, no sign of them. There was an ache in his chest so profound that Jim Ellison didn't know how he kept breathing through it.

The smoke, oil, charred wood and plastic, superheated metals and other burned scents interfered with the acuity of Sentinels' senses, and as no Guide was allowed so close to the destruction there was no one near to ground them. The Guardians and Alpha Sentinels were moving massive amounts of the ruins, piling them to the side, and under each new piece Jim feared what he would find.

Jim felt it through every fiber of his body when the trickle of scent hit him. He stopped, turned and faced the source, dialing in sight and smell, with a controlled desperation that was pinpoint. His ears caught the sound of the heartbeat he most needed to hear, and a second heart beating close to the first. He felt the skin contract all over his body, his lungs expanding, air, hot, harsh and fouled rushing in. None of that mattered, because it was there again, yes, it was, bright and so exquisitely sharp, slicing through all else that sought to mask it. The sound of a heart, a beloved heart beating.

He was standing, nose lifted, straining at the air, then he was running, hurdling the stacked and smouldering debris as he went, a flash of soiled, bloodied white dress shirt, torn pants, and scratched scuffed shoes. He took the corner at full speed and they were there in front of him. Blair. Rafe. He
didn't see anyone else, just his family, the curl of auburn-brown hair, the brilliant blue of eyes, the hand on Blair's arm, steadying him. He sucked in air, a heaving sob of sound.

Rafe turned toward him, arm around Blair. Unmarked, unsullied, perfect, and unharmed.

When he reached them his arms went around them. He held them hard, shaking like a child, crying unashamed tears while they held him every bit as tightly, not caring about the filth, the dirt that decorated every inch of his body. Because here was Blair and Rafe, and they were breathing, and they were alive, unharmed.

Belatedly Jim knew that Abrys and his new bond were there, too, further behind his own Companion and Guide. He reached out a hand to touch his friend, felt the steady beat of his heart. Then he stroked Oma's hair, a single, hasty pass over the long, silky darkness. The dominant Alpha of the group he only nodded to, the man not yet on his radar as family, more a rival actually, and he knew the other felt it too, because his greeting was a grunt and nod, nothing more, the baring of warning teeth a struggle to suppress.

Jim's grip on Blair and Rafe eased. At last Jim was able to stand back a little and look them over. His sensitive fingertips, numbed from hours of clawing at wood and debris tingled as they sought out soft skin, he touched Rafe's face reverently, then Blair's, his eyes eating them like the sweetest of candies.

"Where were you?" He asked his Guide and Companion with deceptive quiet, when he was able to do more than simply breathe in their combined scent.

Blair looked slightly uncomfortable, but he met Jim's eyes. "I wanted to go to the hospital. I insisted Rafe take me."

"What is wrong?" Jim asked, once more flipping into Blessed Protector mode, stepping closer despite the many eyes on them in this too public place, running his hands over Blair, drawing the very rounded Guide against his body. His hands mapped Blair's pregnancy, his senses, strengthened by his Guide's proximity, acute. Simultaneously he drew Blair with him behind the only shelter there was from the news cameras and onlookers. The smoking pile hid them from view.

The tiny tripping of the hearts beating under his hands, deep in Blair's womb, all three of them, were regular, and without dysrhythmia, little feet moved restlessly, as if aware of the momentous upset in the world outside their safe haven. There were no problems he could find other than a flush of heat along Blair's skin. Jim frowned, then he knew what it was. Blair was blushing.

"Nothing. Nothing was wrong with me. I am sorry, Jim, the babies are fine and I am fine. I had heard...Rafe told me...at my request he eavesdropped, listened...there were rumors of...something...going on at the hospital...and I wanted to go investigate. I am sorry. He wanted to tell you, but I didn't want to bother you, or to wait. I was impatient. I am sorry." Blair's gaze let Jim know how true that was, pleading for forgiveness. He never would have chosen to put his Sentinel through this.

"I should have...." It was choked, harsh, Rafe's face was filled with apology, remorse. Jim's hand rose and cupped his Companion's cheek, then his hand went around the back of the bowed neck, pulling his close again. He turned his face into the curve of the Companion's throat. Alive! They were alive. His touch was far gentler than his voice when it came.

Jim straightened, thumb running over Rafe's lower lip, his jaw knotting. "I would," he said, tightly, "have liked to know where you were. I thought, I thought I would find you..." He couldn't bring himself to say it, but his eyes traveling to the bodies gently being laid out let them know what he had feared, what he had gone through. To find them lifeless, broken... "You and Rafe were there, at the heart of the blast the last time I saw you. I left you there....and then, I couldn't..."
"I can't tell you how sorry I am, Jim." Blair said, holding on to his Sentinel, uncaring of who watched him, and Rafe hung his head, swallowing hard. "I would never want you to go through that. We tried to get to you, to let you know as soon as we heard. But no one would let us in!"

Rafe had known he should have let his Alpha know, he should have found a way, some way to follow Blair and to let Jim know. But he had not. And Jim had suffered agonies for it.

"The main entrance to the compound was destroyed," Rafe said. "We tried to come in through the west gate but the Guardians had set up roadblocks a half mile out and were only letting emergency vehicles through. They were worried that the bombing was only the beginning, we couldn't get through, or get anyone to carry a message. Not until they cleared the area, made sure there was no more danger."

"I tried to get through the perimeter patrols," Trent commented, "but I would have had to kill a Guardian or two to do it. I wasn't willing to go that far, so I turned back."

Jim nodded, he was grudgingly impressed that the Sentinel didn't get himself killed in the attempt. An Alpha Sentinel had a hard time taking no from anyone of lesser rank. And until recently, a Guardian had no rank aside from the duties they were assigned. Jim let out a low growl of frustration. Change had not been good to him, to his family, his life. There was no doubt that this attack was because of reform. Was the risk to his Guide and his Companion, to his children worth the change heralded by the new way of life, the laws?

Jim Ellison drew his family close, his hand knotted in the back of Rafe's once spotless shirt, Blair's robes bunched in his fist. Holding and being held. An instant only of peace before the questions fought up to the surface of his mind demanding answers.

Who had done this and why? As if it would matter. When they were found, and they would be, they were dead men. Every last one of them.

Christopher had finally dragged William into the newest section of the Compound. It was still standing undamaged and ringed with Guardians, he was sure it was safe, not only because he had gone over every room, every closet, and every hall looking for anything out of place. Only then had he let William, groggy from medications and fatigue, be brought here. Maire was an indefinable lump under the covers at William's side. Her presence had calmed the older Sentinel, let him rest.

Bandages were wound around the ruling Alpha, his arm fixed in a tight binder held to his chest. He looked tired and ill, livid bruises painted his flesh, a technicolor of reds and purples, fresh and darkening as Christopher looked. He himself had gotten off relatively unscathed but for a few cuts and many, many scratches that were treated with soap and water, not even requiring bandages or stitches.

The more seriously wounded had been moved on to area hospitals, only William and those with minor injuries remained in the Compound's environs. Dr Ashley had wanted William to go, but he had refused. His personal territory had been violated, his friends and guests killed and his home destroyed in the worst way. Annihilated. People had died on these once safe and honored grounds. He would not flee, he would not give up his territory, he would not let the terrorists win. Not even for a single instant.

He won the argument to stay, but Christopher won the decision of where he would be if he stayed. William Ellison was in bed, in his flannel pajamas, and Dr Ashley was in the next room, sleeping the heavy sleep of the exhausted, but within immediate reach if a crisis should arise. Admiral Bellingham
was with him, hovering protectively while quietly directing the operations involved in the excavation and recovery. Guardians came and went. Michael came three times alone then once with a silent, shocked Caleb to check on his father before returning to the rescue effort.

Bellingham was seated next to the bed where Ashley slept, his eye sharp on the fine profile of the other man. From time to time he reached out and stroked a whisper soft caress through tangled gold hair, careful not to wake the sleeping man. The doctor needed his sleep, and Paul Bellingham would see he got it.

It was Bellingham who came to the doorway of William's room, his thunderous expression drawing Christopher to his own feet. A single sheet of paper was in the huge man's hand. Wordlessly he passed it to Christopher.

The text was extremely brief and to the point.

Free Doctor Sandburg, or further disaster will follow.

It was signed by The Brotherhood.

Christopher felt anger pour through his body until it came boiling up out of his throat, and erupted as an enraged howl.
Abrys Llewellyn landed his Cessna at a private airfield three miles from the Ellison Compound. He had learned to fly as a young teen, one of the good things about having a well-off family. Flight had always intrigued him, the freedom, the far horizon, the feeling that nothing could touch him when he was way up in the sky. At times in his life it had seemed his only refuge. He'd been the backup pilot for special forces, but never the primary pilot. The teams didn't want to chance that an unbonded Sentinel would zone on a sparkle of sunlight and bring his plane and his entire team down. It just went to show that for all that the Special Forces knew about Sentinels, there was plenty they didn't know. Abrys had never come close to zoning while flying. The rush of input was exhilarating, dazzling, sharpening his every sense, it was like being enlightened in a way. And Abrys Llewellyn loved it.

Not so for his Guide Oma. Oma, who was attached to the Earth in every part of his being, was giving off clear signs he was looking forward to having his feet on solid, unmoving ground as soon as possible. He did not like flying. He was quiet, not complaining, yet the tension in his body was unmistakable, telegraphing his unease.

Abrys smiled gently. Though this match had been entirely unexpected, and they had not known each other before bonding, he had no doubt that Oma was his Guide. They worked together seamlessly, understanding and anticipating each other's quirks, tolerant and supportive of weaknesses, reinforcing their bond into a single cohesive whole. He felt no annoyance that Oma couldn't join in with him, enjoying one of his greatest pleasures. He flew carefully, steadily, not trying out any of the spine-tingling maneuvers he usually did. Oma's comfort and security were important to him. He felt a warm blanket of protectiveness and concern for his Guide.

Whereas his bonding with Oma was peaceful, gentle and sweet, Abrys' connection with Trent was far different. It was passionate, fiery, intense. He ached for Trent's presence and touch. It was painful, difficult to be apart from him. Having Oma by his side was the only thing holding him together.

Trent was now finished with his undercover work and had called Abrys telling him to return to Cascade. He had discovered who they were looking for and where to find them, all the information that Ruler Ellison sought. Trent would be returning to the compound himself to give his report. And he wanted Abrys and Oma there.

Trent's going undercover, to find the perpetrators of the bombing, had been a bone of contention between the two Alphas. Abrys was more than willing to do it himself or with Trent, but all concerned felt that as an heir, Abrys, was too well known and the need for him to return to his territory was too great to be ignored. Trent was new to the area and no stranger to undercover work. So it was decided. Abrys returned to his territory to claim his rightful place as ruler and Trent stayed in Cascade to find the ones responsible for the act of terrorism. Abrys had no choice but to go to his new kingdom, to leap into the governing of his people, in shock from the loss of their leader in such an unexpected way. There had been no choice, no alternative. He had to go.

Abrys resented that obligation, in a flash of angry irritation he'd even hinted at giving up his rights to the throne. Trent wouldn't have it, but the real stopper was Oma's hand coming to rest on Abrys' arm. A calm had flooded him along with the certainty he could do this. He could let his Mate do what needed doing, and he could get his own obligations taken care of. They were not saying goodbye. They were, even across a thousand miles, still connected.

Abrys wondered if Trent missed him as much as he had missed Trent. A man he hadn't even known
a month ago. A name he'd never heard mention of, a body he hadn't touched, a face he wouldn't have recognized if he'd seen it such a short time ago. Now one of the most important, crucial factors in his life. His sanity, his desire, his breath. Trent and Oma.

On the eve of their parting, Oma had made it clear who he was going with. Abrys. There was no jealousy, no feeling of favoritism. Both Sentinels had accepted the Guide's decision as final. They had been separated now for a little more than one week. Abrys yearned to have them all back together. He found he did not like to be without either of his mates. They were a part of his life he could not do without.

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Oma, true to his word, had found an alpha mate for the elder Llewellyn before they left Cascade. The ruler recovered from his coma rather quickly once he felt the touch of a true mate. Faced with standing trial for his attack on William Ellison or abdicating his rule to his son while retiring from public life, he chose the latter and now lived in relative seclusion in the mountains of Arizona with his new Alpha mate. He was both humiliated and exhilarated by his mate. He refused visitors. He did not however try to send his Alpha away. Abrys had hopes his father would adjust, however slowly, and eventually rejoin public life as a known Companion.

Abrys sighed as he taxied his plane to a stop and went through the shutdown sequence. Oma had done his best in the last weeks to take away the tension of being apart from Trent. It was unnatural for a newly bonded pair to be apart, their bond was not fully solidified on the physical side. The emotional and and spiritual pull was strong, letting its dissatisfaction with the circumstances be known. Oma could only guess at what Trent must be going through without even the comfort of his Guide by his side.

Abrys' body ached for his mate and knowing that Trent was near by but still out of reach only intensified his need. Tingles of fire ran up and down his nerves. Light was brighter, sound clearer and scent more intense as his body reached out in anticipation of his absent mate. Tonight he would be with Trent would hold him and be held, would touch and be touched. He would taste the sweet nape of his mate's neck, feel the heat of his skin, and he would lay back for his mate, surrendering, giving up his control, submitting to what was asked of him, actualizing his true role as Companion to another Alpha Sentinel. He could hardly wait. Abrys flicked the last switch and bid the tower good day before removing the headset and turning to help Oma with his seat belt. Together they moved down the short aisle and to the side of the plane.

Abrys opened the door and stopped at the top step, scanning the area and sniffing the air for any potential danger before turning his head and giving a nod to Oma that the airfield was safe. He watched with undisguised affection as Oma fairly burst from the plane and down the steps, unable to hold back his wide smile. He turned to grab their luggage and stepped onto the short stairway leading down to the tarmac. When he got down the stairs he walked toward the limo and saw two doors open. He dropped the luggage and pushed Oma behind him as he reached for his gun nestled in a shoulder holster. The limo was clearly marked with the Ellison Coat of Arms and the plate appeared to be of official government issue, but a Sentinel could never be too careful when protecting a Guide. The Guardian Sargent was the first to emerge for the limo followed by....Trent.

There was a smile on Trent's face as he walked toward his mate. Abrys came to a full stop, gazing at the man walking towards them, his breath caught in his chest.

"I wanted to surprise you," Trent called to his mate, laughing. "I didn't think you'd want to shoot me." They stood a hair's breadth apart, Abrys, caught in the conditioning of his youth could not move forward that last fraction and finally take his mate in his embrace. He gazed longingly into the
dark eyes slightly above the level of his own. He inhaled the scent and felt his knees turn to water even as fire kindled deep in his belly.

Trent was there, standing in front of him. Abrys finally exhaled and Trent let out a sound of desire that pushed them both forward. They fell into each other's arms, holding tight, Abrys' face, his lips against the warm heat of Trent's throat. The rough velvet of the tanned brown skin called its siren song and Abrys tasted it, his tongue curling out to run over the muscular contour. The electricity was there when they touched. It surged through both of them demanding recognition and completion. Trent, by far the less reserved, moaned again.

The Guardian turned his head away from what he felt should be a private moment. He took a wide path around the two Alphas and picked up the luggage and loaded it into the trunk. Oma was not so discreet as to turn away. He stood watching and beaming at the two men. His feet were once again on terra firma, his mates were with him, all was well with his world for the moment.

The Guardian came back and leaned over to whisper in Oma's ear. "We need to get them into the car." His implication that the armoured car was safer than the tarmac out in the open where any talented Sentinel sniper could perform a miraculous sniper shot was true enough. With a quiet sigh Oma nodded.

"I will do it," Oma said and then walked toward the couple. He lifted his hand and touched Trent and then he backed away, causing the enthralled Sentinels to move forward, toward the open limo door. Just as they got to the door Oma skillfully slipped aside and the two Sentinels half fell into the limo.

The Guardian stifled a laugh as he closed the limo door.

"They need time alone," Oma said heading for the front seat. "I will ride in the front with you."

Christopher watched as his very stubborn Alpha Sentinel slowly made his way into the room and gingerly to the well padded chair behind the massive teak desk. William Ellison, ruler of Cascade seated himself with pointed care not to jostle his still tender injuries. His sigh of relief was almost enough to make Christopher smile. If he'd not been so angry over how his mate had been injured in the first place. Or so worried.

William was recovering, not as quickly as his significantly younger sons, but he was a Sentinel still, though older, and Sentinels were good healers. So Christopher watched and fussed when allowed. Letting the relief flow over him as he saw his mate's body gradually repair itself.

The horrific facial injuries had been addressed by the best plastic surgeons available, but the scars could not be completely hidden, especially from the sharp gaze of another Sentinel. In time the marks would fade, but now they were livid against his pale skin. His arm was functional, if painful and weak, protesting its use.

Christopher moved silently up to the desk needing to act to contain the rage once again building in him, arranging the water carafe and glass close to the ruler's stronger hand. That done he quietly set about readying the room for the business of the day. Pulling aside the curtains he felt his heart lighten a fraction when he saw the unmarred section of the garden. It was beautiful, a combination of all kinds of green from golden to the deepest forest green sprinkled here and there with ferns and an occasional brilliant flower. There was no indication that only a short couple of weeks ago injured had lay on the grass, flesh torn, charred and bleeding, tended until they could be taken to hospitals in the area under a protective guard.
Many had died, some allies and some opponents to the ruler of Cascade. Christopher knew William felt the loss of each one of them, each man, woman, each Sentinel, each Mundane, and the two precious Guides who had passed. He moved to the next section of the long brocade curtains and slid them aside.

Here there were obvious marks of the tragedy. The bare earth visible where the west most corner of the gathering hall had once stood. The debris was cleared, prepared for new construction to start. Yet the bare earth was stark against the other green, the dark wound of the disturbed soil a reminder of the day when death and loss had struck. Christopher swore that he would be there when the men responsible were found. He would be there, and he would see them punished.

"Companion." William's voice at least had not changed. Deep and soothing, far more youthful to the ear than his lined face was to the eye. Christopher turned and looked at him. "I can feel your rage from over here. I can not say it is misplaced, but it is not necessary. It is not...diplomatic. And diplomacy will be what we need."

"Diplomacy? You want to talk to them, men who did this to you? Who killed so many of us? Why?" Christopher was startled out of his fury, away from the burning thought of revenge. How could William mean such a thing?

"Because I can't accept that my children, your children, our grandchildren will have to fight a war I start, perhaps die fighting it because I didn't finish it. Or, one I did not fight to end. I want them to live. To prosper. To know peace. They can't if I don't do everything in my power to see this disagreement resolved."

Christopher knelt next to the desk and looked into his Sentinel's eyes. A pale blue, they were tired just now, but deep in them he saw the fire, he saw the determination that had kept this man Ruler of Cascade for so many decades. The strength that had allowed him to change a lifetime of habit, of comfort and status quo, to enact the new laws. To declare Guides free. Or as close to free as possible, maybe in the future they would truly be free.

William lifted his hand and put it on his Companion's arm. It was his bad hand, and only with effort did Christopher manage not to reach out and help him. The fingers flexed against his arm, digging into his skin, but so weak as they did, that it was hardly the emphasis that William intended it to be. Christopher felt emotion well up into his throat until it burned.

"I will not leave my children in war. They will have a legacy of peace from me, I swear it." William's voice descended into gravelly tones, so great was his emotion. Christopher gazed into his eyes. He loved this man. He worshipped him and would never forget the sacrifices he was willing to go through for his family and his territory. the recent changes in their lives, their newfound closeness was everything Christopher wanted. William's openness to change had allowed Christopher to become a father, a boon few Companions enjoyed.

"I believe you." He said in a whisper. He had no other way to show the depth of his own feeling, he lifted the scarred hand, its back chased with twisted pink lines, and kissed it. He had never loved anyone more.

Had there really been a time he had fought to deny himself this? Abrys wondered at it, while Trent turned so they were lying mostly side by side on the carpeted floor of the limo. The thick dark carpet was silky, warm, Abrys kicked off his shoes, digging his socked toes into the pile, using the leverage
to press his body into the larger one next to his.

Trent hovered half above him, just looking into his eyes, his expression honestly affectionate beneath the hunger. Abrys gazed back into brown/black eyes that glowed in the low light of the vehicle interior. He was surrounded by the scent of his mate, a scent that was changing as testosterone flowed, arousal built. Abrys breathed it in letting it rush through him.

Trent touched the handsome face of his mate, just fingertips, sensitive, exploring cheeks, and chin and forehead. He had missed him. The connection they had was too powerful to just blithely dismiss, no matter the reason. He had suffered the absence, which oddly had given him an air of believability undercover. He had come across every bit as dissatisfied as he was, enduring the very difficult and sudden loss of both Oma and Abrys. He'd hated every moment. It gave him a brooding, dangerous image that gained him entrance into the group of malcontents who had been the bombers of the Ellison Compound. His large, work calloused hands had itched to wrap around more than one throat and squeeze.

His brief growling responses, his glowering dark eyes, and the air of rage that had been around him actually made him desirable fodder for the people whom he despised. There was only a few reasons great enough to kill for. To save a life, to protect, or to punish an unforgivable crime. All else was terrorism. These men....He'd burned with anger. They would pay. They would pay dearly.

Now at last he was back with his mates. He felt Oma so clearly through the divider, riding up in the front of the car. He wanted that small body here, beside them, where he could touch and explore. But he was aware of the greater ache of Abrys' need, a towering need that outweighed all other concerns for now.

The rapid beat of their hearts gradually synchronized, their breath coming together. Trent lifted his hand and rested it against Abrys' cheek, long fingers fanning out to encompass and hold, He tilted the face upwards, his eyes moving in a caress. So beautiful, all that pale blond and gold beauty, eyes that sparkled and shone. A mouth that made him think of wonderful things, parted, breath coming quickly. He lowered his head and lightly brushed his lips across the corner of Abrys' mouth. Abrys held very still, yet Trent felt the shivered response of his body, the little gasping moan that left his mouth in a curl of heat. Abrys opened his mouth wider to admit the tongue that touched his lips, slipped inside, his eyelids fluttered, wanting to close, wanting to concentrate on the feel, but he also didn't want to lose sight of his mate loving him. Trent whispered against his lips. "Shhhhhh. Let it go, I am here, feel it all. Feel me here and now with you. Close your eyes." And Abrys did.

Immediately taste became stronger, touch, incredible. The hands on his body, moving in long strokes down his sides making short work of his buttons, parting the edges of his shirt, cupping the well defined muscle of his chest. The mouth pressed so lightly to his, their tongues lazily sliding along each other, building the need. Abrys had no hope of stifling his groans. His body was afire, his need growing urgent, yet...peaceful. How could that be? How?

Trent lifted his head moving down to nip once at the golden column of his mate's neck, pausing to draw flesh into his mouth, worried at it with his teeth, until when he lifted his head a red mark glowed. The pulse raced against his mouth and teeth. He didn't wound, he teased, giving a new sensation to build on the familiar and smiled when the body under his writhed deliciously. He could feel the hard erection jutting rebelliously against Abrys' confining clothes. Abruptly he wanted the flesh in his mouth and he wasted no time going after it.

The zipper was no obstacle, the underwear easily torn aside, the pants discarded. And the hardness was that quickly in his mouth where he could savor it. He sucked it all in, to the root, tasted, ran his
tongue over the contours, swallowed around it all, feeling Abrys' body seize at the sensation. Abrys' moans growing louder, his body unable to be still, unable to fully submit, needing to participate. Trent grinned around his mouthful. This was good. So damn good. He'd missed it. He sucked harder, drawing the length into his mouth further, winding his tongue around it, sliding up and down. Slowly he raised his head, letting his mouth glide up to the tip, so his tongue could dance around the head.

Abrys arched his body. Only his pelvis held still by the strength of the hands at his hips, controlling him. Trent shouldered his legs wider, opening Abrys, forcing his legs up out of his way. He suckled the tip of Abrys' erection, teasing, enjoying. Abrys moaned, squirmed, tried to sit. Trent put a hand onto his chest, raised his head. Hung over his mate, his dark eyes menacing, dominant.

"No." He ordered and ran his thumb down the swollen perineum behind Abrys' balls, lightly over the furred hole he'd dreamed about for days. Tight, hot, and ever so sweet to sink into. He dreamed, wanted, lusted. Ever since he'd been left alone. Abrys' whole body shook. He writhed. Trent chuckled, a deep sound filled with dark longing. "Don't move." He warned, in a melted sugar voice, fingertips ghosting over the sensitive spot.

Abrys came close to whimpering. A tongue touched him, lapped at him, nearing his center, so close it stopped his breath. Oh, god it felt....

Trent licked, licked, flattened his tongue and drew it slowly over the wrinkled skin, along the seam of his mate's scrotum, nipping it with careful, demanding teeth. His mate was his, every inch of him, every cell, every part. His mouth, his cock, his ass. It was all his. He licked harder, closer, finally across the pink, ruched hole, feeling the helpless tremble of the man under his control. The sound Abrys let out was that of a man tortured by too much pleasure, too much sensation. His legs flopped wide, exposing all. Trent burrowed his tongue deeper, feeling the incredible heat part around his tongue. Abrys, for all he held mostly still was wild. The sounds he let out frantic, bass groans. He fluttered around the invader.

Trent reluctantly drew away, searched the console, hoping, and finding what he was looking for. A tube Jim had slipped to him when he suggested Trent meet Abrys at the airport. Jim, another who understood what meeting after an absence was like...and a Sentinel with which he now shared a mutual respect.

Trent slopped the slick gel over his fingers, warmed it as long as he could bear, then applied it where it would do the most good. This wasn't going to be drawn out, it wasn't going to be easy, it wasn't going to be slow. He slicked the crease of Abrys' body, following it immediately with his cock, swollen purple, thick and demanding. He pressed. Heard the moan. Pressed again, as careful as he could be while shaking with need to be inside, which wasn't very. It was hard, he was hard, Abrys' body reluctant, even as it was incredibly eager. Abrys opened himself, wanted what was breaching him. He let out a cry, and Trent shivered, answering with his own growl.

It was too slow, it was torture. He slid in by fractions of an inch. Riding on the edge of pain, insisting on the surrender, insisting that Abrys give in, his body obey the demand. He wanted him. His hands forced themselves under Abrys, cupping his ass, lifting, tilting. With a frustrated snarl, Trent pulled out the inch he'd gained, and held Abrys hard against him. Abrys hummed against his throat, biting at the sweat streaming down his neck and chest.

Trent curled his fingers into place, rubbing his cock down the widespread crease, bumping into his fingers as he opened his mate, one finger, two, four....too fast, but it was necessary as little in life is truly necessary. He burned, was close to madness, close to hurting that which was his, that which he wanted to protect. The fingers....in deep. Abrys sighed, groaned, heaved onto the intruders, wrapped
his legs around his hunched mate, begged.

The fingers were gone. And Trent was in him. It was good. At last it was good. Trent pulled back, lunged in. Fast, hard, crazy deep. Abrys saw sparkles of light. His skin contracted, his nipples points of fire raked across black, soft, chest hair. His balls were tight to his pelvis, his cock a bar of iron. Trent was in him, and again, again, slamming into him, jolting him, the power built. Wild.

He started to shiver and couldn't stop. It ran over him like a train, too strong to stop, inevitable. He flew apart. His orgasm tearing at him, seizing him, tossing him, Trent roared in his ear, faster, faster, slamming so hard, jolting his body, not letting his peak stop, each thrust a tiny explosion, filling him as he emptied himself of everything, every ounce of what he had. Trembling, shivering...nothing...nothing...screams....and collapse.

The Guardian had long since pulled into the Compound garage and exited the vehicle. He stood with arms crossed guarding the car, his forbidding glare keeping any who thought to approach at bay. Oma was in no such state of control. He had given in, lowered the divider between the front and the back and stared at his mates entwined on the floor. Sweat streamed, their skin glowed pink, red, brown. Their mouths were wide, panting, teeth bared.

Oma stared. He had never seen anything so beautiful. Not the claiming of a newly bound Sentinel. Not the fathering of a child, the Guide taking the chosen Sentinel's seed into his body. Nothing had touched him to his core like seeing, listening, smelling, wanting...yes wanting this. He was up on his knees twisting, dragging his robes out of the way, tearing them in his haste. He was up and through the divider window like an eel. Falling into the passenger space.

He tumbled in next to his mates, reaching out, touching....

Abrys screamed, his body bowing, Trent, hissed, every muscle standing out, fierce, male, dominant, possessive. Yes. Oma moaned. Gods. Beautiful, beautiful.... Then Abrys went limp. Trent freezing over him, suddenly still, no more violent motion. He sucked in great lungfuls of air. His head hung as he leaned over his swooning mate, a debauched very much male seraph, if only there were soiled wings spread out under him. Trent let out a huff, then a laugh.

Oma heard satisfaction. Happiness. Satiation. Trent turned to face him, easing gently from the spent body beneath him, Abrys shuddering as his mate pulled out. Trent reached out, tugged the naked Guide close. Oma went.
Abrys, Trent and Oma made their way across the wide green lawns toward the stone shrine that had been set up at the bomb site on the Ellison grounds. It was the first time the trio had a chance to make the pilgrimage together. Abrys and Oma had returned home to the Llewellyn Territory as soon as possible after the bombing and the mental collapse of Ruler Llewellyn. Abrys needed to reassure his people that their territory still had a strong ruler to lead them into the future. There had been no possibility of not going.

Trent had gone undercover alone to find the people responsible for the heinous act. Abrys didn't like the idea of Trent having no back-up, but there had been nothing he could do. Now the three of them had returned and as long as they were staying at the Ellison Compound the walk to the shrine would be a daily dedication, as it had become to many others living there, reminding themselves of those who were lost in that horrific moment of fire and pain.

When they arrived at the memorial they found fresh candles, lit by the Guardians and protected in sconces so the frequent rain and capricious wind could not douse the flames. Laid around a single white granite column there were flowers in various stages of wilt, they would be cleared away shortly, the remains from yesterday's devotions, and new blooms put in their place. On the brightly polished column was affixed a framed listing of all Sentinels, Guardians, and Guides who had died in the bombing as well as the names of those injured. It had been handwritten at first, a shaky list of names with a rock to hold it from blowing away in the breeze. Now the bronze plaque along with the monument of stone gave more permanence to the memorial as did the sturdy wooden benches where visitors could sit and contemplate. The area would expand in time. There would be no rebuilding of the offices and gathering room that once stood on the area, instead the land had been prepared for planting of trees and grass and an eternal flame would burn in remembrance of those who lost their lives.

Trent's ruler had been one who lost his fight for life in the explosion and collapse of the structure, dying from the injuries he received in the bombing. His young son had survived. The Heir's back had been injured in the blast resulting in a temporary paralysis, from the shock of the impact the doctors said, but thanks to modern medicine and time, there was a good chance he would walk again, eventually showing no outward sign of his experience.

Trent removed his knife from its sheath in his boot and shaved a lock of hair from his head. It was no longer the tradition of a Native American to suffer through a physical trial and subject himself to deprivations to honor a lost and respected tribal member. No more blood needed to be spilled here to make this place a sacred one. Instead a lock of hair was left in memory of those lost. Respect for his Ruler demanded the toll and more; a commitment burned in every survivor's heart to find those who had done this and make them pay.

Oma understood immediately what his Alpha was doing and put out his hand in a silent request for the knife. Abrys followed suit, cutting a small lock of blond hair from his head and laying it at the shrine beside his mate's and his Guide's, a puff of wind caught the strands and mixed them as it drove them across the stone and onto the grass.

Oma chanted a short prayer for the dead, rose from his knees to his feet, and the three made their way to their quarters, each locked in his own silent contemplation of loss.

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"We need to take the upper hand." William said as he leaned forward to pour tea into the waiting
cups. Paul Bellingham resisted the urge to take the teapot from the other man's shaking grip. He knew that using the hand was necessary in order to recover its strength. But he couldn't quite tamp down his inclination to help or the nervous urge to prevent the tea from being spilled down his leg if William's grip failed at just the wrong moment. He watched closely until he was able to breathe a sigh of relief as the pot was set back down on its copper trivet.

The Admiral leaned back, cup in hand, at ease, and waited for Ruler Ellison to lift his own. They each took a sip. The fragile porcelain rang out in a faint musical hum as the rim contacted hard teeth during one tremor as William drank, the sound so faint that none but a Sentinel could have heard it. Bellingham felt his ears prickle up at the ever decreasing sound as if his senses were trying to follow the vibration into eventual oblivion. He shook his head to clear it.

Finally the Ruler placed his cup down on its saucer.

It was delicious tea. Flowery, a jasmine blend, William decided. Probably selected by Maire. His Guide enjoyed spoiling him and Christopher with such small luxuries, she would wait with a tiny smile of anticipation on her soft lips, visible even under her light veil, and watch as they enjoyed the first taste or scent of her gifts.

The tea was good, not too strong for a Sentinel's palate, well chosen, he would have to remember to thank her. William didn't attempt to stop the curling smile that stole over his features at the thought of his Guide. Her belly was rounding now, two children from what William could feel when he lay his uninjured hand on her smooth skin, when he could use both hands again he would be sure of the number. Active, strong children. He was pleased.

"I have so many things to be thankful for." William Ellison said into the silence. "And so many things to regret. So much pain." He shook his head. "My injuries are the least of it. My son Stephen's Guide is fighting back to health, it is difficult for Bella to walk, it may always be. I have lost good friends, friends I was sure would outlive me. Wise men and unwise alike, and some simply good men, gone in a flash of unnecessary hatred. I asked Sentinels to come here to talk, to celebrate, to witness change, even to argue against it, instead they suffered and died, here on my land, and I could not prevent it. But, I did not lose any of my children, only the easy use of my arm, and I am no longer what any would call a handsome man," he said with a wave, dismissive of the terrible scarring that now marred his face. "Yet...I have much to be thankful for, many others lost more."

"You could not have known that an attack was planned for that day." Bellingham said, picturing his new lover, Ashley who was alive and healthy, unhurt by the bombs. He was grateful for that. Yet... he was also angry. Angry at those who had dared to violate the safety of this place and to put the lives of many, including innocent Guides in jeopardy. "We heard nothing of a planned, organized resistance against the laws. We took what precautions we thought were necessary. And though they were extensive, it was not enough. The Guardians apologize for our part in the failing. But we cannot change the past. Only what we do in response." Bellingham knew what he wanted to do: crush those responsible, so that they might never raise the hand of terror again.

William smiled. "Yes. That is true." He lifted his cup again, moving slowly, the surface of the liquid inside the cup trembling. Bellingham found his eyes drawn to the ripples moving across the top of the tea until they broke against the side of the cup and reversed in ever tinier ripples.... He blinked. He had nearly zoned for the second time in mere minutes. He blinked again. He had never zoned, not in forty years. His control was perfect. His rage...he shook his head. He had thought it buried, controlled. It was not so. His rage was merely cloaked. A threat to himself and to all around him. He could not afford it.

"My friend." William said, his eyes sharp and keen and very blue. Paul looked over at him. William
reached out with his good hand, touched his arm. "Do you see?" William asked. Abruptly Admiral Bellingham did see, did understand. He was a protector. Hatred, rage, violence was not part of that. He left out his breath in one long smooth exhale. It helped, but only a little.

"I do." Bellingham said, not completely happy about it. He clenched his massive fists on his thighs. Now his own healthy hands shook as much as William's injured one. His men would retaliate against those who had murdered. But...even if every rebel was killed someone new would take up the sword, adopt the cause and seek their own revenge; their sons, their friends, their brothers, someone else would fight and kill and die. Still, the taste of revenge, the need for it was sharp and crisp and metallic in the Admiral's mouth. He carefully spread his hands wide, rested them on his thighs, looked down at them while the color slowly returned to his long fingers.

"So, we will solve this crisis in a way that will not damage Sentinel relations further." Ellison said. "Are we agreed on that, Admiral?"

"Yes." The Admiral said, the growl underlying the words almost hidden. William was right, bitter though the thought of the guilty being alive was. The penalty for killing a Guide should be death. Bellingham growled. The alternative, while bringing a sweet, temporary satisfaction, a cooling of the blood rage and the exaltation of victory, was far too costly in the long run. Only peace held any promise for the future. His teeth were very white as his lips peeled away from them.

William nodded, taking in the fierce, snarling face with no fear. "Good. I had to have you on my side on this. My sons...they are young men. Their anger is deeper, hotter, harder to control, their need for revenge is greater. I can feel it, the hunger for the blood of those who have harmed us. I know the need to feel my claws rend their flesh, rip them limb from limb." He paused for a steadying inhale of the perfume rising from his tea. "But it costs too dear. I want no more bloodshed if it can be avoided. No more anger on these grounds, or in my territory. I do not want Sentinel to kill Sentinel in my name, not when I can prevent it."

Bellingham drew in a long breath, let it out slowly. He leaned forward looming, large, calm once more. He had almost accepted William's decision. Almost. "William, those directly responsible must be brought to justice in some way. They can not go completely free. As for the rest of their organization, I will see to it that the Guardians take no revenge, but I am afraid it will not be as easy as you think. The door to peace swings both ways and can be blocked from either side."

William nodded his head, meeting the Admiral's eyes. The light from the garden window streamed into the room, casting an eerie light across his torn cheek, the scars a deep, garish pink. Bellingham did not look away from the marks. William spoke.

"Not easy, no, but necessary. I am well aware of the difference. I know how hard it will be. But, I have done the impossible before. I have gone against everything I was taught. I changed myself, my home, and my community. I think I have changed the world by making it possible for Sentinels to look on their Guides as human. Even without the law admitting they are human, that corner has been turned. It will come to pass. The world is changing. There are many fights ahead of us. But I do not want those fights to involve weapons or killing. Not if I can stop it."

Trent adjusted the collar of his uniform minutely as he stood in front of the mirror. He was going to report to the ruler of Cascade and he wanted to look his best, show his profound respect, to honor the man, the once conservative Ruler who had dared to say Guides were free. He was ready to list all his findings, and perhaps, if he was asked, his own assessment of the enemies' weaknesses and vulnerabilities, where the greatest force could be brought to bear resulting in maximum damage. How to take out every damn one of them. He'd done this kind of action enough times before, but
somehow this time it felt far more personal. And, he asked himself, how could it not?

Oma sat on the bed his dark eyes going from the tall form of one of his Sentinels to the other. Resplendent in dark blue, with the gold accents where medals hung at his breast, Trent was handsome, strong, a warrior. His dark hair was freshly shorn, short, bristling, masculine, emphasizing the distinctive planes of his face. Proud, Native American, far closer to Oma's own heritage than to the man who made up the other third of their trio.

Abrys... Oma turned his head to look at the blond man. Abrys was more beautiful than handsome, but in a way that was all male. There was nothing feminine in the perfect lines of his face or body. His dress blues, bordered with grey and crimson, were lighter in color than Trent's, but no less dramatic.

Oma had dressed far more quickly. A loincloth, long enough to brush the floor of brilliant greens and reds, no veil, arms bare, chest covered by a wide strip of cloth embellished with claws, beads, and colored threads, his hair brushed until it shone like watered silk, hanging down his back, pulled to the sides with bone clasps. Then he had turned to watch his mates as they adjusted their own, then each other's uniforms. Ties were snugged, buttons checked, ribbon's straightened, then finally, hats picked up and tucked under their arms.

Oma, when they nodded at him, led the way out of the room and down the halls. His step and his pace was measured, dignified.

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Rafe helped Blair into a chair while Jim Ellison strode across the floor to greet his father, Jim's walk was very close to being the hunting prowl of some great cat exploring a dangerous jungle. Since the explosion he preferred Blair locked away in the very center of the Compound behind several doors and many Guardians.

Blair was having far more trouble than expected getting around, Rafe wished they could simply rest back in their safe rooms. But Blair was insistent, he wanted to attend this meeting, and when the invitation came to hear Trent's report, he had not listened to any of Rafe's reasons why he shouldn't go. He had stood, balance precarious, and headed for the door himself like a fat prowed ship moving slow and stately through water. Rafe had hurried to his side, helped him down the hall, grumbling under his breath. Praying really, that nothing else would happen.

Greetings having been exchanged, Jim returned to help Rafe move Blair's chair closer to the rest of the group. His gaze wandered over Blair in a quick assessment for perhaps the hundredth time of the day. Looking for any reason for alarm, any reason Blair should not be here, or needed help of any kind.

Blair's hand closed on his Alpha Sentinel's, his thumb stroking small circles, the intimacy hidden between their bodies as Jim leaned down. "I'm fine," He said quietly. "Both of you, relax."

Rafe sat obediently in the chair next to Blair's, pulling it even closer so that he could put a protective arm around his Guide.

Jim, raised far more formally, pulled a chair close but did not put an obvious hand on his Guide. Perhaps if it were only his father, William...but having the Admiral here, and soon others, Jim found himself reluctant to be so overt. He positioned himself between Blair and the door, where he could intercept any potential threatening incursion. He checked again to see that Rafe was between Blair and the other two men in the room.
William waited patiently for his son to adjust his seat. Blair was looking decidedly ready to give
birth, he thought. Ripened to perfection, his skin pink, healthy, glowing. He had the small air of
unimpeachable satisfaction that William had seen before in women who were very pregnant and
happy. It pleased William to see it. In the midst of the recent horror, there was a clear message here
of what was of greater importance, life, new life and old, continuing, safe and unthreatened; if it were
in his power to see it so it would be. It hardened his resolve.

"Ah, Michael, Caleb." William looked up, "...come in." William watched as his oldest, yet newest
son entered the room. No one could deny Michael was impressive in his black uniform, huge and
striking, his grim face formal and stern. Caleb was silent, almost a shadow at his side. It hurt to see
the changes. Time, prayer, and love, would heal him, William hoped. Bring back the playful young
man he'd once been.

"Father." Michael acknowledged, then he bowed to his Admiral. His gaze fell to his brother and he
nodded. Jim stood up, held out a hand and they shook. Rafe stood but did not offer his hand and for
an instant Michael's eyes sparked with the desire that had once been while Rafe's narrowed in
suspicious watchfulness.

Stephen met up with Abrys, Trent and Oma as they walked down the hall to the meeting with his
father. The small Guide who led the procession was a startlingly foreign picture in his loincloth and
vest, the incidental flash of his bare thighs at every stride most distracting as he walked. Stephen tried
not to look.

Oma's hair was long, sweeping, and very black. His eyes were barely any lighter in the dark of the
hall. Stephen felt an urge to move closer to the little figure. To lean down...and let his arms steal
around the slim body, then rest his head on the surprisingly well built shoulder, bury his nose in all
that sleek hair. He was so tired, drained, weary of the pain, the worry.

Stephen could not forgive himself for bringing his family here. His Guide, the mother of his children
had not suffered one day of fear or threat while they lived in Europe. But so soon after coming back
to America she was amongst the fallen. Gravely injured, fighting to come back. He loved her so
much. And it had been his choice to bring her here, to risk everything to return to his father's side.
Where, it turned out, neither he nor his father could protect her. Stephen was locked in his morose
thoughts; Oma took his arm and led him down the hall, his nearness in some small measure
fortifying. Abrys and Trent followed behind.

They entered the room together, exchanged greetings and waited until Christopher, who had also
recently arrived, finished serving tea before William invited Trent to disclose the information he had
gathered. Oma took the extra time to settle Stephen in, sitting next to him without objection from his
own Sentinels.

Trent remained standing and handed a small flash drive containing his written report to Christopher
before beginning his oral report at William's nod. He faced William as he began. He did not mince
words but came directly to the point.

"I was able to infiltrate a group of rebel Sentinels who see themselves as freedom fighters rather than
terrorists. A good number of the group members are disgruntled Vets, angry about losing the Guide
infant bonus and having to go back to school to qualify for an MD license if they want to continue to
practice. The rest of the membership is comprised of Sentinels who honestly believe that Guides are
being hoarded by the wealthy in order to control the rest of the populace. The men as a whole do not
believe that there is a Guide shortage. Anger over the hoarding alone was not enough to spur the
group into supporting the bombing. The final straw that tipped their support is even more bizarre.
They have latched onto the idea that Dr. Blair Sandburg is a Sentinel and being held against his will at the compound and that it is their obligation as Sentinels to free him. They believe that he will speak for them, uniting all of the Sentinels in the Cascade territory in a revolution against tyranny. They insist that in reality, if the powerful were not greedy there would be a Guide for every Sentinel.

"And a Chicken in every pot." Rafe muttered low under his breath. Unfortunately he could follow the logic the rebels professed and had brought them to the belief that Blair was a Sentinel. Blair understood Sentinels, sometimes better than Sentinels understood themselves. His writings had startled Rafe in the level of insight into the Sentinel mind. It was actually, easier to think he was a Sentinel rather than a Guide. It was almost scary that someone who hadn't lived as a Sentinel could be so insightful.

Jim gave a pretty loud growl, no one in the room could pretend not to hear it, moving closer to Blair and somehow managing to loom without getting out of his chair. "Mine." He muttered, Rafe kept his face straight, composed as Jim stole a reassuring sniff at Blair's neck. Any further stressor would have his fairly conservative and reserved Alpha licking at his Guide in public.

"Then this is my fault," Blair said, his distress evident in his voice, his hand stealing out to touch and reassure his possessive Sentinel, "for not coming forward and going public with my support for Guide reforms. I should have...." Before he could complete the thought he was interrupted.

"No, it is not!" Michael's voice reverberated in the room, a deep, deliberate tone. "These men are responsible for their choice of action. If they believed a Sentinel was being held against his will they should have come to The Protectorate and filed a complaint. It is our job to investigate such claims of injustice, when either a Sentinel or a Guide are involved."

"I agree," Trent said. "These Vets have their own agenda, they want to overturn the new Guide Laws by any means available to them. They do not draw the line at killing. Freeing Dr. Sandburg is just a smoke screen to stir up trouble and get other Sentinels on their side. Oh, I don't doubt some are truly concerned with a Sentinel being detained, and feel they are acting out of a noble cause, but the others, they are troublemakers. It is unrest, and conflict that they want to see and enjoy."

Blair however shook his head. "No, they wouldn't think to come to The Protectorate. They see you as one of the enemy. Guardians hardly think of themselves as Sentinels. There is no sense of brotherhood between the common Sentinel and a Guardian. You protect those who have Guides and the Guides themselves, keeping the common Sentinel Guide-less. You have thrown yourselves behind the New Laws. They would never feel they could trust you to support their best interest. Not even in a criminal matter. I can see how this train of thought grew. I should have said something to defuse it, to let them know who I was." There was a pause after he spoke, Rafe trying to physically comfort him. Trent and Abrys were looking at him, their faces somber. Abrys suppressed his desire to go to Blair and offer his own comfort. Jim, agitated by his Guide's distress, would not take the encroachment into his personal space without objection not even when the one offering comfort was a friend. Abrys looked down at his feet. And Oma was so far away, still seated next to Stephen who was clearly in some kind of funk.

"I do not believe your assessment is entirely correct," Michael said, in a firm but somewhat quieter voice. "As I recall it was a Vet that came to the Protectorate, with false accusations, in an attempt to take you and your children away from your bonded Sentinel. They have no compulsion against using the Protectorate, when ever possible, to serve their purpose. It is a tool to be manipulated and used to their advantage like any other. We must not lose sight of the fact these men are not lacking intelligence."
William cleared his throat, wishing to redirect the conversation and get back to business. "Do you know who is directly responsible for ordering the bombing? Were you able to discover that?"
William asked a moment later.

"Veterinarians Johnson, Welkin, and Cook," Trent said at once. "They were instrumental in talking the rank and file membership into the assault. I had the impression that until those three started driving things, the group was more of a bitch-fest/support group where they did a lot of complaining but no planning of any violence. I think that there is a small core of members who are behind the bombing, and would like to see more of the same. But the majority are followers who are desperate for answers and just don't know what to do. They need Guides. But they have no way of getting them."

"Sentinels have never been very good at calming themselves once stirred up. They want to act, to do. It is a part of the Sentinel nature." Blair said quietly. "This is all very predictable. I should have seen it. I think I would have if I hadn't been distracted. They can't function effectively as they are. They will follow anyone who promises them a Guide. That is their goal, and they will reach it however they must. We need to help them."

"How, beyond what we are already doing?" William asked. "The new laws will help, eventually, but it will take time. If there is anything else that can be done, I am open to reasonable suggestions."

Christopher spoke up. "We really are experiencing a historic shortage of Guides. Purely from a numbers standpoint...there is maybe one Guide for every two or three Sentinels. Maybe."

"A Guide cannot be forced into a bonding, not any more. There are many who would do without, even in the best of circumstances." Abrys pointed out. "That itself imposes its own limits. When I was home I began planning for the closure of the Brothels. It became very obvious that it is going to be a far larger problem in reality than it seemed on paper. Where can a Sentinel without his own Guide go for help? For bonding?" He shook his head. "We need a workable solution to that question, and the sooner the better."

"I agree." William said. "We need solutions. What we don't need is violence and fighting over the Guides that do exist. I will not repeal the laws; it is the repressive laws that led to this Guide shortage. Guides deserve the protection we offer so that they can thrive and flourish." His voice was firm, certain. There was a murmur of agreement from the others in the room.

Admiral Bellingham took out his cell phone, "I'll have Guardians take the three Vets into custody. That is a start. I will tell them to do it as quietly as possible but we will need to move quickly, I have no doubt they have further plans in the works. Especially since their last plan was so effective. I am sure it earned them plenty of clout with their more militant followers."

"What do you propose to do?" Jim asked William directly, pointedly, impatient with the roundabout discussion. "Why are we taking these men into custody? They are responsible for the death of Rulers, Heirs, Guardians and Guides. Surely you can't justify taking them into custody while we launch a raid on the remaining members of this group of cowards? They should be eliminated at once. That is the message we need to send."

Stephen spoke for the first time, seeming buoyed by his brother's words. "They need to die. We need to kill the bastards. I want them dead. Every one of them. They knew about what was going to be done. None of them tried to stop it, or to warn us so we would be prepared, so we could get the Guides to safety. Dahl is still in danger of miscarriage and Bella can not walk by herself. She..." He choked and Oma laid a hand on his arm, coming out of his chair to kneel at Stephen's side.

Abrys watched Oma's moves but didn't intervene. His skin was tight and his chest hurt. Stephen was
suffering the worst of all who were in the room. He wondered what he would do if it were Oma who had been so grievously hurt? Killed? He held back his moan of anguish, clamping his jaw shut.

Trent moved back and sat beside his mate, feeling Abrys pain wash off him in waves. Disregarding protocol, he put an arm around Abrys held him close. Gently he pulled Abrys’ head down to rest on his own shoulder. He didn't care who looked on, who approved or disapproved. His mate was hurting, there was only one thing to do. He hoped he would be asked to join the Sentinels that raided the group's meeting place, but he could tell that this was not the time to volunteer.

William lifted his good hand in a signal for his son to stop his tirade. "I understand you want vengeance," William said, measuring his words, "but taking vengeance will only lead to war. It is a conflict that can last for a very long time, and one that I want to avoid."

"All the more reason to fight this war and end it quickly, crush those responsible, remove their influence," Stephen said, his voice barely recognizable beneath the snarl. "Anything else will seem like weakness to our enemies. They must learn that we will not stand for terrorist activity. They have to pay, all of them. They need to die." He added the last with a hiss.

William was actually alarmed by the vehemence. Stephen had never been the son prone to violence. He had not wanted to be a fighter, a warrior. But now he had been driven to the edge. The ruler of Cascade exchanged a look with his Companion.

"Stephen..." William began. Only to be interrupted by his son's scream.

"I. Want. Them. Dead!" Stephen screamed, leaping to his feet, his claws flashed into evidence. "I will kill them!" His face was contorted, red, his body shook. Jim moved, gaining his feet and swinging Blair around, further from the threat, thrusting him into Rafe's waiting arms. Blair went, but not so far as out the door despite Rafe's urging. He did let the Companion settle him on the couch by the door, close to the exit. Jim planted himself firmly between the trembling, shouting man and his Guide.

Oma had been similarly whisked back and away from Stephen, lifted by Abrys as if he weighed less than a child. Now Michael stepped forward. He confronted Stephen, his rage. Caleb hung back his eyes huge, round.

"I know how you feel." Rathe said evenly, his voice a deep rumble. Stephen turned on him, hands lifting, shoving against the broad chest of the black uniform. He struck him again, harder. Michael grunted. It didn't really hurt, Stephen wasn't using his claws, but he felt it, the pure power of an anger so deep it was its own strength.

"You don't know! None of you do!" Stephen slammed a fist into Michael's body, the Guardian turning his body to absorb it not trying to fight back, wanting only to contain the fury to himself. Stephen needed to do this. The rage needed an outlet. He was the elder brother, this was his place, his family duty, and he was grateful to perform it. The much smaller blond man pummeled at the big one. One claw flashed and caught a button before Stephen sheathed it. The tiny disk flew, a shimmer of brass catching the light as it tumbled. Michael let the barrage go on, his arms open to his brother as the rest of the room's occupants watched, grim and vigilant.

Finally the wordless screaming stopped. Michael let his arms enfold Stephen's shaking shoulders as he cried. Cautiously Oma approached and Blair tried to struggle to his feet. Rafe put a stop to that. Abrys made an unhappy sound, Trent moved forward to cover Oma, intending to intercept him, stop him. Oma's look was telling and Trent froze in his tracks. Oma would not be stopped. He flowed right into the weeping Sentinel's arms interposing himself skillfully, not at all intimidated, or slowed, by Michael's bulk already occupying that space.
The room was quiet for several minutes as all the occupants watched the three men locked in an embrace.

Admiral Bellingham sighed. "You have expressed what we all feel but it is also true that many times it takes more strength to avoid a war than to wage one. I feel your anger, but on this matter the Guardians are in agreement with your father. The best way to preserve the progress we have made with the Guide reforms is to avoid war."

"Words easy to say," Jim said, managing to keep only a small fraction of the anger he felt out of his voice, "but difficult to see in practice. The sanctity of our home and word has been violated. We gave our word, father... your word as Ruler, and mine as your heir, that the Sentinels who came to these talks would be safe, their Guides protected from harm. These cowards invaded our compound, the symbol of Ellison rule. If we stand by and let this go unanswered, then this bombing will seem to have broken us." The growl was full of menace, more open emotion than William had seen from him since the bombing.

"They will not go unpunished," William said. "Each of the men responsible will face a Sentinel Tribunal, according to law. The Judges will be chosen by lottery from all territories that suffered a loss. The Tribunal will decide their fates, not those sitting in this room." He looked around, watched Stephen being lowered into a chair by his brother. William was drawn to the sight, but now was not the time to dwell on it, the pleasure it gave him to see his sons interacting. There was grim business at hand.

"Rulers and Heirs from other territories were killed in the bombing," Trent said. "For a father, mourning a son, three brought to justice may not be enough. If you are perceived as weak they will send covert forces into your territory, kill, and be gone before you find the bodies." He knew it to be true. He had done that kind of thing himself more than once. When Rulers let a crime slide, a crime that had touched his people. There was a possibility even now that his young Ruler, driven to temporary madness by the grief of losing a beloved father might order him to take revenge now. Especially if William seemed prepared to do so little.

Jim looked over at Trent who kept his eyes straight ahead, focused on William. The Captain knew what he spoke of. Jim had been sent into a weaker Ruler's territory to bring back a fugitive or right a wrong and he had no doubt that Trent had done the same in his career in the military. It wasn't openly spoken of, the illusion of respect for another Ruler's territory had to be maintained. But everyone knew, every military man, that secret raids happened. Hell, Jim was sure his father had gone on such raids before he had become Ruler.

"Trent has a point," Abrys said wording his response very carefully. "A Ruler's strength is often a perception, until he brings his strength to bear and in this case you do not want to wield your full force of power. You are walking a knife's edge, Ruler Ellison. The unfortunate truth of this world is that perception is often more important than fact. If your plan is to work, your actions must be perceived as coming from a strong, in control Ruler. Waver even a little, allow the smallest bit of doubt, and war will become unavoidable. Cascade could be covertly, or openly invaded. A coup could arise. It won't take much in this political climate."

"Well said, Ruler Llewellyn," the Admiral interjected as William rubbed the tips of his fingers across the damaged skin of his face. Abrys tried not to flinch. Bellingham went on. "Acting from strength is pivotal to William's plan. For that he needs his family and the Protectorate's support. We can not ask Sentinels to support the new laws when we, in power, throw away laws at will and allow emotions to rule us."

"We make the law," came Stephen's voice. "We are the law." He said no more, his jaw knotting to
hold in the vitriol. William was the Ruler, and his father. He knew how his son felt on this matter. Michael's hand came to rest on his shoulder. Although unused to the touch, Stephen was still grateful for the steadying support.

"Jim is a brother to me in every way but blood," Abrys spoke up. "I consider all the Ellisons my extended family, but even if that were not true, the Guide reforms must be protected and move forward. You have my trust and my backing, Ruler Ellison. As Ruler of the Llewellyn Territory, in peace or, if it comes to it, war; I'll stand by your decision here."

William nodded to him, acknowledging the declaration.

Stephen shook his head, but said no more, made no further protest. Oma tightened the grip he had on the Sentinel's hand. Stephen returned the pressure. They wouldn't listen to him, that much was clear. William had already made his decision to go soft on the murderers in hopes of avoiding a war. Stephen didn't, couldn't, support that. He had spoken against it, not eloquently, he couldn't in his state of tortured rage, but no one was in doubt as to his feelings on the matter. He was all for peace over war. But only after the sons of bitches who had injured Bella, endangered Dahl's pregnancy, and killed others in his very home were brought to a bloody, final justice. He lifted his head, met Jim's gaze, and knew his brother felt the same. But they kept silent. What more could be said?

"I plan on calling a news conference," William announced. "I'll explain my actions and tell our people that this atrocity has not broken us. Both old and new laws will be upheld. Admiral Bellingham will state that we have no Sentinels or harem of Guides being held against their will at the compound. He will invite any Admiral from any territory to come and see for himself that the rumor of Sentinel Sandburg was made up by selfish vengeful men wishing to overthrow the Guide reforms." William turned to his sons. "Can you see what I am trying to do? I want peace for my children and grandchildren. Your children. Will you stand beside me, Jim, Stephen... Will you show that this tragedy has only made the Ellison's resolve stronger?"

Jim reached over and laid his hand on Blair's round belly. He could feel the babies kicking. His babies, his heirs. He felt that he was at a crossroad in his life. He could take the road less traveled by Sentinels, the road to peace, or he could take the road to war. He could see clearly that both had their own pot holes to avoid and hills to climb. He made his decision; he put aside his need for revenge and looked over at his father. "For the sake of my children," he said quietly, "I choose peace. But I think you are wrong. They will not agree to peace so easily."

"For the sake of my children," Stephen's soft but reluctant voice echoed Jim's reply, "I'll stand by your side." He turned his head, not meeting his father's eyes. A sense of betrayal was growing in his chest. Pain. His father, who should have understood, did not.

"Blair," Oma said, "Will you speak out? It is time for your voice to be heard. There is much pain in this world. It is true you are not responsible for the actions of others, but you are Shaman; your voice can heal the rift in so many Sentinel's hearts. Help Ruler Ellison in his quest, speak out for peace, look into your own heart, I believe you will see the time has come."

Blair licked his lips and put his hand on top of Jim's. "Oma is right," he said, to his frowning Sentinel. "I should speak. It might help. Sentinels look to Dr. Sandburg for guidance. If my coming forward will help to avoid a war, then I'll do it. I want my children to grow up in a world they can be proud of, with parents that they can respect. I'll go public, William, just tell me what you need me to do."
Dr. Miller looked around her, her gaze lingering on the tense faces. There were many, all of whom she knew to one degree or another, all of whom she cared about. Some she had known for nearly twenty years, others were newer acquaintances. Each one brave to be here.

These people she valued and considered friends, some would say co-conspirators, definitely men and women who shared her beliefs, all of whom had taken chances just to meet discreetly in small groups usually, going out of their way not to draw attention, their one unified goal: to work for a brighter future. They were taking another great risk today, one solely based on their trust of one person... Doctor Blair Sandburg. If it went wrong none of them would end the day free.

She had been startled to receive a call from Blair, responding cautiously at first. Taking into consideration the trauma of their final encounter she had thought that remaining at a distance was the wisest course of action for both. She'd vanished from his life not because she wanted to, but because it was the expedient thing to do for both their safety. However much she'd wanted to help Blair, going up against an outraged and wronged Alpha Sentinel was beyond her capabilities. She had really thought for a moment that the Cascade heir, James Ellison, might attack her.

Since intentionally absenting herself from Blair's life, she had felt guilt and concern over what had happened to him. There was no way for her to truly know he was safe and being treated well. Rumors she heard had him pregnant still, and ready to deliver soon. With careful questioning, when he called, she had learned it to be true.

Once the preliminaries were out of the way they began to talk about the real reason Blair called. And Dr. Miller found herself very interested in what he had to say.

Less than a year ago she'd come within a razor's edge of a prison sentence. But now was a different time and she had listened to Blair lay out his proposal. Listened and found herself afraid to believe at first. Then a fierce joy swept through her. It was happening. In her lifetime she was going to see it happen. In less than a single day she was going to be a witness to the changing of history.

Hearing his voice when he'd called had lifted a shadow, a burden she'd only been partly aware of carrying. Priding herself on being cognizant of how the world affected her, and how she affected her small corner of it, she had worried more than she had known. Having the knowledge Blair was well, about to deliver in fact, and hearing about the children she had helped deliver and conspired to bond with the man who was to act as their father brought genuine tears to her eyes.

She'd had to clear her throat more than once in order to speak.

There had been time for only one face to face meeting with Blair and his new friend and fellow Guide Oma, who was endlessly fascinating to the doctor, and the underground leaders. They wished they had more time to talk, one on one with Blair and the long dark haired man; but postponing the gathering would increase the potential for violence and continued retribution for the ills perceived by the misled Sentinels. Emotions ran too high on all sides.

Blair had presented the facts and his plan without embellishment or trying to sell it. He let the membership of the meeting decide on whether they would support his plan or not.

Based on the single conversation with Ellison's Guide more than one thousand people were putting their faith and their lives in his hands. It could go very well, or...very badly. By tomorrow evening it would be done and they would know.
Today in Cascade there was going to be a revolution. A new order that Dr. Miller had worked toward for a long time. She never expected to have the opportunity to take part in such a public effort. It seemed for so long that only future generations would have the chance she was being denied. One thousand two hundred sixty five people were going to take an incredible chance simply because one man asked them to.

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It was time.

Blair rose to his feet slowly, standing with his legs planted wide, searching for and finding his center of gravity after an unsteady few moments. Jim offered a hand of support, his face less than happy. Blair sighed and took the hand. His grip focused Jim's attention on himself, rather than the surroundings. They shared a long look. Blair lifted his free hand and touched Jim's face, just the tips of his fingers making contact.

It was a testimonial to their growing closeness that the physical reserve that Jim preferred in public didn't succeed in making the taller man pull away. In fact he leaned into the touch, bring his body closer to Blair.

Blair, the Shaman of Cascade, let himself rest against his Sentinel for an indulgent moment. Jim's strength was always a revelation. Blair relied on it, cherished it. Today, although he needed his sentinel's touch, he couldn't let it continue for too long. There were things he had to do, had to say. Reluctantly he straightened, and prepared to go to the front of the stage.

He was hidden from the audience view behind the larger bodies standing in front of him, each bent on protecting him, tall Sentinels and even larger Guardians, all hovering anxiously, unable to rein in their unease at Blair being put in such a vulnerable, exposed position, in front of a potentially hostile crowd. Blair was picking up their anxiety; he drew in a long slow breath, and another, looking for and finding calm in the midst of all the chaotic inaction. The precursor to the event. He drew in a final deep breath and squared his shoulders.

It was definitely time.

His robes were long and sweeping, a deep, forest green that picked up the coppery lights in his hair and made his eyes glow an even darker, deeper blue, paling his skin until he looked nearly translucent despite its natural olive cast.

The veil he'd chosen to wear to the venue was light, not quite filmy, but certainly no obstacle to a competent Sentinel's vision. Yet, he was going to try an even bolder step. He was going to unveil himself in front of thousands of Sentinels.

Once he never would have thought twice about showing his face, but it had been a while since he'd felt like that, a lifetime packed into a few short years, during that eventful time his new culture had been drummed into him. Veiling now was second nature except in the privacy of the Ellison enclave.

With help he carefully moved toward the front of the stage, closer to the audience where he could hear the impatient mutterings of the crowd. Jim had a grip on Blair's right elbow, bracing him, as he helped him to step forward, through the ranks of Guardians. The cramping pains had become more frequent, and still he kept them to himself. There was only this meeting to get through, then he would tell them and lay down. He was looking forward to that. Experiencing the pain of labor, not so much, but he wanted badly for it all to be over so he could rest and relax. Being here, now, was not on his list of things he wanted to do. Still, it was crucial.
Rafe had hold of his other arm, his face grim and anything but pleased.

Jim's blue eyes were dangerous, no way did he want Blair facing down the unpredictable, possibly angry crowd. Out among them were those who had bombed his home, killed his friends and colleagues, he wanted Blair gone from this place, out of the reach of terrorists and traitors.

Sentinels didn't fight against their rulers. The men who won their territories and held them. The Ruler was lord. You might speak out against laws or such, you could demand change, but you did not seek to destroy the Ruler. It went against being the protector, the loyal soldier who sacrificed to keep the homeland, the territory safe.

Jim stood straight, tall and frowning making no effort to hide his contempt for those who had been party to the outrage should they have the balls to look into his face and see. He was ready to pick up his Guide and carry him out of harm's way at the first sign of trouble, wanting only an excuse, of any kind, to end this. He would rather kill every man in this room than have his Guide harmed.

Somewhere safe, that is where Jim wanted Blair. That meant not here. Shifting his grip, he put an arm around Blair's waist, moving in closer, giving in to the Sentinel's instinct to stake his claim in the face of so many other men who wanted what he had. To make it clear that Blair was possessed, that he was protected, and that there would be consequences to any trespasser who sought to stray.

Then Oma spoke, his hand gentle as it came to rest on Jim's tense shoulder, stopping the forward momentum. He met Rafe's gaze and nodded back at the chairs the three had just vacated. "Sit Sentinels, this is the business of Guides. I will go with him." His voice was firm, kind but unflinching, as unmovable as the mountains around Cascade. "I can feel the fury that has you. They will feel it, too." He inclined his head towards the crowd that Jim couldn't care less about.

Blair felt the tension in the hands that held him, aware that the idea of letting Blair go to face the gathering alone created a spiraling anxiety in his two Sentinels.

"I'll be alright." He murmured to them, offering a smile. Their protectiveness warmed him, and he'd gotten used to the possessiveness. It was simply 'Sentinel'. They could not be otherwise. They loved and cared for him. He believed it absolutely. He would get through this, and then they'd go home together.

Almost helplessly, knowing it was what Blair wanted of him at that moment, Jim reluctantly let go of his arm, as if he had no choice but to do so. He was not happy about it, his face showed it, Blair felt that reluctance all the way to his bones, and Blair knew that only a short while ago Jim would have refused permission. If he'd even bothered to listen! But Jim had grown, changed.

Blair knew as soon as Oma said the soft, implacable words that they were true. To go to the front of the stage, to the podium, with a Sentinel or two glowering at his side, showing teeth and claws in the stress of the moment would solve nothing. Those gathered would believe he was coerced, forced to give the speech he gave. If they believed he was Dr. Sandburg at all.

No. Blair had to go without a Sentinel holding him, with only Oma supporting him, and face them all.

Rafe was even more reluctant to leave Blair's side than Jim. Oma intruded a hip to make room between Rafe and Blair, easing him away. Blair lifted Rafe's hand, kissed it as the Companion moved away.

Down in the audience a scuffle, not the first, had broken out as the impatient men jockeyed with each other for position. Tension was running high, and building. Delay would only make it worse. Blair
Blair nodded in the direction of the podium that waited.

"Let's get up there." Blair said, gritting his teeth and started on his way with Oma at his side.

Blair was nearing the front of the stage, the podium, which had been augmented with a small step stool so he could be seen over the top. He eyed it dubiously. In his current condition there was no way he was going to be able to climb up on that without risking a serious fall. Oma seemed to understand, moving closer ready to help.

"There." Blair indicated the open space next to the podium. "Get me over there, so I can hold on to the edge. Then bring me the microphone." There was no better solution.

The flanking row of Guardians parted as he neared, making way for him, then sitting in unison so as not to take the focus from the much smaller Guide that they towered over.

Michael Rathe offered the two Guides a reassuring look as they took their places. He was seated within a few steps of both, ready to defend either at a moment's notice. He heard rumbles of distress and dissatisfaction from behind him, and the same sounds from the audience below. Jim and Rafe making sounds of protest, they did not like being so far away from him, he was too close to the discontented Sentinels who waited for something, anything to happen.

Blair could sense their quivering unease. He knew without looking that neither Jim nor Rafe had taken their seat, that they prowled back and forth behind him at the back of the stage. And they wouldn't sit, wouldn't be willing to trust he would be safe. Not here. Not with Blair out of reach. He sighed. He only hoped they would not interfere before he was done. He almost managed a smile thinking of Jim bounding forward to drag him like some cave woman by his long hair back to his lair where he could crouch over him and.... Blair did smile. The picture in his mind had broken the bubble of tension.

This day was not going to go as his Sentinels planned. Not if the dreams he'd been having were true. Oma, the only one who he had shared the vivid visions he'd experienced with, believed them to be real, the Shaman's gift, he'd called it. But Blair wasn't so sure.

It was going to take a lot to get them all through the next hours without bloodshed. He prayed he was up to it. Then he would tackle the complicated and confusing premonitions of the future he'd been having. He'd find a way to sit down and tell Jim and Rafe what he'd seen. Tell them what they did not want to hear.

Oma got him over to the podium by slow increments, and Blair gripped the edge to steady himself.

The twinges in his back and abdomen were stronger now, but he had said nothing. He knew he was nearing delivery, his children were very ready to be born if not today then tomorrow at the latest he thought. And he was anticipating it being over and done, to being able to touch and coo to his new children, to introduce them to their fathers and to see just how Jim and Rafe reacted. If only he could get through the speech without his water breaking.

He had to do this, the unpleasant before the pleasant, he told himself as a slightly stronger cramp hit him. By force of will he stood upright and unmoving. Oma pressed the microphone into his hand, came and took his other arm, and helped him balance his weight, their bodies very close together, Oma's mostly red robes as strongly colored as Blair's own.

Blair took a breath, hearing a rushing sound, loud but not sharp, like a wind stirring through a thousand trees at an instant. It was, he realized, the entire assemblage of Sentinels before him drawing in a simultaneous breath as he lifted his head.
Blair pulled his veil free, his hair tumbling around his shoulders and down his back and over one shoulder, he had made no effort to restrain it, he wanted them to see him as he was. He was not above using their desire for him to influence them. He shone as he stood there, in the halo of the dimmed lights focused on the stage.

His gaze swept the large crowd.

There were so many Sentinels here in the vast room, he could feel their emotion, their disquiet, their frustration and the fear resonating through them. It was like a low angry buzz in the air, charging it like electricity. It was also an ache within him, an itch under his skin, their pain. He felt it all, felt it growing.

Fear, oh yes there was plenty of that, and not all of it came from his audience. If he told the truth, he'd admit to himself, to any who asked, that he didn't want to be here any more than Jim or Rafe wanted him here. He ~was~ afraid, too. But. There was no choice, no other way to get it done. These were Sentinels, the very beings his soul cried out to. Evolution made him their perfect mate, their helpmate, their...everything. How could he refuse to do this if it would help any one of them?

So. Here he was. No sense in putting it off any longer. He cleared his throat, and was amazed at how every head snapped up, each set of eyes fixing on him as if he'd screamed at the top of his lungs.

He glanced at the microphone in his hand, then looked over at the mass of people gathered below the stage, and smiled a little to himself. This was a gathering of Sentinels. He didn't need a microphone for them to hear what he said, he dropped it to the decking of the stage without even turning it on. Hell, they probably could hear his heart beating like crazy.

Blair raised his free hand, his face bare to thousands of greedy, hungry eyes, his gaze sweeping the crowd. They watched him, waited. A slow, sweet feeling began to grow in him.

These were Sentinels. He was, in this moment, the only Guide they had. He smiled lifted his hand higher, held it out towards all of them, burning with the want to touch them all, to heal them, their pain, their need. He knew it was impossible, no one could do so much, but he wanted to. How he wanted.

"I am Doctor Blair Sandburg," He began, his voice soft, beautiful, filled with his desire to touch each one, acknowledge his recognition of what they were. "And I am a Guide." There was no room for doubt in his tone. His voice carried out over their heads, to the very back of the gathering room. The sound of their exhales in unison was like a gale of whispers through bone dry leaves. A tension took root, grew as they returned his stare.

He waited just long enough, waited as the charged expectation grew, then at the perfect moment he raised his voice again. "I am a Guide. I have always been a Guide. Before I was found out, dragged away and imprisoned I was also a professor at Rainier University. I was studying the love of my life. I was studying Sentinels. I was studying each and every one of you." He paused again his large blue eyes roaming the captivated crowd. "I was at the time what has been called a Wild Guide. Not raised or bred in the House system. I was...am...a Sentinel Specialist."

"What I wasn't and am not, is a Guide Specialist." His smile was ironic. They watched him, caught up that quickly in his words and voice. None of the Sentinels noticed the activity along the balconies at the sides and back of the vast auditorium as people quietly, soundlessly moved into position. Perhaps a few of the most sensitive noses twitched. But most, un-bonded, had little fine control over their senses. And no one had the will to look away from the alluring Guide speaking on the stage who demanded their attention. Blair smiled again.
"I am a Guide." He told them, willing them to know it was true. He saw heads nodding as he repeated it this time. "It wasn't until I met my Sentinel that I realized how true that statement is. Most of you know my Sentinel. The Heir to Cascade, James Joseph Ellison." A murmur went through the crowd. Blair waited. Then... "I know Sentinels need Guides. Everyone talks about that. And now I know how much Guides need Sentinels. Before I met him, I did not know. No one really spends much time talking about ~that~. I thought I understood but I did not. I believed I could do without, go without for the rest of my life. I did not ~know~."

The pause was just long enough to have them leaning forward eager for his next words. He lowered his voice just a fraction, weaving pictures, sensation with his words to them.

"Senses. There are too many ways to describe touch, too many ways to experience the definitions of scent, a thousand subtleties of sight, a thousand octaves of sound as I hear it now that I am with my Sentinels, and yet, a Sentinel's experience of senses is more than mine ever was. I know this because they share them with me. When I am with one of them, when our minds are one, my body one with his...I experience his world as he sees it. I finally understand." Blair straightened where he stood, eased his back with a hidden shifting of his feet. "It is a gift my Sentinels have given me."

"I thought I could go through life without a Sentinel, that the cost of having one was too great to bear. I had no way of knowing. There was a cost, and it was great, I do not dispute that, but to have a Sentinel..." The smile on Blair's face was transcendent. "To have a Sentinel is worth every sacrifice. I know in the future it will only be better. I know this, and I tell this to you." He had them, they were rapt, wound in the spell of his words, his voice, its tone. The voice he'd learned with his own Sentinels. Guide voice.

"No Guide should have to live without a Sentinel. No Sentinel without a Guide." A simple statement, irrefutably true. No one disagreed.

Now came the harder part, the dry facts of science.

"Guides. Their numbers have been dropping. They can not be at the side of every Sentinel, there are not enough of us. Why are there so few? It makes no sense. Guides evolved to give birth to multiple infants at a time. Guides were fertile. There were many. And then...they weren't. The question must be asked...." Before he could say it several voices in the crowd were raised.

"Why?" The voices shouted. More chimed in. "Why?"

Blair actually grinned. "Yes." He confirmed. "Why, indeed are we so few?" His back twinged and he gripped the podium edge tighter, knuckles going white until the spasm passed. It was hard to stand this long so near his due date, and his back was letting him know he was going to pay for it. But he had to pass on the news, they deserved to know. The fighting, killing, it all had to end. There was no reason for it. As a Guide, a shaman, he could not let it continue. He would not permit it.

Oma moved in even closer offering his wordless support, his hand going to Blair's lower back, pressing firmly. Blair felt an easing of the discomfort. He drew in a deep breath.

"Science is to blame." He said. "For our pain, our desolation has it roots in what science has tried to do to Guides."

There was a sound, a rumble of confusion. Blair looked around, meeting many eyes, holding their gazes for a fraction before moving on to the next pair. Gradually the restlessness disappeared. And the silence the replaced it was...calm. They looked to him. They trusted him, that he would tell them. Explain it all. He nodded.
"We are not lab rats. We are Guides. We are your other half. But what Nature perfected, science meddled in. And," He swept his arm out, "Here we are. It is our own fault. We did this to each other, you and I and every ancestor we have. It is up to us not to let it happen to our children. I want my children to know what it is to lay with their match, to know what it is to have the chance to touch, be touched, to hold, be held, to taste...." Silence.

Blair had known this would be the hard part. He licked his lips, was aware of a new tension, a sexual one. Not exactly where he wanted to go. He regrouped, time to go away from the senses/sensations that drove Sentinel life. He forced himself to stand taller, to make his gestures less....alluring. This was serious, they had to listen to it. To accept.

"Nature provided for tens of thousands of years. There was no shortage of Guides. When Sentinels needed a Guide, a Guide was found. No Sentinel suffered without his need being met. It was the way it was. The Way of the Guides." He lifted a hand, drew it through the air encompassing the entire audience, ticking off his points. "Light. Air. Water. Food. Shelter. Territory. Family. A Guide. These are the basic needs of a Sentinel. No Sentinel can flourish without them."

There was a wave of louder agreement.

"No Sentinel can truly ~live~ without them."

Again the agreement from the crowd.

"I don't have a Guide," an Asian man shouted louder than the rest, his face twisted and red with frustration and confusion. "I saved every dime I could. For years I've saved. I was patient. I've got the money... but now I can't buy a Guide. It is against the law for me to buy what I need, and no one is offering it to me for free either. I should have a Guide! I need...." His words choked off as if he was fighting to control his emotions. And while no one in the crowd would meet the speaker's eyes, Blair knew the man was speaking for them all. That his emotion resonated through every man out there.

Blair found him in the crowd. Their eyes locked, Blair almost gasped as his vision blurred changed, became..... He saw it again...a small naked child, a Guide, with dark curls running across a lawn laughing. He saw flowers and trees, and an older version of the almond-eyed man he was looking at watching the child playing, a look of deep love on his face, transforming it from merely average-plain to...beautiful. He saw the man holding another's hand. This was the man he had seen, told Oma about. The man in the vision. The child in the vision was yet unborn, but this man would be his father.

"You will have a Guide. You will have a child." Blair said, the certainty in his tone stopping all noise. His statement left no room for doubt. "What is your name, Sentinel?" Blair asked, fighting to keep his tone under control, calm. Wanting to explain it all, everything to everyone, here and now. It would sound like ravings of a madman if he did. He bit his tongue, stopped the words cold. Instead he listened for the name of the man whose only child would one day be a Shaman.

"Cho. Danny Cho." The man said, not needing to raise his voice to be heard. Everyone was listening to the exchange, there was no competing sound in the great room.

"Danny Cho." Blair said, putting a name to the face he'd seen in the vision. "Come here." He had also seen the other person who stood next to Cho and watched the child playing, he knew who it was, the Guide. He had seen the face of the Shaman-child's mother. Uncertainly the man started forward, then when he wasn't impeded, when the throng parted for him, he hurried, until he was almost running. He stopped at the edge of the stage platform. Blair beckoned him forward.

Cho still looked unsure, but he bounded up onto the stage, keeping a wary eye on the huge Guardians who were keeping a close, very interested eye on him as he did. Jim, stood up from the chair he'd finally taken. His chest was tight, his fists clenched. There was a Sentinel next to his Guide. Rafe stood with him, hearing the sub-vocal growl of his Alpha as he watched the scene playing out. There was something not right. Jim took a step forward, stopped. Growled, nearly silently. Rafe touched his shoulder, claws pricking.

Cho sidled closer as Blair held out his hand. "Stand here with me." Blair said and took the young Sentinel's hand. An in drawn breath raced through the crowd. Blair forced his gaze out, away from the man at his side.

"Sentinels," he called out, "look above you, look behind you." Lights flicked on illuminating the balconies. "Here are your Guides. If you will look beyond the farms and breeding Houses, there are Guides who will have you. Guides who want you. Wild Guides. Guides who need Sentinels every bit as much as you need them. Guides who will chose you. If you will accept that they are your partners, not your property. Then there are Guides all around you." There was a stunned moment of absolute quiet, then a surge towards the stairs leading up, until Blair stopped them in their tracks.

"No, Sentinels, you do not need to pursue them, they will come to you. They will find you." The expressions of disbelief, of hope grew, until they outnumbered the ones of doubt and distrust.

Slowly the first of the wild Guides arrived at the downstairs doors. A little hesitant, but gradually they moved into the crowd of Sentinels. First one stopped at a Sentinel's side. Then another. And another.

And....Blair knew he didn't need to say anything more. Not yet, not today. In the future there would be so much more, arguments, disagreements, even bloodshed. But not today. He had done what he came for. It was time to go home. He sighed and leaned towards the strong Sentinel whose hand he still grasped letting himself rest on that unknown strength for only an instant.

Blair turned away, a smile on his face until it was replaced by a frown and a grimace. He squeezed the hand he was holding very hard as his contraction peaked, and Danny yelped, but reached out and held Blair on his feet as the Guide sagged. Oma struggled to take what he could of Blair's weight, as Blair panted to regain control.

It was going far better than Blair had expected. And now it was time to go. Before he gave birth on this stage in front of five thousand interested witnesses. He turned, shuffling a little, then gasped and froze as another strong contraction hit. He was closer to giving birth than he'd thought.

Focused on the pain he dimly heard a yell. Someone shouting his name. He turned his head back to the crowd, wondering who it was, the voice was so familiar in a way. He looked right into the barrel of a gun.

Everything slowed down; Blair's perception pinpointed on the Sentinel and the gun. He didn't really see the face beyond it, only picking up on the grimace of rage, of eyes blazing with hate and a fierce triumph, he actually saw the bullet explode from the black hole of the barrel. From the corner of his eye he saw motion, Michael leaping. Blair knew he wasn't in time.

The blow hit him, it felt like nothing more that being punched. He was slammed back, down, meeting the floor hard. There was no pain, just shock. And then there was... pain. His belly protested, his hips, his back, his womb twisting tight, beyond bearing.
Then everything was gone.

Danny Cho heard the enraged voice shouting out Blair's name and saw the man standing in a firing stance, arms lifted, feet planted, eyes fixed unerringly on his target, the gun pointed directly at Blair, right at the center of his body where a hit would kill the Guide and likely his children as well.

Officer Cho didn't need time to consider his own safety, he reacted faster than thought. Cho's arms went around Blair, taking him down at the same moment he put himself between the bullet and the Guide. The bullet struck. They went down; hit hard, Blair's pained cry tearing at every Sentinel ear in the vast room. Danny grunted, then lay still. Blair was limp, boneless underneath him.

Cho rolled off, the movement awakening a searing pain in his neck, he gasped, going to his hands and knees, then in slow motion, he toppled to one side, even now putting himself between the Guide and danger.

It took less than a millisecond for Rathe to redirect his charge as he saw Blair and the Sentinel go down. His priority now that Blair was out of the direct line of fire was to contain the threat, eliminate it. His massive thighs gathered under him and he sprang out into the audience, a flying battering ram, aimed right at the man with the gun. The look on the familiar face was diabolical, twisted with spite, madness limned the eyes. The man saw him coming, saw that he couldn't avoid the charge, and threw his arm up as if to ward off the human missile with so fragile a block.

His snarled, "No!" was barely recognizable as speech, so garbled with fury. Michael hit him like a ton of bricks, hearing the bones snap, ribs giving way under his boots as he struck. He landed on top of the man, in a crouch, the gun skittering across the floor. Disarmed, stunned, and fairly seriously hurt the madman still clawed at Rathe's face, his arms. "I won't let you stop us! We are going to kill him!" Spittle, flecked with pink and red foamed on the man's lips.

"You will hurt no one ever again." Rathe rumbled at him, his teeth bared, his face truly frightening, all of his bloodthirsty intent exposed on his normally impassive face. His huge hands grasped the man's head, and with a flick, there was a satisfying snap of bone. Rathe allowed himself a grimace of pure triumph as he crouched atop the corpse of the Vet.

Then he felt them, the bodies around him, closing in. He looked up, stood, towering, surrounded by hundreds of Sentinels, mostly Alphas who were moving in, their eyes blazing, feral and intent. He backed away, towards the stage, raising his hands. He realized he was not the prey they sought. The man he'd killed was. "He is yours," Michael Rathe said, at this moment he cared nothing for evidence or decorum, or law. He only cared that the person responsible for trying to kill a Guide was down and out. If the Sentinels wanted to tear the body apart, let them.

Jim reached Blair, Rafe less than a step behind him. He fell to his knees, skidding to a stop beside the unmov ing form. He looked up, stood, towering, surrounded by hundreds of Sentinels, mostly Alphas who were moving in, their eyes blazing, feral and intent. He backed away, towards the stage, raising his hands. He realized he was not the prey they sought. The man he'd killed was. "He is yours," Michael Rathe said, at this moment he cared nothing for evidence or decorum, or law. He only cared that the person responsible for trying to kill a Guide was down and out. If the Sentinels wanted to tear the body apart, let them.

Rafe collapsed, mewling his pain. Weeping, on his hands and knees, the horror growing so huge in him he shook like a leaf, shoving the bloodied body of Danny Cho away from his Guide. He cried out, tearing at Blair's robes to find the injury, to try to stop the bleeding, to try to bring his Guide black to him. Rafe begged the gods for a miracle.
It was screaming that woke him as he was jostled from side to side. Loud and horrible, as the screams of men were, so unexpected. His face was wet, sticky, a metallic taste on his tongue commanded all his attention, it grew only worse, stronger when he licked his lips. He knew that flavor. It was blood. All over him, his robe was wet with it, his face dripping. There was a pressure, a heaviness on his chest and his belly. There were hands on him, lots of hands, and he was laying on the floor.

Flash. He remembered the gun. Flash. The barrel, a black hole, threatening oblivion, loss of everything, all he loved. He moaned, a deep sound of terror.

The weight was gone from him, he could move, and he rolled up on his hands an knees, hands continued running over him, his robes torn, hanging in tatters, in the process of being ripped more as two sentinels tried to find any injuries. He was dazed, shaking so badly he was sure he would fall if he tried to move. Then he saw the body, legs twisted oddly, the white shirt soaked with red from a wound that was still pumping blood from a small wound on the throat.

Blair lunged forward. His hand slapping down on the wound, fingers searching until he found the pulse and clamping down hard. "Get help!" He wheezed. "A doctor! An ambulance. Please!" He shook his head as other hands found him again, kept touching him.

He knew it was Jim, and Rafe who touched him, he felt the enormity of their fear for him, but right now he had only seconds to save the life of the man who had saved his. His life, and the lives of the children he carried. There could be no greater sacrifice, he could not feel more gratitude for the selfless act. He couldn't let the man die. He couldn't let the Child never be born. He could rant and weep and cry, think of himself later, when he knew Danny Cho wasn't going to die.

"Hurry! This isn't what I saw!" He whispered the last when Oma materialized at his side a wad of cloth in his hand that he added to the pressure of Blair's hand over the artery. The body wiggled bonelessly.

Blair sobbed. "It isn't what I saw!" He told Oma as the tears flowed down his face.

He looked up and into Jim's eyes, eyes like twin lasers, eyes that showed the ghost of a man who had looked into the pit of hell. Jim, who was trying to recover, to understand that Blair, his life, Jim's own life, wasn't over. All he wanted was to take Blair into his arms and hold him. Blair's second cry got through.

"Help him, please!"

Jim's focus snapped past the white-faced Blair, beyond the fear that the blood that covered his Guide hid some fatal wound. It wasn't until Blair begged him to help that he even saw who the bleeding man was. Danny Cho, a rookie police officer at his own station. Who had stepped between Blair and a bullet. Intentionally or not. He had saved Jim's Guide's life and the lives of Jim's children. The bullet had torn through his neck, Jim smelled the fresh iron of hot blood, it had hit an artery.

Jim shouldered his way between Blair and Oma. He'd seen these kinds of wounds on the battlefield, he knew that there was little chance the man would survive. But if anything on this earth could save him, Jim would see it done. His larger, more skilled hand slapped down on the bleeder, knowing, feeling just how much pressure he needed to stop the flow. He snapped out orders.

"Get his feet up." A man was there, lifted them into the air, redirecting what blood remained in the body to save the brain and heart. "I need an ambulance. Cover him up, keep him warm. Check him
over, make sure there is no other injury. He can't afford to lose any more blood." He rapped out instructions.

"An ambulance is already on its way," a Guardian told him. Then Michael Rathe, his brother, was there kneeling by his side.

"Blair and Rafe are on their way to the Compound. I sent a dozen Guardians with them. They will get him there safely." There was a pause. "He is in labor. Dr. Miller is with him until Dr Ashley can get him into the birthing suite."

Jim looked up fast, shocked, then an expression of utter joy suffused his face. Blair was alive. Their children were about to be born. Now all he had to do was figure out a way to save this man who had made that possible.

There was a snarling brawl going on in the crowd, the sound of ripping cloth and tearing flesh. Jim's satisfaction was vast. The man who had shot at Blair was being torn limb from limb, there would be nothing left of him, nothing that was recognizable, nothing to bury, nothing to honor or mourn. Sentinel Justice.

Jim had never been more pleased.
Bought Epilogue

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

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One day after the shooting

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Jim woke up rested and happy. Blair lay next to him, his soft, auburn curls spread across Jim’s chest. Blair’s hair was usually lovingly brushed and braided by Rafe every evening, but Blair was exhausted after giving birth so he was sponged off with warm water and put to bed with Rafe snuggly spooned in behind him.

The two newborns, both Guides, slept quietly in a bassinet by the bed. Jim was glad they were both Guides. It would give his father the proof he would need to have Guides declared human and not merely sentient. There were many Sentinels that still did not believe a Sentinel could father children with a Guide. Now that the Ruler had the proof with his own flesh and blood family no one would dare contest the declaration. Jim sighed in contentment, the scent of Blair and the babies, the sound of their heartbeats, and the look of Blair sleeping with his head neatly tucked under Rafe’s chin, even the slight tickle of Blair’s curls on his chest, all contributed to his beautiful moment of peace.

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Yesterday had not been, in any way, peaceful. The morning held anxiety about Blair’s speech. Anxiety that turned out to be well founded. An enraged Vet tried to shoot Blair, but Danny Cho, a Sentinel police officer Blair had called up on stage took the bullet. He saved Blair’s and the babies’ lives. Blair was in labor, but his concern for the fallen Sentinel stayed with him. He cried out over and over, “That’s not what I saw.”

Jim gave orders; everything that could be done should be done, Spare no cost. He sent two Guardians to the hospital with Cho, one with his large hand clamped over the neck wound the other keeping Cho’s legs raised. It was for naught. The bullet had shredded the carotid artery and slammed through the C4 vertebrae. Sentinel Danny Cho stopped breathing. The EMT’s gave him CPR all the way to the hospital. Emergency room doctors called for a ventilator and gave him much needed blood.

Officer Cho’s Captain rushed to the hospital when he heard about the shooting. He waited with Cho’s parents, a Sentinel father and a mundane mother, for the doctor to give them a report of Danny’s condition.

The doctor came to the waiting room and looked down at the floor, he took a deep breath and look up into Sentinel and Mrs. Cho’s eye’s. “I’m Dr. Boyd, your son’s neurologist. For the moment Sentinel Cho is stable. Unfortunately the bullet did irreparable damage. It shattered the C4 vertebrae and fragments passed up into his brain stem. He will be a quadriplegic and require a ventilator to breathe. I was told that his legs were kept elevated, that was a big factor in saving his life. I’ve done a neurological scan and it shows that his blood loss has impacted his brain activity and the fragments made it worse, but we can’t be sure how much cognitive function will remain until he wakes up.”

“Is there any hope that he will recover?” Danny’s father asked.
“I’m sorry,” Dr. Boyd said, “The injuries are permanent. Sentinel Cho is a quadriplegic. There’s no way to repair the spinal cord injury. There also appears to be some brain damage due to blood loss.”

Mrs. Cho began to cry. “He wouldn’t want to live like that.”

The Captain produced a copy of Danny’s signed DNR. “Sentinel Cho has a signed order of Do Not Resuscitate, in the case of catastrophic injury. It was filed with the police department when he joined the force.”

“Sentinel Cho is on a respirator,” Dr Boyd said to the Cho’s parents. “I’ll need a signed order from you to remove your son from it.”

“Where do I sign?” Danny Cho’s father asked. “His mother is right. My son would not want to live like that.”

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All efforts to save Sentinel Danny Cho’s life stopped. The Cho’s held their son’s hand as the ventilator was removed. His mother cried.

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Day of shooting

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The Guardians tried to guide Oma to the last car in their three car convoy, but Oma had more than a little experience of sliding like water through a crack into places he wanted to be. He was single-minded in his decision to ride back to the Ellison compound in the Guardian car with Blair and Dr. Miller, Abrys and Trent waited at the auditorium for the ambulance to arrive and take Cho to the hospital, then drove Jim home leaving the Guardians to deal with the crime scene.

Oma proved to be a calming influence on Blair reminding him that the doctors at the hospital would do their work and Blair must do his and bring his children into the world. Blair held the little Guide’s hand and looked him in the eyes. “It’s not what I saw,” he pleaded softly. Then another contraction hit him.

William, Christopher, and Dr. Ashley waited at the Ellison compound’s hospital entrance with a gurney and, when he arrived, they sped Blair to the birthing suite. Dr. Miller, who rode in the Guardian car with Blair asked for permission to attend the birth.

“Please,” Blair pleaded, he reached out his hand and Dr. Miller took it.

“Of course she may,” William said. He had forgiven Dr. Miller for her past actions. At the time he didn’t understand them or approve of them, but now he understood that she had known the truth and done what little she could, under the antiquated laws, to make a Guide’s life better.

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After a quick shower to remove Danny Cho’s blood Jim went to the birthing room and took the cool, wet, cloth from Rafe. He sat by Blair’s bed and took over the duty of wiping the sweat from his forehead, just as he had done when his first children were born. It was Michael who went to the birthing suite and whispered quietly into his brother’s ear telling him the news of Cho’s passing. Jim nodded, but decided he’d say nothing to Blair until after the children were born.

Blair’s labor lasted eight and a half hours, but in the end two healthy babies were born. Blair was exhausted. After nursing his children he fell into a deep and restful sleep.
The morning after the shooting

Blair was in a wide meadow. He felt the grass on his bare feet. He could smell the wild flowers and feel the tickle of his hair on his face in the soft breeze. The sun was warm on his skin and the cloudless sky was was bluer than Blair could ever remember seeing it. A Sentinel walked toward him with dark hair, almond shaped eyes and a brilliant smile, he had a beautiful face, a face that Blair knew.

“Danny,” he called and lifted his hand.

The Sentinel took Blair’s hand and kissed it. “I wanted to say goodbye before I left.”

“No,” Blair said, “I’m your Guide, you can’t leave me. We’re going to have a child together, I saw it.”

Cho took Blair’s hand in both of his own and looked deep into Blair’s eyes, he spoke with a soft voice “You saw what you needed to see to bring me onto the stage. It was my destiny to be there, my destiny to save you and your children.”

“Then it was all a lie?” Blair asked. “Our child was never meant to be?”

“Walk with me. Do you recognize this place?” Danny asked.

Blair looked around. “It's the meadow I saw in the vision.”

“You saw us walking hand in hand, just like this. It wasn't a lie,” Danny stopped and turned to Blair. “I have to say goodbye now, but part of me will be with you. You will have my child,” he said as he once again lifted Blair’s hand to his mouth and kissed and then let it go. “Look in the Sentinel Gene Bank, number CAS 3763.” With eyes locked with Blair’s he backed away. “Thank you for letting me be your Sentinel, and thank you for being my Guide.”

Blair was desperate to keep Danny with him he tried to run to him but found he couldn’t move. He tried to call out but the only sound he could make was a pitiful squeak. Danny’s body faded further from sight with each step backward he took. Blair’s squeak turned to a moan and then to a cry of no.

Danny Cho blew a final kiss. “Remember to look in the Sentinel Gene Bank, Tomorrows Child, CAS 3763,” he whispered. Blair heard the whisper and then the Sentinel took his last step back and faded away.

Jim could feel Blair’s contentment through their bond. He felt it as the emotion turned to anxiety and then to fear and finally overwhelming grief.

The anxiety woke Rafe, his eyes opened wide, holding a question for his Alpha, what’s wrong? He hugged Blair to him as he began to struggle.

Jim stroked Blair and carded his fingers through the unruly hair. “It’s okay Blair. We’re here, the babies are fine. It’s just a dream.” The cry of no changed to heavy sobs and tears wet Jim’s bare chest. “It’s only a dream, Blair, It’s only a dream.”

The newborns, already sensitive to their mother’s emotions woke and began to cry. Rafe went to the babies as Jim comforted Blair.
“Danny Cho is gone,” Blair said when Rafe got out of the bed and he could move back to look into Jim’s eyes.

“I know,” Jim said. “There was too much damage. If they saved him he would have been a quadriplegic on a ventilator for the rest of his life. He had a “do not resuscitate” order registered with the police department in the case of catastrophic injury, and his parents confirmed his wishes.”

“He came to me just now to say goodbye. He said it was his destiny to save me and the babies.”

“Maybe he was right about that,” Jim said. “He was a stranger to you and you brought him up on stage. I’ll talk to father. He’ll be awarded a Distinguished Service Medal and buried with full Sentinel honors. It’s the least we can do.”

Rafe brought the babies to Blair and he put them to his breast. “I brought him on stage because I had had a vision. I recognized him when he asked the question. I didn’t want to believe the vision, I didn’t think it could be true, but Oma said I’m shaman and it was true.”

“I don’t understand,” Jim said, he had a bad feeling in the pit of his stomach. “Why wouldn’t you want to believe the vision?”

Blair looked into Jim’s eyes. “I love you, Jim, you and Rafe and our children. I love my life as your Guide.”

“Why didn’t you want to believe the vision?” Jim’s voice was soft but Blair could sense that the question had a hard edge to it.

“It’s a moot point now, Danny's gone,” Blair said. He decided it wasn’t the time to tell Jim he was going to have Danny Cho’s child. Tomorrow’s Child had to be a sperm bank. When the time comes he would choose. Jim would allow it. Just as the vision had told him, Danny Cho’s child would become a shaman.

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One month After The Shooting

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William looked up from his desk as Admiral Bellingham entered. “Paul, is it lunch time already?” William looked around the room for Christopher, his companion. He was nowhere to be seen. William knew he must have gone to the kitchen to bring back a lunch tray. He got up from behind his desk, grateful for the respite. He didn’t offer the Admiral his hand, their friendship had long since moved beyond that or any other social gesture. They had been through a lot together. The Admiral had saved his life twice and been wounded doing it. They had ridden the emotional roller coaster of doubt and determination that the turmoil and adjustment to the new laws caused. They had put their heads together and found ways to deal with all the unintended and unforeseen consequences that the social and cultural changes caused, and they felt the loss of friends and colleagues, along with the rage and grief that followed. Sometime during the past year William Ellison came to realize that Paul Bellingham had become more than a colleague and friend he had become a brother, in every way but blood. They shared a bond, nothing like the bond he had with his Guide, Maire, or even with his companion, Christopher, but it was a bond and Ruler William Ellison was grateful for it.

Admiral Bellingham smiled at his friend. “Indeed it is time for lunch,” the Admiral said. “I saw Christopher on his way to the kitchen as I came in.” Lunching with William three days a week was always a time he looked forward to. Paul Bellingham had known William Ellison for many years. They had always had a mutual respect for each other, but that respect deepened when Ruler Ellison
discovered he had been mistaken in his beliefs about Guides. His commitment and tenacity in not only changing the laws, but also educating other Rulers about what he had come to know to be true was guided by his moral compass. A moral compass that pointed true north. Their talks occasionally surprised him and led to some unexpected changes in their laws.

The Admiral breathed in deeply, appreciating the scent of the bond he had with the Ruler. He had thought the bond he felt with William was unique until he picked up the scent between William’s youngest son Stephen and Guardian Sergeant Jackson Miller. Miller had been assigned as a Guardian to Stephen’s children. When he asked Sergeant Miller about it he was told that Stephen’s oldest son, Billy, was a Guardian grade Sentinel. Stephen wasn’t interested in learning about Guardians and they became close friends. Stephen encouraged Sergeant Miller to have a relationship with his son. The Sergeant also told the Admiral about Stephen’s Companion Andy, and how Andy had chosen Stephen and how Stephen had killed an Alpha and took Andy’s family under his protection as a Guardian would do. “He is worthy to call friend,” Sergeant Miller told him.

“Indeed he is,” Admiral Bellingham told him, “indeed he is.

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“Is your companion going to join us today?” William asked. He knew that Dr. Ashley’s duties often interfered with him eating on schedule.

“Not today, Terrance is attending to a Guide birth.”

“Paul, something has come to my attention that we need to discuss,” William said, getting right to business, as was his habit. “I was talking to my son Michael yesterday and he told me that his mate, Caleb, didn’t know that Guardians existed before meeting him. He was sent to the Compound thinking Rafe would find an Alpha for him to bond with. It seems no one in Caleb’s family knew what he was. Not even Rafe. Jim knew, of course, and kept him safe, but it just seemed astonishing to me that that could happen.”

The Admiral placed the large stack of files he carried onto his desk. He would not leave the rulers office without discussing them, short of the building catching fire, but for the moment they could be put aside. He wasn’t sure what the Ruler was getting at, but he did see the opportunity to steer a conversation to something that did need to be addressed.

“Yes,” the Admiral said. “That is not unusual. It is why, when we find a family with a Guardian suitable companion, we register the bloodline. That way they can be put under our protection. Many children are killed by Alphas simply because the families do not know that their Beta child is a Guardian suitable companion. Trying to mate them to Alpha Sentinels is often disastrous.”

“Yes,” William said, “It is a circumstance that must end, I can’t stand by and do nothing while children are being killed and families are living in isolation and fear. I have a plan mulling around in my mind, one that will solve more than one problem.”

Christopher entered the office and busied himself laying out lunch.

William walked to the table with his friend. They sat across from each other, as was their usual sitting arrangement. Each one of them wanted and needed to look the other in the eye as they discussed reforms, the unexpected consequences, and how to deal with them.

The Admiral spooned sugar into his camomile tea and slowly stirred. “And your plan?” he asked as he lifted the sweet beverage to his lips.
“Just hear me out,” William said as he took one of the sandwiches off the serving tray.

“When have I been unwilling to do that?” Bellingham asked with a smile.

“Well this is another big change,” William said. “One that I think may get an argument from you. Christopher feels we will be able to come to an equitable agreement.”

“Christopher is indeed a wise Companion, but enough beating around the bush; tell me this plan.”

“I want to move our educational system, from kindergarten through high school, under the purview of the Protectorate. There would be no change, of course, in your responsibility as protectors of Guides throughout their lifetime and your responsibility to enforce Sentinel law.” William paused. It wasn’t often that Admiral Bellingham was surprised. He was analytical, nearly to a fault, and William suspected a bit intuitive, but this time William had managed to surprise the Admiral.

“Well, William, I certainly didn’t anticipate that.” Bellingham said thoughtfully. Now that the initial shock of the Ruler’s proposal had passed, the Admiral’s mind began to churn with the implications, both pro and con of a new law coming out of, what seemed like, nowhere. “I can see benefits and deficits to enacting such a law, however I don’t see how this will help solve the problem of identifying Guardian suitable companions.”

“Am I mistaken in thinking that you can sniff out a suitable Companion as young as ten years old?” William asked thinking that the connection was obvious.

“Younger than ten, we just don’t claim then as a future companion until they are ten years of age, but it is true,” Bellingham told him, “Guardians do have the ability to recognize them by scent.” The Admiral waited. He needed to know exactly what the Ruler was getting at. This was no time to make assumptions, assumptions that could derail what he felt was a very important subject and one he had thought would have to wait a great deal longer to be discussed.

William sighed, he would have to spell it out after all. He was hoping his friend would understand what he was trying to do. It would make his argument easier. “With the protectorate overseeing our educational system.” he began, “You would have the legal right to go to rural school districts and inspect and guard them. I believe two things would happen. Wild Guides would be more willing to send their children to public schools with Guardians there to protect them and Guardians would be able to identify and protect young Betas as well. Paul, I believe that if Guides are to be fully integrated into our society we need to start with the children. The easiest way to do that is through the schools. We’re doing what we can here in the compound, but we need to do more.” There, it was said, William waited for the Admiral’s response.

“I see your logic, William, and I agree with it. However there are some problems that need to be overcome. Guardians are by nature and by law sworn to protect Mother Guides. It is true we also bring suitable companions under our protection, when we find them, and we enforce Sentinel Law, but what you are proposing is that mundane and Sentinel children will come under our purview. I believe there will be... push back to that, perhaps heavy. Mundanes have considered Guides to be livestock every bit as much as Sentinels have. I believe many of them would consider it a step too far. I can also see some resistance coming from Guardians themselves. They may see it as an attempt to... dilute their ability to protect Guides.”

“That’s not my intent.” William said. “Guardians are underutilized. I want them to have the recognition and honor they deserve in our society. My intent is to uplift them into the position they belong.”

“I believe that I can convince Guardians of your intent and that they will see that this law will be
beneficial to us and to Guides.” the Admiral said, “As for Sentinels and mundanes, the roll out of the law must be carefully handled.”

“Yes, but I would like it implemented by the beginning of the next school year. Even if it is only inspections and Guardians stationed in rural areas until we can implement a full takeover.” William said. “This morning I got the results of my newest grandchildren’s paternity test. It is scientific proof that Guides are human. I plan on announcing the declaration Monday.”

“You and I may feel that dealing with the argument that Guides are livestock will be a bagatelle, but beliefs are not so easily changed, my friend.”

“The only other option is to have two public school systems,” William said, “My father fought hard to end it. I refuse to go back to such a regressive policy. It helps no one and is destructive to our society.”

“I do not want to give you the impression that I do not agree with you on this, William. I will stand by your side for your announcement, if you will have me. My only intent is to be aware of, and prepared for, any resistance we run into. However, we also need to evaluate whether a Guide’s needs can be met in a conventional school.”

“You know more about Guide’s than anyone I know. I’m willing to give the Guardians input into the upgrade of our school system. Perhaps a seat on our school board? Maybe you would agree to become my Secretary of Education?” William asked.

“My duties as Admiral keep me quite busy,” Bellingham said. “However I do have a few Guardian Captains worthy of promotion to Vice Admiral I believe I can find one that will accept a seat on the board of education.”

“Sounds like a plan,” William said with a smile. “Now, about that stack of files you brought with you today?” William asked.

“Those, my friend, may prove to be a more difficult problem,” Paul said, glancing at the stack of manila folders on his desk. “It seems that many Sentinels paid exorbitant amounts of money for contracts to have their Guides impregnated before Guides were declared sentient. The district courts are upholding the contracts because they were signed before the new laws took effect. They have ruled that the Sentinels own the infants and may remove them from their mother’s care.”

William growled. “All of those files are about this issue?”

“I’m afraid so, William, there are three judges that have consistently ruled in favor of the Sentinel.”

“And the judges names?” William asked.

“Judge Harold Abbott, Judge Samuel Gold, and Judge Franklin Meadows.”

“Christopher, see to it that a subpoena is issued for the judge’s financial records, I want to make sure they’re not taking bribes for their decisions. Use my name. Tell Attorney General Roberts I want him to follow the money. He’s the best we have at this kind of thing.”

Christopher nodded and left the office. William turned back to Admiral Bellingham.

“I need to issue an executive order effective immediately that Guides must have their legal interest represented by counsel. All the cases that found against the Guides freedom must be appealed to the circuit courts. This cannot stand.”
“Now that you will be declaring Guides human I believe that the appeals will be successful.” The Admiral was only partially relieved. “The Sentinels will not like this. They may try to run with their Guides.”

“We’ll have to close our borders to pregnant Guides and newborns immediately, before word gets out. It will have to be the Guardians that man our borders along with the right to take pregnant Guides and newly delivered babies and their mothers into protective custody. Do you have the manpower for that Paul?” William asked.

Admiral Bellingham smiled, “Indeed we do, my friend, indeed we do.” The Admiral took out his phone and made the call.

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26 Months After the Shooting

Blair woke with a tingling over his body. It could only mean one thing...within two or three days he would be in heat. It was time to talk to Jim about having Danny Cho’s child. It wouldn’t be easy to broach the subject, but in subtle little ways he had been preparing Jim for the conversation.

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Six months after the babies were born William asked Blair and Admiral Bellingham to write a book about Guides. It was mostly written by the Admiral, but William felt that with Blair as a co-writer, more Sentinels would read it. The book was released less than a month ago, William was right, the book quickly became a bestseller. Blair supplied the ancient anthropological facts and how they applied to the modern world and Admiral Bellingham wove all his knowledge of Guides into Blair’s writing. They worked well together and the Admiral didn’t mind at all taking dictation in the nursery as Blair cared for the babies.

Blair would tell Jim, whenever he got a chance, about how ancient Guides lived. He talked about how Maire had asked to bond with both her Sentinels. Jim seemed to listen but never commented. He would push the carriage through the gardens, or chase the toddlers when they went off the path. Blair could never tell Jim’s personal feelings about what he was telling him. The only feeling he could pick up on was how much he loved his family.

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Jim looked up as Blair walked into his office. “What is it Blair?” he asked. “Are the children all right?”

“They’re fine. I just put them down for their nap,” Blair told him. “I need to talk to you. Do you have a few minutes?”

“Of course,” Jim said. He picked up the phone on his desk and told his secretary he was not be be disturbed. “I’m assuming this is important or you wouldn’t have come to my office. Let’s sit.”

Blair and Jim settled in on the well worn and comfortable black leather couch. Blair laid his head on Jim’s shoulder. “Jim, do you remember the day after the twins were born you asked me about the vision I had concerning Danny Cho?”

“I remember,” Jim said as he buried his nose in Blair’s hair and inhaled the comforting scent.

“I’m ready to tell you about it now,” Blair told him. “In the vision I was walking hand in hand with
Danny. It wasn’t just sight, there were feelings too and I knew without any doubt that I was Danny Cho’s Guide.” Blair waited for Jim’s reaction.

Jim sat up. “That’s what you didn’t want to tell me,” Jim said. “In the vision you choose to be Cho’s Guide?”

Blair put his hands on Jim’s face. “Jim, no, I never gave up you and Rafe. Danny was my Sentinel too, he was my third Sentinel.”

“Blair...I’m not sure what you’re trying to say,” Jim told him. “Cho is dead. If it’s guilt you’re feeling there’s no need. You never took him as your Sentinel. But I do know this. The vision had to have been false. I couldn’t have accepted you taking another Sentinel. I would have fought him.”


“Yes, I know,” Jim said. “You forget I spent more than a year in Oma’s village. I’ve seen the choosing ceremony. But a Guide that chooses to spend a night with an unbonded Sentinel to give him a child is very different than taking a Sentinel in a bond.”

“It wasn’t a false vision, Jim.” Blair told him. “When Sentinel Cho stepped in front of that bullet and saved my life and the life of our children he became ~ MY ~ Sentinel and I became his Guide. He gave his life for me.”

“Blair, if your asking for my forgiveness there is nothing to forgive. You’re a strong empath, of course you would feel that way. I feel a debt of gratitude to him myself. One that I can never repay.”

“What if we could repay him?” Blair asked, “Both of us. What if there was a way?”

“I don’t see how there could be, our children are alive because of him. You’re alive because of him. It’s not a repayable debt. He’s gone. But if you want to name a school after him or a new Guide Center, I’ll talk to father. I’m reasonably sure he’ll agree.”

“That’s a nice gesture,” Blair said, “but it’s just that, a gesture. I was thinking of something else.”

“Something else?” Jim asked. “What could we possibly do? Cho is gone.”

Blair took a deep breath, let it out slowly, and continued. “There was more to the vision,” he said. “I saw a child, Danny’s child. He is destined to become the next Shaman of Cascade.”

“You want to have Danny Cho’s child and you want my blessing,” Jim said. “We don’t even know if he deposited sperm in a Sentinel Gene Bank. It may be impossible to find out.”

“The day after the twins were born Danny came to me to say goodbye. He told me to look in a bank called Tomorrow’s Child, he even gave a number CAS 3763. I called them, he did leave a sample there and signed permission for it to be used by his guide for insemination in case of his death. I’m going into heat, Jim. I feel it coming on. I want to be inseminated with Danny’s sperm, I want to have Danny’s child.”

Jim pulled Blair into a hug. “The Guide chooses,” he whispered. I’ll register you as Cho’s Guide so we can get the sperm legally. I don’t think we’ll run into any problems. I always thought it would be Rafe’s baby you’d choose. All those little hints you were giving me while you wrote that book, I thought it was about Rafe.”

“I’m still young,” Blair said. “I do want to have Rafe’s child one day. But this time I’m choosing Danny Cho.”
“You have my blessing,” Jim said, “I owe Cho a debt. I can’t not give my blessing and live with myself.” Jim kissed Blair on top of the head. “Just tell me you will choose me again, in the future. I still need an heir and I want you to be his mother. Besides, I don’t know how I’d survive losing you.”

Blair looked into Jim’s eyes “You’re never out of my heart,” he whispered as he stroked Jim’s face. “Will you be with me... when I’m inseminated... hold my hand?”

“Wild horses couldn’t keep me away, Jim said. “Do you want to tell Rafe, or should I?”

“I’ll tell him,” Blair said, “but it will take away some of the sting if I can tell him that you’ve given your blessing for me to choose him in the future.”

Jim nodded his head. “I love him, I’ve never been able to tell him.”

“I’m sure he knows,” Blair said. “Did you know he loves you too?”

“I think it’s you and the children he loves.”

“I’m an empath,” Blair said. “I know these things. He loves you.”

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4 years 51 weeks after the bombing

Abrys Llewellyn, Trent Soaring Eagle, Oma and the three Llewellyn children all deplaned and got into the limousine the Ellisons sent for them. They came to attend the five year commemoration of the bombing that had claimed the lives of Sentinels, Guardians, Guides and Mundanes alike. They arrived a week early to visit with the people they considered family. In the past five years there had been many changes. Changes beyond the new Guide laws. The Ruler Ellison had been the first to recognize the existence of Alphas that had a strong preference of protecting the home front. Thanks to the writings of Dr. Blair Sandburg and the support of William Ellison, homosexual Alphas no longer lost their Alpha status and Abrys Llewellyn remained the Ruler of his territory.

Oma looked forward to spending time with the Guides he called friends, Maire’s sweetness, Bella, who was a teacher to Guide, Sentinel, Guardian and Mundane children together in one classroom, and did not let the need to walk with a cane slow her down, Dahl, whose miscarriage had sent him into a deep depression, but who now had twin three and a half year olds that the Guardians had identified as Sentinels that would grow into Guardian Companions, and Shaman Blair, with whom he had a deeply spiritual connection.

For a long time Oma had been the only Guide who lived in the Llewellyn compound. Abrys had set his father’s and his own Guides free with generous stipends to live on. It went far in convincing the New England Sentinels that their Ruler was not hoarding Guides. It was more difficult to convince wild Guides to come forward, but Admiral Quinn, the head of the Guardians in the Llewellyn territory, helped and eventually they did come out of hiding. When the Compound had finished their new Guide Center it contained a school for Guide children as well as a classroom for adult Guide education. There was a daycare for Guides with infants and toddlers. A clinic staffed by an MD not a vet and a Guardian Barracks to assure Guide safety. The new programs were very popular and construction had started on two more Guide Centers in New England. The new centers would have public schools attached for a fully integrated school system. Oma personally greeted each new Guide to the center in the Llewelyn compound. Many who had never borne a child were now mothers.
Abrys and Trent went to Jim’s office while Oma, accompanied by his three children and two Guardians, hurried off to the nursery where he knew his fellow Guides would be. Rafe had just gotten the children settled in for lunch when the nursery door opened and Oma and his children walked in, children being children, they all jumped up to greet their friends. Rafe frowned. Not at their arrival, which was earlier than expected, but that he would have to go back to the kitchen for three more lunches. Oma immediately went to greet Maire who was nursing her newborn.

Maire had two children who had been identified by the Guardians as being fathered by William. She had felt a deep disappointment that she hadn’t given both her Sentinels a child. Christopher told her many times that it made no difference, but as two years passed and then three without her going into heat again, Maire’s disappointment turned into an abysmal ache. Just as she gave up hope she went into heat. This time she chose Christopher to lay with. William did his best to stay away, to give his Guide her wish and to allow Christopher a child by blood. When he did go to her, no longer able to ignore his need, Maire could not refuse him. William had stayed away for three days. Three days that she had spent with Christopher alone. When the child was born with a head full of blond hair, instead of the dark hair William’s children were born with, she knew she had given him a gift he believed he would never have and she smiled.

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Jim Ellison’s Office
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Jim Ellison and Vice Admiral Michael Rathe sat in Jim’s office discussing the security for the upcoming five year memorial service of the bombing. Michael had been promoted to Vice admiral three years before. He was head of a search for six abducted Guides. The Guides were found quickly and the mundane traffickers were promptly dispatched. Continuing investigation into the case uncovered a multi territory Guide trafficking ring. Then Captain Michael Rathe was instrumental in organizing Guardians from other territories and bringing down the traffickers. He was promoted shortly thereafter.

The Protectorate would supply the manpower for the memorial service’s security. A map of the venue was spread out on Jim’s desk. They would be using an auditorium that had been built at the site of the bombing. Security was heavy, not that they expected any trouble, but five years ago Ruler Ellison had given his word that the compound was safe. That had turned out to be untrue. It could not be allowed to happen again.

The two Sentinels talked quietly, their fingers pointing out any trouble spots, when they heard a soft knock at the door. Their heads popped up. Blue, who had been resting comfortably in one of the overstuffed leather chairs that took up a corner of Jim’s office got up and moved beside his mate.

“Yes?” Jim asked.

“Sir,” Jim’s secretary said. “Ruler Llewellyn and his companion are here to see you.”

“Send them in,” Jim told her.

Jim walked to Abrys and gave him a hug. “It’s good to see you Lew. Did you bring Oma and the children?”

“They’ve gone to the nursery,” Abrys said. “Oma was anxious to catch up with Blair and to see Maire’s new baby.”

“Trent,” Jim said, taking his hand and grabbing his shoulder in greeting. “You’re looking well.”
When Jim and Trent first met there was an uneasy peace between them, but when Trent volunteered to go undercover and find those responsible for the bombing he had gained Jim’s respect. That respect, over the years had turned into friendship.

Trent smiled and nodded. “Things have been fairly quiet, on our home front.”

“You both know my brother Michael and his mate Caleb.” Jim said.

“It’s good to see you again, Michael,” Abrys said.

“As it is you,” Michael said with a bow of his head.

“We’re just going over security for the commemorative,” Jim said. “Why don’t you come have a look, make sure we haven’t missed anything.”

Blue went back to sit in his chair and watch the Alphas and his Guardian mate. Things had changed since he had been claimed by Michael. Ruler Ellison had declared a new class of Beta Sentinels, Auxiliary Betas. Now, Beta’s like him were identified and protected from childhood. When it was time for them to go for Sentinel training Auxiliary Betas attended special academies under the Protectorate’s purview. The instructors were, for the most part, mated Guardians with a peppering of mundane teachers. Blue had toured the new academies with Michael. It was one of his new duties since being promoted to Vice Admiral.

All in all life had settled down nicely since the early days when Blue was a newly claimed companion. Blue had grown into his full manhood. Michael had seen to it that he was fully trained in self defense. There were times when Blue came back to their apartment in the Ellison compound exhausted and achy. On those nights, after supper, Michael would scoop up Blue and deposit him in a warm bath, rub him with a sentinel friendly cream to chase away the aches and gently lay him in their bed. They didn’t have sex those nights. Blue would mold himself against the huge warm body and fall into a peaceful sleep.

Michael was a gentle and loving mate along with his strict disciplinary policy. The discipline was never violent or hurtful. Michael never demanded more from Blue than he was willing to give himself and Blue thrived with it. There was never a repeat of the unfortunate incident with Andy and there bond deepened. Blue was often sniffed as he walked among Guardians, he knew that the sniffing made Michael proud.

Blue’s stomach gave a grumble; lunch was past due. Michael looked over at his mate.

“I think we’re done here, Gentleman,” Jim said as he rolled up the map. “Let’s get some lunch.”

Blue stood up and stretched. He noticed as Michael watched in appreciation. He saw the quick dilation of his mate’s pupils. Tonight they’d make love. Yes, life was good.

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Day of the Commemorative Service

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Blair looked at his newly designed guide robe with the Ellison medallion and smiled. This design was both practical and beautiful. He was four months pregnant with Jim’s and Rafe’s babies. He had meditated on what to do when his body came into heat. After all he was Shaman and the quest wasn’t really for him, it was for his Sentinels. He needed to know what to do. He could feel Jim’s longing for an heir. Rafe’s desire for a child of his blood wasn’t as strong. He was grateful that he now laid with Blair and channeled his desire for a child of his blood into the love he felt for his
Blair rubbed his belly sending contented thoughts to his unborn children. It was too early to feel them kicking but he did feel the sensation of butterfly wings fluttering in his womb. His belly bulged just enough that any sharp eyed Sentinel could see he was pregnant. Blair stopped rubbing his belly and turned to his new robe. He reached out and rubbed the silk between his thumb and forefinger. The feel of it brought forth a memory of a day he had worn a more traditional Guide Robe.

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Flashback
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"We are in crisis." William Ellison, Ruler of Cascade Territory said, looking around the table and meeting the eyes of those seated there. "It is not a crisis that is new. It is a crisis of our own making, of our unwillingness to see what trouble we fomented as it happened. We are the cause of the Guide shortage, and worse, of their suffering."

"That is a little harsh don't you think?" Wyoming Territory responded. "We never meant to..."

"Intent doesn't absolve us." The Texas Ruler said. "Guides are still in decline. And we suffer for not opening our eyes and admitting what we were seeing all along."

"What should be done. I'm tired of parceling out blame. What are we going to do about it? How are we going to fix it?" The tall, buff Ruler of Florida grumbled. "If this thing..." He thumped the thick packet of printed notes on the table, "...is to be believed, we can solve the problem in part by sharing out the fertile Guides. Having them live for a time in our own harems, until our Guides get with child."

"No." Blair said, and his voice was pitched such that they all looked at him. "Build your Guides homes, you are all wealthy men. Bring in other Guides. Let them live amongst each other, lean on each other. They will begin to bear children."

"That will take years." One Ruler complained. "When William sold us on trying the new laws, he emphasized that we did not have time enough to hesitate or to deliberate. We had to act now." The Sentinel was frowning.

"Yes," Florida spoke up again. "Faster to share out the Guides...." His gaze fixed on Blair. Blair had no trouble seeing the hunger there. Jim's low growl prompted him to lay a quelling and comforting hand on his Sentinel's arm.

"No." Blair said again, very firmly. "I will not go. It is me you want, isn't it?" He met the dark blue eyes of the man. "I do not hold it against you. I am a Guide and you are a Sentinel. I am pregnant, and you want me, you want what I represent. If I went to you, to your household, you wouldn't want to give me up."

The big Sentinel smiled. "Yes. I wouldn't want to give you up. Just to touch you would be exquisite. Is there truth to the whispers that to lay with a pregnant Guide and then with a Guide who is not, will transfer the fertility to the non pregnant Guide? Perhaps you would care to volunteer for an experiment?"

Jim was ready to launch himself across the intervening space when Blair grinned at the man.

"No, Sentinel. I will not volunteer."

The man sat back, letting Blair see his disappointment. "No. I thought not. It was worth a try." He
was accepting Blair's refusal. Letting Blair draw the line. William let out the breath he was holding.

"So we know what is not the answer." A slim man who was speaking for the first time began. "Now what is the answer?"

"Who among you has fertile Guides in their personal harems?" Blair asked.

The Sentinels shifted, eyeing each other, then about half of them lifted their hands.

"So that is where the seed will start. Every where there is a fertile Guide, surround him with other Guides. Call on your Guardians to give them safety. See if the fertility passes on."

"That is it?" One Sentinel grumbled. "You have three children already. Why not hold a lottery and see who gets to take them home? Surely we can count on your children being fertile." He gestured to Blair's abdomen. "And you have more on the way. Within a few years we can have more than a dozen of your children to start fertile colonies."

Blair stood his hands braced on the table. He was furious. "Do you suppose that being a Guide I have no feelings? That I am incapable of loving my children? That I would be able to parcel them out like...groceries? Like a packet of tomato seeds? I am as human as any of you, perhaps more than some. I love my children. And they will stay with me until they are ready to leave, until they want to go."

Blair stalked down the hall towards the Nursery. He wanted to be quit of the company of Sentinels. He wanted to be among other Guides. His robes streamed behind him, his step quickened by his anger. Some had listened, others had latched onto the idea, and refused to let it go, that Blair himself was the answer. That William and Jim should sacrifice Blair to combat the growing crisis. That Blair should understand the necessity, the urgency, and obey.

Blair had no intention of doing as the idiots suggested. How did William cope with them day after day, week after week? Sure, some seemed to understand, others were so used to getting their way they didn't listen to what was being said. They simply stated their own desires and expected to be indulged. Idiots.

Rafe was beside him when Blair stumbled over the long hem of his formal robe. Blair let him offer help, wanting suddenly to rip the garment off his body and to go back to the student attire of jeans and flannel shirt. See how those stiff, overly indulged Sentinel liked him in that.

Even the men who had listened to him speak, let him share his views and thoughts, had looked at him with eyes that wanted him. Desired him. Not one of them would have refused to take him to their beds. A year ago, not one of them would have asked him if he wanted to go. Now a few would ask him. Some would even listen to him if he said no. But Blair knew that they all thought he should be theirs if they wanted him. If Jim wasn't his Alpha. If Jim wasn't William's heir.

Dahl had been smart to stay away. Maire, as William's Guide of course couldn't be touched. But Stephen was not heir. There were those among the Sentinel Rulers here today, who would dare ask for Dahl and expect that, as they out ranked Stephen, the newly pregnant Guide be given to them. A gift between rulers. Blair was disgusted. Change wasn't happening any where near fast enough.

"Blair, are you all right," Rafe asked as he entered the room. "If you were a Sentinel I would have thought you zoned."
“Blair laughed, “No, I was just remembering how much things have changed.”

“It’s time to get dressed now,” Rafe said. “We’ll be leaving for the ceremony in half an hour.”

“What about Danny?” Blair inquired of his youngest child who was firmly entrenched in the terrible twos. “He isn’t trying to undress himself is he?”

“Oma is in the nursery distracting him,” Rafe said. “He’ll be fine. Let’s get you dressed.”

Afternoon - Five Year Memorial Service of the Bombing

The attendees of the Memorial Service stood in solemn respect. One by one a family member of one who perished in the bombing walked across the stage, stood at the podium and pronounced the name of the loved one they lost. A bell tolled for each name read. The clear ring of the bell tolled thirty three times.

Ruler William Ellison walked up to the podium and signaled for the attendees to sit. He looked out at the crowd. It was all he could have hoped for. Rulers and their families from across North and Central America as well as three ruling families from Europe were in attendance. Many members of the Admiralty had accompanied their Rulers to the memorial as well as decorated Captains of the Guard. Unbonded Guides made up a large portion of the audience. Every seat was filled. Northwest Territory Guardians, wearing the Ellison insignia, stood, a stoic and reverent wall, across the back of the auditorium.

“Sentinels, Guides, Guardians, and Mundanes,” Ruler Ellison began, “today we come together as equals in our society. Five years ago three cowards, angry that the new laws no longer allowed them to feed their greed on the lives of our precious Guides, chose to use terrorism in an attempt to turn around our society’s move forward. We did not allow their horrific act to deter from our path towards what we knew to be morally right and biologically true.

We did not allow those who died here to have died in vain. We raged against the injustice, but still we moved forward. The changes our society went through demanded adjustments from all of us. A higher ranking Sentinel could demand a fertile guide from a lower ranking Sentinel without regard to the guide’s wants. Judges can no longer rule that a vet can take a newborn from a guide mother without any consideration to the feelings of the infant’s mother or the child that must grow up in the care of an institution, without a mother’s love. The slave market no longer flourishes and those that try to enslave our citizens are quickly dealt with by our Protectorate.

Today we have a fully integrated Public School System, Guides, Sentinels and Mundanes have an equal education. Guides go to college and contribute to our society in ways, that five years ago, would not have been believed possible. The Protectorate, and Guardian Sentinels that man it, have been elevated to their rightful place in our society. Guardian children are now raised by their Alpha fathers and their Guide mothers instead of being adopted out. We have recognized a new subset of Beta Sentinels, the Auxiliary Beta. These Sentinels are no longer killed in childhood. They are now identified as children and given the support they need to become valued members of our society. Alpha Sentinels that have a strong drive to protect the home front no longer lose their Alpha status. Guides are now recognized as human and entitled to the same rights as any other citizen.

This transformation of our society has not been easy. It required adjustments in our beliefs and attitudes. It required changes in our culture. But we have been successful. Our guide birth rate has
gone up to levels we have not seen in nearly a century. Other territories have followed where we have led and they have had the same results in their Guide birthrate.

Our School system is the envy of our country. The Northwest Territory will host an educational symposium next month. Our economy flourishes. New business are opening. We work together and our territory flourishes.

This revolution has not always been peaceful. We must never forget those who died here or why they died. The perpetrators of this atrocity had only greed in there hearts. They did not care who they hurt. They cared only for their monetary profit.

That is why we must resolve never to be torn apart again... That is why we must resolve to always go forward with charity for one another in our hearts... That is why we must resolve that now and for the future … WE... ARE... ONE!

The end

Chapter End Notes

Neichan and I want to thank you for sticking with this story. We have been working on it for years and you stayed with us through it all. It is bitter sweet for us to see it come to an end.

Hugs to all,

Neichan and Joan Z

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