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**In Another Life**

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**Summary**

Jim and Blair's relationship is never realized. Jim marries and is happy. Blair helps them to raise a bundle of children. This is a multiple-box-of-tissues Death Story. The warning is important. He dies.

**Notes**

I wrote this many, many years ago, and then did a substantial revision with the amazing assistance of gardnerhill. Most of the good stuff, especially the kids, is her doing. It was a very rewarding experience.
He would never forget the way Jim's eyes had shone when he got home that night.

He'd just gotten in himself. After coming out to Jim two years into their partnership he'd given up dating women entirely. Not that he didn't like women, but it just wasn't the same. A woman could never make him feel the way Jim did when he looked like that, all the hope in the world shining from his eyes.

"She's the one, Chief." Jim sat down on the couch beside him, ignoring the stack of papers and books Blair had surrounded himself with as he worked. "I want you to meet her."

"Just give me the time and place." Blair swallowed his heart and opened his day planner, made a note when Jim did.

It would have been better if she weren't so great. But she was, terrific. Smart and pretty, kind and down-to-earth. Just the sort of woman to keep Jim grounded, to make him happy.

Above all else Blair wanted to know that Jim was happy.

He asked her to marry him after eight months of dating. She said yes after eight seconds of consideration.

She grew accustomed to Blair's place in their lives. Jim's tagalong, his shadow, partner, best friend. Often the odd man out, he did occasionally bring a date along. Rebecca was as blasé about his sexuality as Jim had been, nice to his dates, even setting him up with people she knew.

But after the first few times she didn't do it again. Blair wondered if she knew, if she'd guessed...and then decided that it didn't matter.

He wrapped his dissertation the week before the wedding. The first person to read it after Jim was Rebecca. Jim had insisted: "I want her to know, Sandburg. And this will explain it better than anything I can say."

She accepted this new side to her fiancé with the same calm serenity she brought to her first grade classroom. When Blair walked across the stage to accept this, his last degree, she cheered as loudly as Jim.

That night, after the last stragglers from the party they had thrown staggered out to waiting cabs, she returned to the living room to find Jim passed out on the sofa and Blair sitting on the loveseat watching him breathe.

"Allan didn't ask you over?" she sat beside him with a smile. Allan was Blair's latest on-again, off-again lover. It was the only kind he seemed to have.
"He's moved on to greener pastures." Blair's words were soft, and he wasn't looking at her. He was still watching Jim.

"He doesn't know, you know." She spoke quietly, turning his face to look at him. His eyes were clear and calm and sad.

"How could he? He wouldn't see it if it -- if I bit him." His grin was shaky but held real humor.

"I wondered at first, why you didn't tell him. But now I understand."

"He could never return it. He's straighter than I'm gay. It might even be the Sentinel in him – the drive to pass on that advantage to the next generation." He smiled a little, in genuine joyful anticipation. "To your children." His look held nothing but tenderness as it focused on the sleeping man. "He's had so much pain in his life, Becca. He deserves all of this."

"What about what you deserve?"

"I already have more than I deserve." He took her hand and gave it a squeeze. "I have him, and he brought me you. I don't need anything else."

"I can't say I'm sorry. But I hate to see you hurting."

"I never thought it would make me happy to see him with someone else. But you...." He smile at her and she saw the shine of tears in his eyes. "Seeing him with you is like seeing him complete."

"How did you get so wonderful?" she asked in a teasing voice, but her heart was in her eyes, so he gave an honest answer.

"I found Jim."

He stood up for Jim at their wedding. Played 'Best Man' to the hilt, right down to arranging their honeymoon in Colorado, remembering her love of skiing, and kept the whole thing a secret until the minute they left.

He hugged and kissed them both goodbye at the airport, laughing. If he went home alone and silently wept himself to sleep it was his own business.

And if Rebecca probably guessed, she kept her own counsel.

*****

(1999)

"I'm going to Quantico, Chief," Jim greeted him one day when Blair came to the house for dinner, as he did three or four times a week at Rebecca's insistence.

Jim had moved into his wife's house, Navajo-fashion, and Blair kept the loft. It made him feel closer to Jim. He'd turned the upstairs into a study and still slept in his old room below...when he didn't fall asleep on his old office sofa he'd badgered Jim into helping him haul up there.

He tried not to spend too much time at their home, not to intrude too much on their lives, but Rebecca encouraged him to think of it as his second home. Once, in private, he had confided in her that he thought of any place that Jim lived as his true home. She had become such a dear friend.

"Okay," Blair said, unsure how to answer. "You haven't had a zone-out in years, you're adept at
disguising your abilities. I don't think there's any danger in that."

"I want you to come with me."

That had made him sit heavily.

"I'm going to Violent Crimes. There's a new program that partners agents with profilers. I want you to be my profiler."

Blair had nothing to say.

Jim leaned over him, a hand on his shoulder, speaking with quiet urgency. "I know you love teaching. But your knowledge could be used to do what we did on the streets, going after the big fish, making the world a little safer. You can make a real difference in the world, Sandburg. Come with me. I can get you in, I'm sure of it."

"What about...?" Blair tried to phrase it delicately. "I mean, what's the policy on hiring non-heterosexuals?"

"No one will care about that if you're good. And you'll be great, Sandburg. The best. Between the two of us we can save lives."

"What Blair does is important, Jim," Rebecca said softly from the doorway, her hands resting on her still-flat belly. They'd obviously been 'discussing' this for a while and she wasn't happy about it.

Blair stood and went over to pat his potential new charge, giving Becca a sad smile that Jim couldn't see. "It's okay." Blair gave the belly a rub and was rewarded with her luminous smile. "I'll come. I mean, I have to be around for this little one. Besides, a Guide doesn't leave his Sentinel."

"That's the spirit." Jim had been pleased, looking forward to the new life he envisioned for them.

Rebecca had hugged them both to her. If Blair leaned into Jim's embrace, nobody said anything about it.

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"Sandburg." The interviewer looked him up and down with a sneer. Blair stood firm, letting him get it all in.

"I don't want you to change yourself for this, Chief," Jim had insisted when Blair had begun talking about a haircut. "The standards are looser for profilers. It's not like being a regular agent."

So Blair had donned a moddish suit, clubbed his hair back, and three hoops shone defiantly in his ear. They'd both already passed the physical -- Jim had never had to tone down his sight so he wouldn't do too well on an eye exam before -- and the psych eval had given Blair high marks for adjustment. Blair had mentioned his sexual orientation -- he was not going back into the closet at the age of 27 -- and had been duly warned of the difficulties this might present.

Now the interview. Really more of a formality since he had passed everything else, even the security clearance. But this guy could make things hard for him if he wanted to.

"So...you're kind of small. Cute, too."

Blair kept his face blank. Was this guy hitting on him?

"I'll be honest with you, Mr. Sandburg. The Bureau wants Ellison badly. He's made it clear that he
won't come without you. This has led some to believe that there is more going on here than meets
the eye."

Blair couldn't help it. He laughed. "Have you met Rebecca, sir? Jim's
wife?"

Apparently it was the right response, because the man went on to other, more mundane topics.
Blair was able to draw several parallels between cultural points he'd discovered and modern police
efforts that seemed to impress him.

At the end the man stood and offered Blair his hand. "It will be hard for you," he said with a thin
smile. "But I think you are going to be an asset."

"Thank you, sir." The words were becoming second nature to him.

That interview was nothing -- he'd already passed the tougher interview in his head.

*Am I doing the right thing?*

*I'm going to miss school.*

*Which would I miss more -- school or Jim?*

*Duh.*

***

Jim and Becca bought a house in a pleasant suburb. Blair stayed with them while he and Jim went
through basic training at Quantico. They had several classes together, and several apart.

It was on the week-long field exercise that Blair got his first taste of federal-style discrimination.

He didn't understand what point there was living rough for a week, when agents spent most of their
time in suits doing paperwork. But he did his part, slept out in the rain, ate his c-rats -- well, some
of them -- and was generally a good little soldier. But on the fourth night the snow turned to sleet
and his intolerance of cold asserted itself.

He shared a tent with Jim and four other guys, all of them crowded. Jim, the team leader for this
exercise, had staked out a spot on the side, and then given it to Blair to avoid conflict, so that he
slept between his friend and the others.

Blair woke in the middle of the night, shivering with cold, freezing even in the insulated sleeping
bag. Soon his movement woke Jim, who offered him his own bag.

"What? The little faggot's cold?" The voice's owner obviously had thought his remark safe -- to a
man with ordinary hearing it would have sounded like a sleepy mutter.

"That was an inappropriate remark, Henderson, and you'd do best to keep your opinions to
yourself," Jim said levelly, balancing his concern for Blair with his position of authority.

"I don't see why he has to sleep in here with us," another voice grumbled, not so quietly.

Blair felt Jim bristling, and whispered Sentinel-soft. "Chill, big guy. Let them get it out of their
systems." He shook his head at the offer of the sleeping bag, and instead got up and made his way
to the flap. He was still in his fatigues; nothing seemed to terrify homophobes worse than a fairy
changing clothes in front of them in a deliberate and malicious attempt to alter their sexual
Slipping through, he went to the edge of the camp and sat in the grass, looking at the sky. His shivering increased, and he was wet now.

Crossing his legs in the lotus position, he laid his hands flat on his thighs, closed his eyes, and gained control of his breathing.

Soon he was in a meditative trance, beyond the reach of the cold and the cruel words.

He never even heard the footsteps behind him, or saw the weapon that thudded into the side of his face.

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"Blair! Blair! Can you hear me?"

Strong hands shook his shoulders. His head ached fiercely and he felt suddenly, violently nauseous. He feebly pulled away from Jim, leaning over to dry-heave into the wet grass, eyes still closed.

"I'm gonna get the son-of-a-bitch that did this," Jim's cold matter-of-fact voice was terrifying.

Blair made a choking sound when he tried to answer. He opened his eyes, saw Jim's face, pale, eyes darkened with rage. Beyond him he saw the rest of the camp gathered. The agent in charge of the exercise was coming around the side of a tent, first aid supplies in hand.

"Jim...no," Blair whispered.

"He probably just fell and hit his head," someone suggested.

"Stupid to go out like that," Henderson agreed too loudly.

"Get this!" Agent Carlisle roared. "This is a serious breech of policy and will be treated accordingly. A fellow agent has been attacked by another agent. This is NOT ACCEPTABLE."

Jim helped Blair to his feet and into the tent, where the side of his face -- cut and bruised by the blow -- was cleaned and treated, bandaged with gauze and tape.

Carlisle came in, turning Blair's face with his fingers. "I'm sending you back, Sandburg."

Blair blinked, but otherwise didn't flinch; he'd already made the pain a part of himself. "I'd just have to do it again, sir," he said casually. He'd show those motherless dung-beetles who was afraid of whom on this course. Besides, if he redid the course he'd be doing it without Jim.

"He can finish," Jim added smoothly even though his jaw muscle was dancing the Minute Waltz. "It's just a bump on the head." Blair silently blessed his partner for the backup.

"Any sign of weakness -- dizziness, nausea, you even look pale and you're gone." Carlisle smiled grimly. He knew exactly what they were thinking.

"Yes, sir," they chorused.

"And when we get back there will be a complete investigation."

This time Jim answered alone. Blair pursed his lips and gazed at the floor.
"You didn't do this because it was going to be easy, Sandburg," Carlisle said firmly. "So why stop halfway?"

When Blair met his eyes he saw understanding, compassion, and respect. "Yes, sir," he said quietly.

"I'm excusing you from the morning hike," Carlisle said, and Blair didn't object.

Three months later he and Jim were graduated as agents. Henderson and two others were kicked out of the program for assault and conspiracy.

***

"This is my husband Jim and his partner, Blair. Blair's the back-up coach, in case Jim's off someplace and can't get to me in time." Becca sat back with a smile.

The other parents in the childbirth class didn't seem concerned. One woman had three coaches -- her husband, mother, and sister -- so this wasn't too unusual.

Blair felt a little awkward, especially at break time, when the chatterbox that sat next to them asked if he was married, and then tried to set him up with her younger sister. She was cute, round-faced, blond, and gave off an aura of protected-womanhood usually indicative of Midwestern Christianity; Blair didn't want to start anything. Jim just rolled his eyes and stayed out of it.

It wasn't until she started getting pushy at the third meeting -- trying to get him to 'just give her a call, you'll be perfect for each other' -- that he finally realized something had to be said.

Becca beat him to it, though. "Look, Sandy," she said suddenly, breaking into the woman's nattering while they waited for the instructor. "I don't think Blair and your sister should go out with each other."

"Why not?" Sandy looked indignant.

"Because she's not Jewish," Blair replied, and Jim choked. "Or a guy," he added, as if an afterthought. He smiled sweetly at her.

He thought Becca would deliver right then and there, trying to hold back the convulsions of laughter.

Sandy's eyes doubled in size. She practically scrambled across the floor away from him.

"Ouch," Jim observed, resting his hand on Blair's shoulder.

"Oy gevalt," Blair agreed.

"Stop it both of you," Becca gasped, eyes wide and watering with her effort.

"You -- you...the three of you! That's disgusting!" Sandy hissed. She staggered to her feet, with her bewildered husband's help, and found a spot to sit on the other side of the room.

I wish, Blair thought, and blushed when Becca threw him a look as if reading his mind.

The rest of the class was amused, but Sandy never sat near them again. Mission accomplished.

***
"oh, god....!

Blair jumped up from the floor, where he had been lying on his back reading.

He'd put off looking for his own place until Jim got back from the conference he'd been scheduled to attend; Jim had been very angry, but in the Bureau the job still came before family.

"Take care of her," he'd told Blair as he left.

"Worrywart," Blair had laughed. "She's not due for another month."

"First babies are almost always late, Jim." Becca had kissed him gently. Blair looked away, feeling the so-familiar pain that tender sight always brought.

Now Blair ran into the bedroom at the cry and saw Becca coming out of the bathroom, her eyes wide, hands spread. The front of her gown was soaked. "Oh, shit." He grabbed her hand. "Sit down."

"It's too soon. Jim isn't here!" she wailed.

"I know...I know...." he spoke soothingly. "You've got hours to go yet. I'll call him. You get into something dry and we'll start walking, okay?" Calm and practical as he always was in an emergency, Blair unzipped the dress for her, then opened the closet and studied the contents while she slipped out of her clothes. "You want that comfortable blue thing?"

"Blair..." he turned back around to find her sitting on the bed, face pale with pain, dress half-off. "I think we should go to the hospital now."

He held her hand until the pain passed, then gently helped her dress and helped her out to the truck, calling the doctor on the car phone.

He made a valiant effort to reach Jim, but he was out and about. He left a message on the voice mail and with the hotel desk, but there was no telling when he would be back.

Becca groaned beside him and he held her hand while he drove.

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"C'mon, baby," Blair urged, squeezing Becca's hand. He had an arm around her, propping her up, a nurse on the other side.

"I'm so glad you're here, Blair," she panted as she waited for the next pain.

"It's an honor," he grinned, ignoring the pain in his hand as she clenched it. "Jim's never going to forgive me."

"Jim will always forgive you," she said, and then gasped as a new pain hit. "It hurts."

"Almost over...." the doctor spoke from the base of the bed. "I can see the top of its head...look in the mirror, Rebecca. You can see your baby!"

She stared up at the reflected scene. Blair resisted, then suddenly saw, and was overwhelmed.

Love, joy, pride, a fierce sense of belonging to that ugly bloody squashed head emerging into the air --

Guide radar. Had to be. This one was a Sentinel.
"Oh gods, Rebecca," he breathed.

"Men drool, women rule," she whispered as she grit her teeth and pushed at the doctor's instruction.

The girl slid into the world with a scream of rage that stabbed Blair to the heart. Dry-eyed, he stared at the ugly beautiful little thing, cord still throbbing, and stepped down from his place beside Jim that she would rightfully assume as his child. The wrongness of Jim not being there at that moment ached, almost as much as his empty arms.

"My new student," he croaked, and then he was crying as hard as Becca.

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He leaned against the glass, staring in amazement.

The nurse beckoned him toward the door and he shook his head. Looking confused, she lay the sleeping infant back into the little bed and came to open the door. "Don't you want to hold her, sir?"

"She's not mine," Blair said softly. "I'm just a friend of the family."

"Well, you were in the delivery room. I'll make the exception this once." Her eyes twinkled; she obviously made this "exception" more than once.

"I wouldn't feel right. Jim should be the one to hold her first." Blair answered.

"Go ahead, Chief."

He'd felt Jim's presence at his back a split-second before the other man had spoken. Blair turned and took in the rumpled suit, the stubble, and a weary smile backed by a glow that could light up Cascade for a month. Blair beamed in plain self-defense at the joy radiating before him. A blind man could have seen that Jim was a New Father.

"Jim! Finally! Oh, man, Rebecca is fine, there's so much to tell you--"

Jim grabbed him gently by the shoulders. "Blair," he said happily, "shut up -- and show me my daughter. Becca's sleeping; I knew I'd find you here."

"I'll take you both in." The nurse led them to the room where they put on the sterile suits and then brought the baby to them.

Jim gestured to Blair when the nurse hesitated.

Blair accepted her gingerly, his face filled with awe at the heavy warm little living thing. "Jim, she's perfect."

"Yeah, Chief." Jim casually rested an arm over his shoulder, closing his eyes and inhaling deeply. "And she smells wonderful."

"What are you going to call her?" Blair knew they'd chosen a name, but had kept it from him to tease.

"Jessica." Jim stroked the sleeping cheek with a finger and they both chuckled when the tiny mouth opened and searched. "Becca's always wanted a little girl named Jessica."

"And the middle name?"
Jim gave him a long look.

"We want it to be Naomi. If you don't mind. Jessica Naomi Ellison."

Blair's eyes filled with tears. "Oh, Jim. That's great."

"We love your mom."

"She'll be thrilled."

Jessica woke and grunted. Blair felt the connection again, the cell-deep joy over this tiny bright-eyed thing blinking sleepily up into his face. "That's right, sweetheart," he whispered lovingly as she drew in a breath from an impossibly small nose. "Take a good long sniff. So you'll never forget what your Guide smells like."

Jim let Blair hold her until she started to fuss, and then he took her to Rebecca. Blair went home, giving them time to bond as a family.

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Soon after Jessi's birth he made the big move.

"I can't stay here forever," he told Jim with a grin. "The house rules would drive me nuts."

In private he admitted to Becca that it was just too hard to be around him all the time, and it wasn't fair to her. "I sublet the loft to Darryl. He'll take good care of it."

"And what are you going to look for?" She sounded worried that they wouldn't see him anymore.

His sly grin disabused her of that notion. "You know that little subdivision two blocks over?"

"The new one? With the little cottage houses?"

"I bought one." His grin widened with delight at her astonishment. "It's about time I did something grownup."

She laughed out loud. "Oh, what's next, Blair, an IRA? A stock portfolio?"

He laughed with her. "I want Jessi and any other kids that come along to feel like they can come over to Uncle Blair's any time. You guys are my family. I hope you don't mind that I want to keep that, I want to be a part of that."

"God, Blair. What would we do without you?" she hugged him fiercely. "You're a part of us, all of us, you know that, don't you?"

"Yeah." he hugged her back, burying his face in her hair. "But sometimes it seems too much to hope for."

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(2000)

As he always had, Blair dated frequently after they joined the bureau, but after the first year he began to keep his sex life and his home life very separate. Becca quit asking him to bring his boyfriends over because he always made an excuse not to...and Jim worried.

"We've got to get you settled down, Chief," he brought it up one night as they sat in their office
doing paperwork. "You know there's a pool going on you."

"Yeah. I'm up against Agent Sander's record. What did he do -- a hundred thirty-five women in one year?" Blair tossed the foam ball into the hoop over the door.

Jim looked up at him, letting his concern show. "I'm serious. You have so much to give, Blair. Why don't you find someone and fall in love?"

Blair didn't say that he already had, just grinned his most mischievous grin instead. "I don't know Jim...I'm not really the settling-down type, you know? I like the hunt." He leered until Jim reluctantly grinned and dropped the subject.

They could talk about almost anything, this almost perfect team.

They were hot, at the top of their game.

The way they loved each other made them strong in a world that destroyed the weak.

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(2002)

"Blood," Jim said, lowering the dirty blue bandanna from his nose and focusing his eyesight on the area. "And skin. Very thin, probably from the lips. Some ground-in motor oil and asphalt from the road, here where this part of the bandanna hit the ground." He focused harder, his nostrils flared.

He shook his head. "Latex again. He wore gloves. No fingerprints."

Blair nodded, his fingers flying over the keyboard. It's just the latest piece of evidence, just data, just words, put it in. Your Sentinel is now trying to protect the tribe from the "King Kong Rapist" and he needs his Guide alert to lead him to that man. "Okay, we'll have the lab boys run DNAs on the blood and skin, just on the off-chance some of it doesn't match Danielle's. Probably not, the marks are the same as the others."

By now Blair Sandburg was an expert at protecting himself with cop-style gallows humor. "Marks," yeah, that's a good one. Some of the women's faces almost cut in half by the gag, jaws wrenched, lips split at the corners to make those mouths a huge open red scream of horror -- yeah, I'd call those "marks"...

"You'll let me know, Chief," Jim said. It was almost a question.

Blair's bespectacled eyes were set firmly on the screen before him.

"Yeah, I'll let you know."

"Before too much longer."

"Look, I'll do it, all right?" Blair snapped, facing the unflappable Ellison. "It's...not a lot to go on, to let go and dive in."

"It's a start. The same MO for every rape/homicide, the same pattern of abuse on the corpses." Jim Ellison was as adamant as Blair running his reluctant pupil through another test of his heightened senses.

Blair nodded, trying to tamp down his fear. There was always this queasy feeling before "diving in" to the perps he profiled. It was like jumping off the cliff into the waterfall all over again, every
time he did this -- the terror of loss-of-control, knife-edged in blood and insanity. And for this one, he had to enter the mind of a man who dragged his female victims, all office workers, to the tops of their own buildings, brutally gagged them, raped and sodomized them, and then pushed them off the buildings to their deaths -- hence his nickname. A nasty slur against the big ape: Kong had saved Fay Wray's life before falling alone to his own death...

But Jim was right; he had to go in. Just as Jim's police background and Sentinel abilities made him perfect as a walking forensic lab for the Washington State branch of the FBI, Blair's imagination, understanding of human behavior, training and abilities were well-suited for profiling.

And how would he face himself in the mirror, if another woman died because he hesitated out of fear?

"Tomorrow," he said. "Tomorrow."

Jim nodded. "I'll make the arrangements."

They finished cataloguing the details in the bandanna, locked up the evidence and left.

Jim dropped Blair off at the Sandburg residence. "Chief, I can wait--"

Blair waved a hand. "Go on. Have my therapy waiting for me. I could do with a walk."

"Okay," Jim said, and headed for home.

Blair walked into his dwelling and headed for the shower, stripping off his clothes as he went. Ten minutes later he was clean, his skin tingling from a fierce scrubbing and his hair a wild damp mat which he rubbed sporadically with a damp towel as he loaded his ditty bag and two changes of clothing into a satchel. Clean underwear, jeans, Payless sneakers, a plain white tee and he was out the door, locking it and leaving the dark empty house without a backward look.

Down the street, two blocks. Right at the stop sign. Four blocks.

Right again. Third house on the right -- light and noise and movement.

The big blue truck in the driveway was still warm and pinging a little from being recently turned off. Up three stairs. Find his key, unlock the door, step across the threshold.

"Hey, guys," he said.

Blair caught one quick impression of Rebecca at the table and Jim tossing a salad in the kitchen, before a high-pitched squealing assaulted his ears and a thigh-high torpedo slammed into his legs.

"Papa Bear! Papa Bear!"

Three-year-old Jessi squeezed both his legs and beamed up at him, her blue eyes bright and her smile pure joy under a tangled mass of rust-colored hair. Tara toddled forward, still squealing in excitement at the appearance of her third-favorite grownup, and fell down.

Blair grinned as wide as the child still clinging to his legs; the weariness and horrors of the day he'd left, and his apprehension of the day to come, fell away from him like a sloughed skin at the brilliance of that welcome. He got down on his knees to scoop up the 18-month-old golden-haired devil of the Ellison household for a fierce hug and a kiss.

"Ha, gotcha, mtoto!" he crowed. He freed one arm to wrap it around Jessi and sweep the giggling
child in for her own hug and kiss. Both pairs of small arms tried their best to throttle their beloved Papa Bear. "Oh, m’cushla I'm so glad to see you!"

"Papa Bear, read book!" Jessi ordered.

"Book, book, book!" Tara piped, tugging at Blair's shirt. Jim and Becca swore that Tara thought "Book" was Blair's name.

Blair looked up from his assault to see Becca beaming at them from where she was setting the table, her belly just beginning to show signs of her third pregnancy. "Looks like you're outnumbered, Blair," she said.

"You've got time before dinner, Chief," Jim's offhanded voice reported from the kitchen. "One book," he reminded sternly -- but whether the warning was for Jessi or Blair was problematical.

"One book it is, Dad," Blair replied, and stood, hoisting both girls up and leaving his bag where it was; he'd collect it later. For the hundredth time he looked at the chaotic clutter of toys and books and videos and puzzle pieces in the main room, and reflected on this greatest of miracles achieved by Jim's remarriage and fatherhood. The infamous house rules of Ellison's bachelor days -- indeed, the anal-retentive Ellison himself -- had died an unlamented death. "Guess what, kids? I'm sleeping over tonight."

"Yay!" both girls screamed in his ears, and Blair grinned, imagining Jim's wince of pain as he turned down his hearing another notch.

"Okay, one book before dinner. What'll it be?" As if he didn't know.

"Wild Thing! Wild Thing!" Tara yelled, followed closely by Jessi's "Where Wild Things Are!"

Becca grinned widely and turned back to the table. Jim went back to the salad, but Blair knew he was tuning his hearing *way* down. There was a reason the girls loved reading this particular book with Papa Bear, and the complex sentence structure and Caldecott Medal-winning artwork had little to do with it.

Blair soon found the well-scuffed and scribbled copy of Maurice Sendak's literary masterpiece. He and his therapy ensconced themselves on the couch, Tara on his lap and Jessi sitting beside him "like a big girl," where she had the honored task of turning the pages; as Blair's arms were around the girls (and both hands were busy keeping Tara's from ripping the pretty pages) he couldn't do it himself.

The evening ritual began. "The night Max wore his wolf suit and made mischief of one kind, and another,' " Blair began, " 'his mother called him -- ' "

"WILD THING!" both girls screamed.

Jim winced even as he picked up a fallen shred of lettuce from the cutting board and dropped it back into the salad bowl.

"You Make My Heart Sing!" Blair yelled in response.

"That's not in the book!" Jessi yelled, laughing. "Papa Bear, you silly!"

Tara just giggled.

And that was just the beginning. For some sadistic reason, Jessi had decided some time ago that
each monster had to have his (or her) own special roar, and Blair had been happy to oblige. The girls joined in enthusiastically, bellowing and howling and trumpeting and squawking at the tops of their lungs when their favorite Wild Things hove into view.

"I assume there's a good reason you invited him tonight," Becca said archly to her blank-faced husband when she retrieved the salad under the noise. "Other than winding the girls up so we'll never get them to sleep."

"The usual reason," Jim replied, all his attention seemingly on slicing the pot roast. "He's going deep-sea diving tomorrow, and he needs some R & R."

"The bad one?" Becca knew what Jim was referring to.

"They're all bad. But this one's really dirty." A moose-bellow from the family room interrupted him. "He'll need this tomorrow night, too, more than tonight." Jim faced Becca. "He's got a tough job. Profilers have been known to go mad, to become psychotics themselves. Or suicidal. One guy went completely around the bend in DC, and they assigned him to the Unexplained files; now he's running around the country looking for UFOs and crop circles. They have one agent tagging along to make sure he doesn't hurt himself."

"Oh, god, Jim, then why -- "

"Because Blair is good. He's good at what he does, and this work needs to be done. He's strong enough to endure it." Jim and Becca winced as Tara let loose one of her ear-bleeding squeals, and saw Jessi and Blair clap hands to their own ears; little kids had big lungs, but everyone suspected that Tara was part banshee. "Most of the profilers who bottom out are the single ones, with no family support to keep them grounded and remind them of who they really are. Blair may be single -- but he has a family." Jim looked over at the enthusiastic trio on the couch. "The girls are doing him a bigger favor right now than he's doing for them."

"...and back to his very own room where his supper was waiting for him," Blair said, "and it was still hot.' The end." He closed the book.

"Again!" Tara said.

"Sorry, mtoto, our own supper's waiting." Blair stood up and carried the younger girl to her high chair. Jessi slid off the couch and trotted to her booster seat. "We're done, Jim -- you can turn your hearing back on."

"Great," Jim said sourly, and Jessi giggled. For some reason her hearing was immune to her own noise, rather like the way Jim's own command-voice roar could not deafen him. "You three have got to find another book to read, Chief."

"Could have been a book about fire trucks," Blair said. "Or a marching band. Come on, Jessi, just try them," he coaxed the girl who was making a face at her peas beside him. "How do they smell?"

"Yucky."

"Well, make the smell go away. Smell everything else on the plate, but don't smell the yucky peas."

"Sandburg," Jim growled.

Blair held up one hand, not looking at Jim. He smiled at his favorite Cascade redhead. "Come on, m’cushla, make the smell go away. Can you do that?"
Jessi nodded, bent over her plate and smelled loudly. Tara, who loved peas, stuffed another handful into her face unconcerned with the little drama across the table. "No peas!"

"Good, the yucky smell's gone." Blair beamed at her. "Now, I bet you can make the yucky taste go away too, even if you eat 'em. Just eat one pea. Don't taste it, just eat it. Just one?"

"No." Jessi scowled fiercely at Blair.

"Just one? For Papa Bear?"

She looked at him. She looked at her plate. Her lower lip jutted out. She picked up one pea and stuck it in her mouth. Her face scrunched up.

"Now make the bad taste go away." Blair covered her mouth with his hand just as she pursed up.

"Not by spitting it out, that's cheating! Make it go away the way you made the bad smell go away. Can you do that?" He took his hand away.

She held still, her cheeks bulged out and her lips pursed. She chewed once. Then again. Then again and again, and she swallowed.

"Pea gone!"

"Now, sweetheart," Blair said, flashing the grin he'd used to coax so many coeds, "can you make the yucky taste go away when you eat all the peas? Bet you can't."

"Can so!" Jessi fiercely picked up her spoon to show Papa Bear.

Jim shook his head, incredulous, as the hated peas disappeared off Jessi's plate -- and not, for once, onto the floor or table. Becca leaned over to her husband and whispered, "Can we have him eat over all the time?"

***

Blair examined all the evidence, laid out for him on the table. He looked at all the photos of the six victims -- heartbreakingly young and smiling in candids, contorted and gory in the police photographs.

All of them between 20 and 30, all small women; two black, three white, one Hispanic; some single and dating, some married, some affianced, one lesbian, all leaving heart-broken and enraged mates. All of them office workers in buildings downtown, never more than one per building, no buildings under 10 stories. He examined the contents of the victim's desks, of their pockets, their address files, their day planners.

No semen in any of the victims -- the man didn't want to be DNA-typed.

He probably withdrew rather than wear condoms; Jim hadn't caught a whiff of latex in any of the battered vaginas of the corpses, even filtering out the stench of decay and blood and terror. That night it had been Jim who'd spent a long time with his two girls, roughhousing with them on the floor and laughing, finally asking Blair to watch them as he tenderly took Becca upstairs to forget the evil another man had done to women, letting his love for them all cleanse the stain of his job from him.

Now, to dive in.
Blair took a deep breath. He was alone in the stark interrogation room, with only the evidence before him and the mirror facing him. He closed his eyes.

Filter out everything that was Blair Sandburg: his revulsion and rage at who had done this, his grief for the girls' families, his fierce desire to see justice done and the truth revealed, his fear at getting lost in an alien mind. Only the evidence mattered here, and the clues it would lead to the man behind them; potshards and bones, a fragment of a tapestry, to recreate an ancient city. Just the facts, ma'am.

The people who'd worked with the murdered women -- Jennifer Sutherland, Ashley Hiller, Lanisha Jackson, Priscilla Barnham, Danielle Dugan, Rosie Marino -- had all mentioned how bright and cheerful their co-workers had been, full of laughter and chatter.

The bandanna. He'd gagged his victims so viciously that the cloth had torn the corners of the women's lips. He wanted them silent with a rage for silence. A rage at women's voices, women's words. Stopping them up, silencing them. Finally, silencing them with death.

A small man, overwhelmed by a talkative mother or wife. He had to be small -- he couldn't be much of a specimen if all he could overpower were the petite talkers -- and harmless-looking, obviously.

And he knew the talkers, he knew them. He targeted them.

The murders occurred within a month of each other -- never more than one a month, never more than one woman a building. Menstrual cycle?

No. No, he knew --

Small, nondescript, clean-cut, clean-shaven. Low on the pay food-chain, but high enough to put him in contact with the women, to make him pinpoint the talkers, and to be overwhelmed with the need to shut them up.

So -- a weapon, probably a gun, a good phallic symbol to make his dick bigger. Probably put the gun in their mouths, just to gag them. Hissing at them to Shut Up even as he fumbled for the bandanna, yanking it tight so that even the shriek of agony was muffled by cloth and blood. Up to the tops of buildings -- tall buildings, ensuring instant or near-instant death for his victims. Making himself tall, making himself King Kong, Eighth Wonder of the World, symbol of male virility, climbing the great phallic Empire State Building with his silent mouths, completing his triumph over terrified, silenced women, feeding off their pain and terror, making himself bigger and stronger than they were, making himself heard as he hissed the filthy names the mouths deserved in their faces, throwing their nonstop woman's-babble back at them even as his cock stopped up their other mouths. Then dragging the mouths to the building's side and pushing them over, their wide horrified eyes as they plummeted over the edge in dead silence a savage joy exploding in his cock --

"--burg. Sandburg! Sandburg! Come out, come out of it! Come out."

He blinked, blinked, opened his eyes. He was breathing as if he'd run a 4-minute mile; his teeth were locked together in a grin like a skull's, and --

He shuddered at what he'd done in his trousers. Oh God -

Warmth and strength like a living wall enfolded him. A familiar, beloved voice whispered to him, calling him back from the evil place inside him, calling him up from the stark, cold mouth of Hell.
to regain his royal robes like Inanna from the Underworld.

"It's all right, Chief, you're safe, you're okay, you're okay, it's over, you'll be all right..."

Jim. Jim, on the other side of that mirror, who'd come in at the right moment. Jim, pulling his Profiler out of his zone-out.

"I've got him," Blair whispered, and groped. Jim pushed the running tape recorder towards him. Blair leaned forward, elbows on evidence photos. "Look for a male, skin color unknown, most likely Caucasian, short and slight of build, clean-shaven and clean-cut. Very, very likely an office temp, probably works in the mail room or messenger service, lower rank than the women he kills. Talk to male workers in the offices --see if any of the male temps ever referred to women as 'mouths' or said something about how women talk too much. Mother and/or wife talks a lot. No semen in the corpses because he gets off on watching them fall. Carries a big gun, probably a ridiculously big gun like a .45, when he does the job. Doesn't fire it, uses it to threaten his victims, probably puts it in their mouths..."

On and on he went, almost frantic to spill it all out of him, as if he were vomiting, bringing up everything that had welled up to join the possibilities, shuddering at the clammy stickiness in his boxers.

Oh God, he felt filthy. He couldn't bring this home to the girls.

It was Jim who finally switched off the machine. Blair was shaking.

"Good, Chief. You did good."

"Well," Blair responded automatically. "I did 'well.' And I'll believe it when we drag him in."

"I'll get this down to Forensics," Jim said, taking out the cassette; the A side was nearly through its 45-minute length, Blair noticed blankly. He'd been spewing words for 45 minutes? "You did everything but give us his blood type and Social Security number. We've got him."

Blair nodded. Jim was usually right about stuff like that. "I've, uh, I've got to..." he waved a vague hand.

Jim levered him out of the chair and aimed him toward the showers. "Scrub that bastard off of you."

The hot water was like a benediction, and Blair took especial care in lathering his genitals. God, he needed some recreation, some fun, some tenderness. If only Jim could undress, join him here, enfold him in the same embrace he'd given Blair to coax him out of the dark evil place, stroke him, whisper in his ear, take his cock in one big hand, stroke him --

He leaned his forehead against the tiles, groaning; cold, empty and alone. So far, and no farther. A kind word, a smile of joy, a comradely hand on his shoulder or back, the occasional fierce embrace of relief and gratitude for having survived another day of horrors. So far Jim Ellison would go, and no farther. The look Blair wanted to receive was aimed squarely at Becca.

It wasn't so bad, most times. The love he felt for Jim's family was real and strong, and he wouldn't trade Jessi and Tara and Next for anything in the world. But after going deep into that dark ugly place inside him -- the place that could understand real, human monsters -- he wanted so fiercely not to be alone that it was an ache in his body like an abscessed tooth. He wanted a warm hand on his heart, warm lips on his own, a warm body beside his in his bed.
*Why the hell did I fall in love with the straightest guy in the galaxy?*

Angrily Blair shook his head under the spray, his wet hair flying like a dog's. All right -- no damn self-pity, not tonight. He'd take the illusion of tenderness, amid a sea of passion. Two ships that pass in the night, grateful for the release. A dance, a kiss, a grope, a dark corner. Men who only wanted sex, a friendly body, who didn't need to gag their partners or shut them up, or silence them forever --

Sandburg stalked out of the stall, toweling himself off fiercely, groping for his locker where a spare pair of boxers was stashed, and dressed; his soiled undershorts were in a sealed plastic bag to take home to his laundry. Last thing the spooks around here needed was finding the resident fruit's cum-stained shorts in the shower -- they'd never let him use it again.

God, there were times he hated being gay.
Jim had taken care of the evidence and the tape; Sunny was already inputting the information into the computer. Tomorrow, they would see what the composites would yield. In the meantime, they'd look at the local temp agencies and start asking questions.

The two men drove home in silence, broken only when they reached the streets where both houses were.

"Jim, could you drop me by my place?"

Jim agreed. But when they reached there, Blair slid off his seat in the big minivan Jim now drove and flashed a grin at him.

"Don't wait up for me, man. I'm going out tonight. Kiss the girls for me."

Jim looked at his friend for a moment, but nodded. "I'll do that, Chief."

The van pulled away.

Blair changed into his best leather "fuck me you fool" outfit, made sure the nipple ring could be clearly seen through the open vest, made absolutely sure that no Federal ID was on his person or in his wallet, and headed for his Corvair, jingling his keys in anticipation. Behind him, barely noticeable, was a shadowy ghost of a man, a thin and reedy mail boy whose mild eyes grew cold with rage at the chatter of exuberant women...

Blair shuddered and tried to shake the creature loose as he hopped into his convertible. A big guy tonight -- the biggest, burliest, hairiest brute in the bar. Even if all Bluto wanted to do was slow-dance with him, that might be enough to shake out the part of Blair that had resonated so strongly with Skippy the mail-boy, who became King Kong once he'd shut a woman up.

Two hours later Blair was happily sprawled across a dimly-lit table on the second floor of Javatt's, exulting in the red-bearded behemoth pounding his way home.

Papa Bear was getting fucked by a real bear.

The guy was even nice -- had condoms and everything. One or two voyeurs watched the performance gravely; one man stroked Blair's hair.

Perhaps they would want a kiss, a blow job, their own turn on the dance floor, when this was done.

It wasn't what he wanted, what he craved. But, for now, it was enough.

***

Jim came down the stairs for breakfast, to see Blair at the table feeding Tara and reading her a book while Jessi ate her own cereal and listened in. Behind him he could hear his wife splashing and sighing with bliss in the solitude of the upstairs bath. Becca made the most of the mini-vacations Blair's attention to the girls allowed her.
"Feeling better, Chief?" Jim said noncommittally.

"Much."

Jim had heard Blair come in late, somewhere in the alpha state that was never entirely asleep and knew when his Guide was near; Blair had let himself into the dark house quietly and made his way to the guest room. He couldn't be working on more than five hours' sleep, and Jim could sense the tender areas on his body that indicated heavy sexual activity, but he did look better than he had yesterday afternoon.

"Were you sick, Papa Bear?" Jessi said. She seemed more interested in redecorating with her bowl of soggy Cheerios than eating them.

"No, I was sad. I went out and had some fun. I feel better now. Let's see, where were we... 'Would you like them in a car? Eat them! Eat them! Here they are!'"

"Would not, could not, in a car!" Jessi yelled, and splashed her spoon in her milk.

"Eat your cereal, Jessi, don't play with it," Jim said, sticking a couple of bread slices into the toaster.

"Don't wanna. Wanna cookie."

"Cookies aren't for breakfast, you know that. You're a big girl."

"Want Mommy!"

"Your mom's taking a breather, hon," Blair said without looking around. He turned a grimy page as Tara stuffed a fistful of dry Cheerios into her mouth. "'Not in a train. Not in a tree. Not in a car --'"

"Want Mommy!" Jessi wailed, her voice rising into the bleeding-ear stage.

"Where's Mommy?" Tara quavered, half-chewed Cheerios falling from her quivering lower lip, green eyes slowly filling.

"Mommy asked me to feed you two. You'll see her in a bit, I promise--"

"Want Mommyyyy!!"

Jim tuned his hearing down again, trying to keep his bawling three-year-old from throwing spoonfuls of soggy Cheerios as Blair valiantly kept trying to distract Tara from joining her sister's tantrum by slogging through all the other places not to eat green eggs and ham.

No wonder Becca loved having Blair stay over.

By the time a flushed and relaxed Becca came downstairs in her bathrobe to relieve the men, the girls were making a stab at eating again and the noise was muted to an angry sobbing from Jessi. Pausing only to finish his toast, kiss his wife and the girls (and pluck a few Cheerios from his clothing), Jim headed out. "Chief."

"I do so love green eggs and ham thank you thank you Sam I am," Blair finished rapidly, kissed Tara and then Jessi. "Be good, girls."

Becca he hugged, and kissed her cheek. "Later, pretty mama."
"You're a lifesaver, Blair," Becca said, grinning as her husband's partner disappeared out the door. "Have a good day."

"Hope to."

By now Blair thought of the car as armor. Once he and Jim were in it, on the way to work, they were suited up for the job. When the door closed, Blair nodded grimly to his stone-faced partner.

"Let's go nail that son of a bitch."

***

That day and the next were pure legwork, following up on the profile; phoning every temp agency in Cascade and the county, collecting faxes of employee descriptions, going through computer records for similar profiles and similar m.o.'s, interviewing employees. Now that they were concentrating on the mechanical aspect of crimefighting, Blair could distance himself again from the perp, and once again revived. At night he returned to his own house, writing his reports and his journal, returning correspondence from Ranier students who e-mailed him for advice.

On the morning of the third day Sunny said, "We've got him," even as he and Jim walked in.

"He's in?" Blair said, leaning across her desk.

"No. But we've got his workplace." She held up a printout. "The Moonlighting Employment Agency specializes in office workers. They've got a number of busy boys here -- messengers, mail people, secretaries, admin assistants. A lot of their clients work in monthly increments in and around the office buildings in question. But only one of them was a perfect match."

Blair took the fax of the application form and read about the murderer whose mind he had inhabited; Jim read it over his shoulder.

Keith Ambrose. Male Caucasian, 27, 5'5", 132, hair dirty blond, eyes blue. No tattoos, piercings, birthmarks. Currently employed as a clerk at --

"Oh shit," Blair muttered, and was grateful for the big warm hand squeezing his shoulder, stilling the shudders. He'd had enough of Wilkinson Tower to last a lifetime.

A small swarm of flak-jacketed men and women armed to the teeth milled in the foray, and their leader was snapping orders right and left. Both Jim and Blair went blank-faced at who was in charge of the raid. Agent Ford. When the fuck was the Agency going to stop hiring guys who took their cues from Chuck Norris films? This was going to get really ugly really fast.

"We've got him, Chief," Jim said. "Stay here, we'll take him down."

"Like hell you will." Blair glared at the attack squad. "Listen, you guys."

"This doesn't concern you, Sandburg," Agent Ford said, turning his back on Blair and continuing to brief his riflemen. "You've done your part, now we're doing ours."

"Yeah, Ford, I'm the profiler on this dick, now I'm telling you if you march in like this, a battalion or two, you're gonna lose him," Blair snapped. Always, always, he had to prove he was as good an agent as the cowboys. "Listen, this guy's a chickenshit who can only take on women smaller than himself. Just Ellison showing up waving a badge is gonna send him running like a roach before we get the place nailed down. Or going postal and taking out a lot of co-workers instead of just one."
"You've had dinner with him, Sandburg?" Ford said, with not-quite a smile on his face. "You know what he's like, what he doesn't like, hmm?" Some of the male agents grinned or laughed, not hiding the contempt in their voices or expressions.

"Down," Blair muttered in a voice only a Sentinel could hear, reining back his own enraged cowboy. To the lone gunman he said, "Worse, Ford. I've been in this guy's skull. Every attack he makes is to take power back from women -- physically small women. Too big a counter-attack will spook him. If he runs, he dyes his hair, changes his name, finds a new town, and we won't know which one till the next small talkative woman falls to her death. We can save that woman's life."

"What kind of attack do you suggest, Sandburg?" Jim said, his voice neutral. Most of the other gunmen gave Blair neutral looks also -- the most they'd dare support him while their boss was watching them. But they were impressed by Ellison's prowess with guns and the physical side of agent work, and took their cues from him. Jim was the far more natural leader than the Chuck Connors reject who'd recently gotten dumped into this northwest outpost.

"Play upon his insecurity, his need for power, and lure him into a safe place away from his office to take him into custody." Blair grinned. "Let's say, a businessman comes into his office, part of a start-up company who needs someone to redo a big spreadsheet right away, just as a temporary job...

"...and I was given your name by your agency, Mr. Ambrose," the bespectacled and neatly-dressed businessman said. "They were going to call over here, but I knew I could make the drive from my office in less time than it takes to process all that temp paperwork. Panther Software is still in the garage phase, but I'd like the best that I can afford." He named the hourly rate the spreadsheet job was worth -- half again the going rate for office assistants. "If the job gets done under deadline it'll mean a saved contract that will more than pay for this work."

The watery-looking young man flushed. "I'd be happy to come work for you, Mr. Ellsberg. I'm very good at spreadsheets, very good!"

"So I was told." Mr. Ellsberg smiled warmly at the eager young man. "If you could come over today, after work, just to see my office setup and what I want done on the spreadsheet, it would be a great help."

"I can come over now, my lunch break is in 15 minutes," Ambrose said eagerly, nodding and smiling. "If you can wait 15 minutes, I can come with you! I can work on my lunch break if you'd like!"

Mr. Ellsberg beamed. "That's a great attitude, Mr. Ambrose. This will only be for three days at most, but if I like your work and my company picks up steam in the next 3 months, I'll keep you in mind as a permanent employee."

Ambrose smiled and nodded some more. "Thank you, sir. Thank you. You'll like my work. I know you will!"

Soon Mr. Ellsberg and Keith Ambrose left Wilkinson Tower and headed across the parking lot. "We'll go in my car, it'll be easier than you following me," Ellsberg said. "I'll drop you back here after lunch to finish your work day. Perhaps in a day or two you'll be free to -- "

"I can start tomorrow morning, Mr. Ellsberg," Ambrose said instantly.

"Wonderful. And I know you'll do a better job than my secretary did! She's the reason this is a rush
job. You'd think she'd find time to do the work I assign her instead of talking on the phone for hours, or wandering around talking to people. Maybe if she'd paid better attention she wouldn't have entered the numbers in all the wrong columns -- ruined the whole thing. You'll have to start from scratch, I'm afraid." Ellsberg shook his head and gave a resigned laugh. "Still, I can't fire her - - she files everything and she's the only one who knows the system!"

Ambrose nodded and laughed. "Yeah, that's the way sometimes. You know, these women, they can talk for hours, and it's stuff they could have said in 10 seconds, boom, it's done."

Both men approached a little white Toyota Corolla, 5 years old if it was a day. "When I net my first fifty K," Ellsberg said, smiling, "that's when I get the Mercedes." Ambrose laughed again as his new boss pulled out the keys.

Jim smiled grimly from his position behind the boxwood barrier along the parking slots. Blair had his character down pat, and Ambrose was eating it up -- drawn by the money offered, flattered by the attention, and convinced that this new boss shared his attitude about women who talked too much. A little closer, they'd part to get in the car, and then Ambrose would be wide open for Jim to --

"Ellison! Prepare to move in!"

Even with the gain turned far down on the earphones, Jim winced and froze at Agent Ford's snapped command. Worse, he saw both Ambrose and Blair start --they'd heard.

Blair reacted immediately to bring down the suspect, but Ambrose acted immediately at the same time -- Sandburg was staring down the barrel of a .45.

"You fuck!" Ambrose yelled in a high-pitched voice. "You're a cop!" He shoved the muzzle under Blair's chin, tilting his head back. "Get back, all of you!" he screamed. "Get back or I kill him! I'll shoot him!" He shoved Blair backwards, up against the side of the white Toyota. "Unlock the door, get in the car, now!"

The transformation of Keith Ambrose from eager young office boy to enraged gunman was instantaneous. They'd taken his power away, and he was getting it back.

Sandburg complied, managing to unlock the door from behind and letting Ambrose shove both of them into the car. The gun looked huge in Ambrose's hands.

Jim slumped down, his teeth set. The only thing he wanted more than Ambrose's arrest right now was his hands around Ford's neck. Thank you, Chuck Connors.

***

Ambrose's big gun poked Blair's back. "You'll never fucking talk about this," he snarled, his voice rising to hysteria levels. "Drive, shit!"

"You don't want to die," Blair said calmly, not going anywhere near the accelerator. "But that's exactly what will happen if I drive."

"What, what, what, you wired the fuckin' car?" Ambrose shrieked. His gun jabbed Blair's spine, and felt like a cannon.

"What I mean is that there are too many people out there who are covering you," Blair said. "The parking lot exits are all blocked. It's not a standoff, Keith, it's worse. Because they don't care about me, those guys out there. They don't care if I die. They might shoot me before you do, if anything
"That's not true, you're lying!" Keith shrieked again.

It was Lash all over again. But this time Blair was unchained, and he held the whip and chair.

"Keith, I'm like you, I'm not like them." He exhaled. "They don't care if I get dead too. They sent me out here 'cause they hate me. Bitches were hoping I'd get dead."

"You're fuckin' lying, man," snarled Keith. His eyes were wet.

"Do I look like a cop, man?" Blair snapped, glaring at the hysterical gunman. "Do I look like I made the fuckin' height requirement? One-fuckin'-quarter inch -- that's how close it was. They never let me forget it. They call me queer, faggot. The bitches laugh at me, most of them are fuckin' dykes. Tell me what to do, where to go, once they get any kind of rank.

"That's what's out there now, Keith. Those bitches are hoping you'll start something so they can blow both of us away."

Keith was shaking. His eyes were huge. His gun, pressed firmly to Blair's spine, quivered.

***

Jim's monitoring of the situation in the Toyota was broken by the headset. "Ellison, prepare to move in on the suspect."

*Fuck you, Ford.* "Negative, Sandburg is in negotiation with the suspect. Any hasty move could trigger a shootout."

"Sandburg is a hostage, Ellison, he's incapable of negotiation. A shootout is an acceptable risk. Sandburg's a trained agent, he's prepared for that outcome."

*Besides, who cares if a queer gets killed in all this?* was the unspoken message in that sentence. Sandburg was spinning his story from a strong unspoken truth.

The worst part of Ford's insistence on attack was that it resonated with Jim. Something primal in him, something with black fur and cold blue eyes, wanted nothing more than to protect his partner and friend -- and beyond that, his wife and daughters -- by seeing nothing left of this rapist but a bullet-riddled body.

But something -- someone -- held the panther at bay. Someone who even now was wading his way through the jungle of this man's mind. Someone who would be caught in the undertow if a wave of violence broke out.

"Sandburg's handling it. I'll let you know when he signals me."

"He's been made, Ellison, he won't be able to signal you. Or does he know semaphore?" Ford sneered.

"He does," Jim said simply, never taking his eyes or ears from what was going on in the Toyota. "But we have a set of signals we can exchange. I'm in the best position to see what's going on now. I'll give the orders if and when they're necessary."

"Ellison, you are not going to undermine my authority by taking over this operation!"

"I'm giving you the information that will best help you in doing your job, sir." *Listen to me, you
bug-brained John Wayne wanna-be -- one false move from you and Blair is dead. And I'll see you
destroyed for it.*

***

"You know there's no women in jail," Blair said conversationally. "Not the one they'll put you in.
None at all. Not even the guards. You won't hear any more bitches talking, Keith, flapping their
mouths all day long, shutting you up."

Keith was shaking a little less hard. "They'll shoot me up, man. Lethal injection," he whimpered.

Blair shook his head, snorting. "No, no -- insanity. You do insanity, they can't kill you. You get a
room by yourself. No more bitches shutting you up." Blair waited for three beats. "Keith, I don't
wanna die. I don't want *them* killing me, and they're gonna start shooting if they think you're
gonna do something."

Keith shook. The barrel dug into Blair's back.

"Keith, do you know what's worse than lethal injection? It's being shot by bitch cops who don't
care where they aim. They want to hurt you, Keith, hurt you bad. They'll do that stuff to you. But
they can't if you surrender. If you come out with your gun gone and your hands away from your
body, they can't do anything to you but arrest you. All they can say to you is your rights, they can't
talk and talk and talk and keep you quiet."

Tears ran down Keith's eyes. The gun wavered.

*Sweet Krishna, if I step false, send me back to the Wheel.*

"Let me take care of you, Keith," Blair said gently to his weeping companion. "I know, I know.
But it's the best we can do. There's
too many of them out there. Let me show them you didn't hurt me. That I've got your gun and I'm
not in danger. They can't shoot us if I'm not in danger. They can't hurt us. Please, let me show them
you haven't hurt me. Okay?"

"I want out of here, man," Keith moaned.

"I know. I know. Keith. The best thing you can do is either put the gun down or give it to me, and
let me put handcuffs on you. That'll show the others that you can't hurt me. And then they won't
dare hurt either of us."

Keith was crying. He looked with trust at a soul-mate, a man who understood how he thought.

"Keith," Blair said gently. "There's too many women out there. Too many talking mouths. You
can't stop them all. Just...get away from them all. Go someplace where there's no women to talk too
much." He looked into Keith Ambrose's eyes and held out a hand as if to shake the other
man's. He smiled, a friend to a friend.

*Jim, you just heard me. If Ford does something stupid now I'm a dead man.*

Then the pressing weight was gone from his back, and the cold heavy weight of a .45 sank into
Blair Sandburg's hand.

"Thanks, man," Blair said, and transferred the gun from right to left hand, the muzzle away from
both of them. "I'd still better cuff you, so they don't think you're making any threatening moves,
okay?"
"Ford, if you don't drop that thing I'll shoot it out of your hands right where I'm standing," growled Ellison. He saw the hidden man start -- he shouldn't have been seen. He'd been hoping to squeeze off a round before conferring with Ellison.

"Is that a threat, Agent Ellison?" Ford said coldly.

"Sure sounded like one to me," Jim said serenely. "Christ, no wonder they shipped you out of Washington, I heard about your screw-ups in Chicago." Keep them talking, keep them distracted -- But his primary distraction stopped him. It was changing. He looked and listened. He smiled. Into the mike he called, "Stand down, crisis over. Stand down."

"Jim, your partner is still in there!" snapped Thomas. "Or don't you give a damn what happens if --"

The Toyota door opened on the passenger side and Agent Blair Sandburg stepped out, quietly reciting "...and to have an attorney present during questioning." He guided a cuffed, weeping Keith Ambrose by an arm. "If you find that you can't afford an attorney..."

"Sweet Jesus Christ," Thomas said softly. All over the parking lot Jim heard murmurs, and the metallic, mechanical sounds of guns being holstered, safeties put back on, clips removed. Agents rushed in to take the shaking sociopath into custody. Blair smiled politely at the shoulder-claps and back-slaps, the chorus of praise for his deed, and relinquished his burden. He kept walking.

Jim cut through the milling pack of jacketed gunmen. He smelled and saw and practically tasted the fear-sweat that soaked the placid-looking man who was making a beeline for him. "You're gonna pay for this one, Chief," he said levelly.

"Scared the crap out of you too, huh?" Blair said, grinning shakily. "Feel like a rabbit in the headlights --" Then he was held tight in strong arms, and held on to that solid body with all his strength.

"You're a lion," Jim whispered. "You're a lion." They were both shaking.

"I made one major mistake on that profile, Jim," Blair said, smiling shakily over the third beer the team had bought for him. "Turns out the damn gun was loaded after all. He'd just never fired it."

Jim was silent for a long moment. "Don't let it happen again, Chief," was all he said.

"Christ, Sandburg, you mean you weren't even packing?" Thomas said, her voice rising. "You went up against that fucker unarmed?"

"Hell no," Sandburg retorted to the team member who'd bought his second beer of the evening. "I was armed." He smiled and tapped his forehead with a forefinger. "I just wasn't carrying a gun. Jim, tell them what I've used in the past to subdue suspects."

"Storytelling," Blair corrected.

"You tell stories?" Agent Ford's tone and expression indicated that he'd already run up against at least one other person who'd used precisely that method.

"Whatever works," Blair said. "For instance, there's this old Inuit tale about a man and a woman fishing -- "

Ford was out of the bar before the sentence was finished.

***

"Papa Bear! Papa Bear!" Jessi clapped and held her arms out, the child looking beautiful in her favorite red dress. Tara squealed.

Jessi was well-balanced on Jim's shoulders, letting him clap as eagerly as his daughter. Becca whistled -- her arms were full of Tara and she couldn't clap.

As soon as the official photos were taken of Blair Sandburg being presented with his citation for bravery, he was off the dais, making his way through fellow medal-earners, agents and other well-wishers, to kiss his girls and get another hug or two from the adults.

"Oooh, Papa Bear, that pitty!"

"Try it on, Jess," Blair said, draping the silver medallion around the little girl's neck. He laughed at the face she made, and took it off. "Too big for you, huh?"

She nodded.


"Tara!" Becca scolded.

"Tonight, mtoto.* We'll have a book tonight." Blair held up the medal. "What do *you* think?"

Tara took the silver disc in both hands and stuck it in her mouth, the ribbon dangling.

"You like it, huh?"

She nodded, her mouth still full of the medal. But when Becca tried to pull it away, Tara tightened her fists and made a wailing sound in her throat.

"Tara, let go! Blair, I'm sorry, she's been so crabby lately -- "

Blair waved a dismissive hand. "She's cutting another tooth, isn't she? At least it's doing something useful." He held his arms out and took the beaming Tara from Becca. "There, now I've got it back. Let's go find you a chair, pretty mama, and get some cake and punch for these two, shall we?"

"Yay!" Jessi screamed.


Other medal-earners and their families were clustered at the refreshment table. Blair strolled amid the Ellisons, smiling at the laughs he got at Tara gnawing his medal. "You're not giving that up, are you, mtoto?" He got a green glower from his charge. "Tara, you know some primitive people believe you can acquire someone's traits by holding one of that person's possessions? Maybe
this will make you brave. You gonna be a big hero and stop a bad man when you grow up?"

Tara's response was a burble around the medal and a leer. Becca laughed at the man's inability to get his citation back from her stubborn daughter.

"So how do you like being a 'big hero,' Chief?" Jim asked.

"Nice to see I'm getting the same respect I ever do," Blair groused at Tara. But he smiled. "Honestly, Jim? This part is a kick. I like the validation part of being a hero – the acknowledgement from the community. That's important. It's a needed quantity, after the bad part of performing the actual heroic deed. That's a constant in human behavior from the time when -- "

"There's more to come," Ellison said before the lecture could continue. They approached the place where the big cake was being cut up and served to the family members. "Ten yards from us, five o'clock."

Blair gave a surreptitious look, and groaned at the angry-looking man he saw. "Ford. He's gonna make my life hell from now on, isn't he? Because I got this and he didn't."

"Worse, Chief. You got it for capturing Ambrose without firing a single shot, when he couldn't do the same thing with an entire SWAT team behind him." Ellison grinned smugly. "All I can say is -- better you than me."

"Tara, sweetheart," Blair said, smiling his best smile at the stubborn little girl glowering at him over her new toy, "Would you do your Papa Bear a big favor, and give this nice shiny medal to that man over there?"

Tara tightened her grip and glared at Blair.

"I'm dead," Blair said, still smiling at Tara.

"'Fraid so, Sandburg," Jim said deadpan, handing a piece of cake to his helplessly laughing wife.

************************************************************************

(2003)

"Uhhh...Ellison." Unspooning, and rolling over, Jim grabbed the phone before it could wake his sleeping wife and his newborn son, cuddled to her breast.

It was their first day home from the hospital. James Joseph Ellison Junior didn't seem particularly happy about it so far, so he was here in their bed where Becca could feed and cuddle him, so they could all get some sleep.

"Ellison," he repeated rather sharply, but still quietly.

"Jim..." Blair's voice, soft, the words slurred. "I'm sorry to wake you, man."

"Where are you, Sandburg? Are you okay?" Jim crept out of the bed, grabbing the jeans and shirt he kept on the shelf inside the bathroom door for just such occasions, right next to the suit hung there in case it was work. Whatever called him out of bed in the middle of the night, he could dress for it without waking his wife.

This wasn't the first time his partner had called. There were different reasons, but it usually boiled down to 'can you come get me?'.
"Ummm." He could almost hear him thinking. And, although he could piggyback his scent to his hearing and smell him as well, he didn't need to, to know that his partner was wasted.

"What happened, Chief?" Stepping out of the master bath fully dressed, Jim crossed the room in the dark and scribbled a note on the pad on the bedroom door. He never left in the middle of the night without leaving a note. He looked at the "Gone to get Blair" and smiled, drawing a quick little heart with an arrow. "Love ya, babe. Big Jim."

Blair still hadn't answered, so Jim tried a different approach. "Chief, where are you? I'm coming to get you."

"No, Jim, I'm sorry, I shouldn't've called, shouldn't've woke you."

"Just tell me where you are, buddy. I won't be able to rest until I know you're okay." Silence. Bar noises in the background. "Chief? Are you at the Red Door? Or Traveling Man?" They were two of the better-class gay clubs Blair frequented.

"No, man. I'm at Odds. I'm kinda in trouble, Jim." The words were still slurry, but he was getting clearer. Sobering up some? Odds was one of the trashiest places in town, lower on the scale than a dive. Jim hated it when Blair went to places like that.

In seconds he was in the truck, the phone still to his ear. "Tell me."

"Man, I didn't want to wake you but I got no ID on me and they called the locals. I don't want the office to find out."

"Just sit tight. I'll be there in thirty and I'll take care of it." He listened for the mumble of assent, then disconnected, driving fast.

Odds. The police called. He hadn't shot anyone, he would have told Jim if it was that serious, right away. But he'd been quiet and unhappy, really, since the baby was born.

Knowing how his Guide loved children -- knowing that he would most likely never have any of his own -- Jim understood his mood and hadn't tried to coax him out of it. He just wished it didn't seem to drive Blair further into what could only be called degrading behavior, like anonymous sexual encounters at places like Odds.

Probably a bar fight, and he couldn't keep out of it. Jim grimaced. His partner avoided violence, but when it was thrust upon him he protected himself, and his loved ones, fiercely. His sense of duty was almost as well developed as Jim's.

***

There was a small crowd outside the converted warehouse, mostly just talking, and two patrol cars, lights flashing. An ambulance, doors open. One uniformed officer, a stout woman, tried to stop him as he pushed his way through the dented metal double-doors.

"Excuse me," he mumbled. When she put an arm out and actually stepped in front of him he sighed and pulled out his badge. "Ellison. I'm with the Bureau."

"We didn't call any feds."

"It's *personal*," he snarled. She backed down and waved him through.

Blair's voice, angry and beginning to rise, caught him immediately. "I told you, he jumped me and
I defended myself!

From behind a door behind the bar. Jim was there.

"Yeah, we're supposed to believe you beat the shit out of that guy, a little -" a man made a
disgusted noise, then looked up when the door opened.

In a plain chair, in a corner, blood on his face, his clothes torn, one eye swelling shut. Blair. He
looked up and the relief in his eyes made Jim's knees weak.

"Who're you? His boyfriend?!" one of the men, the one who had been shouting, growled at Jim.

"No, his partner." Crossing directly to Blair, he brushed sticky hair back from his face and did a
quick assessment of his vitals before standing and pulling his badge again.

The oldest cop, not the asshole who had yelled, took it and studied it.

"He's a fed?"

"My partner."

"Your partner's a fag, man." rude-boy started, but the older man made a sharp gesture.

"There's a news flash, Einstein," Blair muttered. Jim rested a hand on his shoulder, squeezing a
warning.

The older cop gave Jim a hard look. His badge read 'Gardebrecht.' "Ellison. I've head that name
before."

Jim waited. The others looked expectant.

"Last year. That King Kong rapist. You caught him."

"Actually, he did." Giving Blair a shake, Jim saw that his eyes were clouded. He was still pretty
drunk, even with the adrenaline in his system. "He got the medal."

"Profiler?"

"The best." A quick grin.

"Heard those guys are crazy."

"He has his moments."

There was a thoughtful silence as Gardebrecht looked from the older man to the younger,
considering.

"Tell you what, Ellison. Catching that guy was a big deal. I'll let your partner tell us his story one
more time and you'll help me decide what to do."

"Sounds fair." Jim turned and leaned over Blair, shaking him until his eyes focused on the bigger
man's face. "Hey, Chief. What happened? Report." The last told the younger man that he wanted
to hear it like a report, unemotional, unadorned.

There was a minute of worry for Jim, then Blair spoke. He wasn't quite clear, but he was coherent.

"I was coming in from the back..." He winced as Jim grimaced, knowing that his friend understood
exactly what that meant -- that he'd ducked into the alley for sex, as many men came here to do -- "...and this guy starts hassling me. He's got his hands all over me, he's telling me that I can't say no..." He stopped for a minute, closing his eyes. The large hand on his shoulder patted gently. "Then he grabbed my shirt and tore it. He said I gave it away and he might as well have a sample." The clouded blue eyes hardened as he spoke and a couple of the cops made gagging noises.

The muscle in Jim's jaw twitched violently. Blair knew *exactly* how that sounded. But he didn't try to soften it, didn't cut himself any slack. Tonight he'd followed his baser impulses and he wasn't going to hide it, not even from Jim.

"I hit him -- he hit me back." Slender fingers touched the swollen eye, the brow crusted with drying blood. "Then he tried to pin me against the wall, banged my face on it a couple of times...I wasn't about to stand there and let that pig rape me." His voice was suddenly cold and Jim saw the shocked awareness in the eyes of the cops who watched him with contempt: *This little man is dangerous.* "So I took him down. No quarter, Jim."

"Absolutely." Jim met Gardebrecht's eyes levelly. "No quarter. It's what I've always taught you. Protect me, protect yourself."

The older cop cocked his head, lips pursed.

"How bad is the guy hurt?" Jim asked. Blair was slumping to the right, his head barely brushing Jim's good leather coat. Stroking Blair's head once, he waited for the answer, knowing his young friend was going to crash any minute now that Jim was there and he'd told his story.

"Couple of broken ribs, broken leg, broken jaw. Guy must be 6'4", weigh close to 250." There was some mild awe that the little fag had managed to do that kind of damage. "He's claiming he-" he gestured at Blair, whose eyes were sliding shut, "attacked him. But he doesn't want to press charges."

"Any witnesses?" Jim knew that they didn't need the other guy's cooperation to prosecute Blair.

"About a dozen, maybe two that'll stand up to a jury."

"How about we drop this now? The Chief here won't press charges against that guy for attempted rape and that guy won't for assault. Sounds like he's hurt bad enough to remember this for a long time."

Gardebrecht thought it over. The other cops didn't look happy about it.

"That's fair." he said. "Just keep your partner out of this neighborhood for a while, willya? We don't need that guy's friends hunting him down for revenge."

"Deal." Jim said. He stooped and shook Blair again. "Hey, Chief, all settled. I'm going to take you home now. Maybe you better crash at my place."

"Nah, the baby'll be crying," the younger man protested loudly. "Becca doesn't need me around like this."

"She took the baby to bed with her, buddy, he's sleeping." Jim grinned as he got him to his feet. "My wife would kill me if I left him alone like this," he told Gardebrecht casually. He met the uniform cop's dark eyes and saw a glimmer of understanding. "Look, we owe you one. You need a favor, call me."
"Oh, I will." Gardebrecht just watched as Jim half dragged, half-carried his battered, drunken partner out of the room.

The single female cop who'd witnessed the scene opened the door for him and gave him a smile. "You're a good partner," she said softly. "No..." he sighed, maneuvering the smaller man through the door. "I let him get like this."

***

Blair was completely passed out by the time they got to the house. Opening his door, Jim shook his head as the younger man simply slid off the seat to the driveway. He picked him up and carried him to the door, where he had to use a knee and some tricky balancing to get the electronic keycard into the slot.

Through the family room, up the stairs, to the right. Last door on the right, just past the girls' room. Technically it was the guestroom, for Becca's family to use when they visited. He frowned at that thought -- her parents were due in the next day to see the new baby, and they made it clear they had no use for Blair -- but Jim thought of it as Blair's room.

He laid Blair on the bed, and calmly stripped him. There was an awkward, slightly embarrassing moment when he realized his partner wasn't wearing any underwear -- and that he wore a second gold ring in a place he'd never told Jim about -- but he just flipped the covers over him and went for a washcloth.

He was gently bathing the bruised face, smell turned way down to escape the raw scents of sex and semen and blood that his friend was emanating, when Blair woke suddenly, clutching at him, pulling him close.

"Hey, Chief, easy there."

"Jim!" The outburst was accompanied by a blush he could see in the darkness. "Oh, sorry, man, just spooked..." Blair released him right away, one hand nervously brushing invisible wrinkles from Jim's shirt. "I'm home?"

"You're at my place." Jim finished washing his face, hearing the wince and hissed breath as he tried to scrub off the crusted blood.

"Leave it, I'll get it in the shower in the morning."

"About the morning, Chief..."

A stare, and then a nod. "They're coming, that's right. I'll be gone before they get here." Becca's parents and her brother Allen considered themselves tolerant because they treated Blair as if he were invisible rather than as a leper (at least in Jim's presence); for the sake of peace between Jim and his in-laws, Blair would beat a strategic retreat.

If Jim thought to protest, all he needed was to remember the Christmas three years before.

*Blair had taken the girls onto his lap for a story out of Tara's new picture book; Mrs. Carr, heading back into the room, had dropped her teacup with a crash, rushed into the room and snatched Tara away, gesturing to Allen to take Jessi. Both of the girls had started crying and Blair's beloved redhead had clung to him stubbornly. Blair himself had been too shocked to react, other than to automatically stroke Jessi's hair and try to calm her when Allen backed off.  


Becca and Jim had rushed into the room, worried, Mr. Carr right behind them, and when Mrs. Carr explained everything so calmly and rationally Jim had gone off on them all, stunning Becca with the depth of his rage. Only Blair's quiet voice had calmed him as he gathered his things and left, wishing desperately that he could stay and comfort the crying children.

After Jim's dressing-down the in-laws had calmed somewhat, but they were still anxious and uncomfortable around the younger man. Mr. Carr had apologized for his wife, saying that she had just been 'startled,' and Blair had taken it graciously. They'd come to an uneasy truce that allowed the children access to all their loved ones over the holidays; Blair didn't do "anything overt" (in the Carr's words; "Like what, fuck the turkey?" Blair had snarled once, and Jim had nearly driven into a telephone pole) and Mrs. Carr and Allen avoided him. He slept at his own place and came over in the middle of the night to be there when the kids woke up on Christmas morning, often keeping them quiet and occupied until the other adults rose, always Jim first. But the tension was there and he knew the kids could feel it.

"Just wake me early," Blair added.

They both grinned as the thin wail of a newborn baby rose across the hall.

"I don't think that will be a problem." Standing, Jim watched Blair lie back and get comfortable. It was only with Sentinel hearing that he picked up the next words, but he answered them with enough emotion for Blair to feel as well as hear his response.

"I'm sorry, Jim."

"I am too, Blair. But as long as you're okay. That's all I want."

Blair's reply was slurred, by sleep or alcohol or something else Jim didn't want to think about, it didn't matter.

"As long as you're my partner, I'll be okay."

Finally Jim could go back to his center of gravity. Lying in bed, holding his exhausted wife in his arms, watching his newborn son nurse peacefully, Jim felt at peace. A peace that wouldn't be complete without the kind, brilliant, exasperating man sleeping across the hall.

*********************************************************************

(2006)

"Jim. Hey."

Jim stopped still, the office door behind him swinging shut on its own.

"Chief? You okay?" He recovered and crossed to his desk, to sit in the comfortable chair Blair had given him for his birthday this year and lean forward, studying the smaller man.

Blair was working, quietly and diligently; not fidgeting, not fussing, not chattering. He was in another odd mood.

They had been partners for so long now. Three years at the cascade PD. Six years here. And sometimes even Jim Ellison didn't understand his strange partner.
These moods had become more frequent over the last two years. Jim had watched, and worried, and tried to get Blair to talk about it...but the younger man just smiled at him and shook his head, his long hair, now barely dusted with grey, swinging around his face. "I'm growing up, Jim," he'd say, teasing. "Isn't that what you always wanted?"

"Fine, Jim. Late night," was all he said now. The older man knew he could finish the script, but, really, what was the point?

{Not if it means you have to be sad, Chief.} Jim finished the familiar conversation in his head, watching Blair work on a report, quiet and quick. {Not if it means seeing you so unhappy.}

"Are you coming to dinner tonight?"

Blair's face lit with real pleasure as he looked up again.

"Wouldn't miss it."

"You haven't been over very much lately."

Now Blair flashed him a patented leer.

"I've been busy...you know?"

As always, that expression got a reluctant grin from Jim and a headshake. "Got to get you settled down, Chief." He picked up the folder that lay in the middle of his pristine desk. The old Jim was alive and well in this office.
Chapter 3

"Oh, gods..." the groan rolled from Blair's belly to ooze from his wide-open mouth. "more...."

From behind him a man's voice chuckled, breath warm on quivering skin. "You have the prettiest ass I've ever seen. Like what I'm doing?"

"If I liked it... anymore I'd be dead now," the words were broken by gasps. "Oh, fuck me."

The chuckle was louder this time.

"Just relax. We'll get to that."

Lying on his belly across a couch in a dark upstairs corner of a club, his body quivering with hunger, Blair let his mind slip, for just a minute, acknowledging, briefly, the absolute stupidity of what he was doing. No name, no privacy, no condom.

{If Jim knew, he'd kill me himself.} the thought sent another, darker shiver through his taut form, and he felt the stranger stand behind him and prepare him for entry. {But for now, this is all that matters.}

Blair gave himself up to the swirling ocean of lust gladly, eager for relief, desperate to forget, if only for this little while.

Less than an hour later he padded his way back down the concrete stairs that led to the main floor. He ached all over, mostly his lower body, but his ribs were sore as well. Probably bruised. The first guy he'd taken this night had been big and mean and wrapped his arms around him so tight...it was a pleasant reminder of the pounding he'd taken, sad remembrance of who he'd gotten it from.

Not whom he wanted. Never whom he wanted.

Several men smiled and greeted him when he passed the bar. Over the years this had become a favored spot for him, and he'd become very popular. Even now, no longer the youngest beauty in the place, he drew their eyes. His grace and style, the assured self-confidence, the hint of pain in his eyes...the vivid hunger. It drew them.

They wanted him. He could have any man in the place. And he picked and chose according to whim, seeking solace in the arms of strangers, shrouding his identity in anonymity.

It wasn't enough.

Hadn't been for a long time.

"Have a good time?"

The low, musical voice seemed to float to his ears. Deep, deep baritone, it caught his attention, pulled him out of his musings.

He stopped, and glanced at the bar.

A tall black man was watching him, smiling. It was the kind of smile Blair didn't often see in one
of these places. A smile that said 'I'd like to get to know you better ...maybe even with your clothes on.'

A smile like that usually set off every alarm in Blair's beleaguered heart. But tonight, that smile seemed to offer the tiniest bit of hope.

Slowly, he turned, and his eyes widened as he studied the man who had spoken to him. Folded onto a bar stool he was taller than Blair...how tall would he be when he stood? His hands were clasped loosely between spread knees...and they were huge. He was definitely pushing some buttons for the smaller man.

His eyes were dark and calm and....kind.

"Guess so." Blair's shrug came so naturally, fit the atmosphere so perfectly, even Blair had begun to believe it. "Same old, same old."

"I'd like a chance to change that. If you'd like to give me one." Kind eyes in a calm face. Lined from years of smiling. Blair didn't know how much his eyes revealed when he met those dark ones.

"You want to go someplace quiet?" The words were devoid of inflection, a test for this man who didn't seem to belong here.

Now he stood, and Blair's eyes followed him up...and up.

"Oh, shit." his grin summoned a smile to the tall man's face.

"There's a diner a couple of streets over," the man said. "Want to follow me there?"

{He didn't ask me to ride with him. He wants to go to a diner, not a hotel.}

"Yeah." Blair's grin softened. "Walk me to my car?"

"Sure. You can protect me if someone jumps me." The man grinned, teasing; Blair wondered what he'd say if he knew that Blair could protect him. He'd taken on guys this big before, and at least held them off long enough to get to his weapon, or until Jim arrived to save his ass -- he always did in time.

They walked in silence.

He arrived at the diner a few minutes after Blair. In the bright light he looked even bigger and Blair stared a little as he stopped beside the booth Blair had chosen and held out a huge hand.

"Hi. I'm Phillip."

Taking the hand, feeling the strength in the grip as it engulfed his own, Blair made a decision. He seldom used a name, it usually wasn't important to the men he wanted. "Blair."

They ordered coffee. After several minutes of glances and quick grins, Phillip shook his head.

"One of us better say *something*."

"Okay." Sitting back, projecting nonchalance, Blair played with a toothpick while he spoke. "I've seen you before. Why haven't you ever spoken to me?"

"You don't pussyfoot, do ya?" Copying Blair's slouch, the man's grin faded. "I didn't think you'd say yes."
"I say yes to a lot."

"But I'm not asking for sex."

That got Blair's attention, but he hid it well. "Then what were you doing in there?"

"Watching you." Now Phillip looked embarrassed.

Blair picked up his coffee and sipped, suddenly reminded of Simon Banks. Jim's old captain had been stunned when Blair followed Ellison, but now they were friends. Simon had gone into private security and was doing well. Darryl, a detective on the Cascade PD, was due to give him his first grandchild any day now.

"Hey. You still here?" That wonderful voice rumbled like a slow quake. Blair shivered, imagining it in the depths of passion.

"Memories, man." A sudden bright grin, meant to put things back on track.

Lust. Passion. To drown his hunger, fill his loneliness for a while. That's what Blair Sandburg was looking for. Wasn't it?

"You don't have to cop attitude with me," Phillip said, so very softly. "I'd like to know you, Blair. More of you than you can give me in bed."

"Are you sure of that, man?" Feeling exposed, Blair grasped his shields more tightly about him.

"Yeah." Still gentle, still soft, still beautiful.

"This is weird." With a sigh Blair dropped the facade, and saw Phillip's awareness when he smiled. "I haven't...made small talk since the last office party."

"What do you do?"

The seemingly-innocent question brought all of Blair's defenses back online. "Why?"

At first the Bureau had tolerated him because it wanted Ellison. But now Blair was one of the best profilers on staff, and they needed him as much as they needed Jim. But he wouldn't survive the publicity of an outing or other scandal. His job was to backup Jim, profile the psychos so they could catch them, and keep his private life private.

"Because I think I like you."

It was a simple, honest answer. Blair could read people, better than Jim, and something told him that this man was telling the truth.

"Could we leave that for later?" he asked gently. "It's not something I'm comfortable explaining to someone I just met."

"I can understand that." Though he looked disappointed, Phillip didn't press. "I'll tell you something about myself, then. I teach physics at the university."

"You have a beautiful voice," Blair said quietly. "I would have thought..."


Feeling as if he should share something of himself, Blair picked a topic that was relatively safe
while still being interesting. To him, at least. "My academic field is anthropology."

"Really? I just read the most interesting article about gestalt theory and closed societies. It focused on police forces..."

{Oh, shit. That's my article he's talking about. What do I say now?}

Blair knew he would one day return to his calling. One day his need for Jim would fade or become too much, and he would go, take up where he left off. But to really do that he would need to have a presence. To that end, he made it a point to write and publish at least two strictly anthropological articles every year. Most focused on the type of work he did now, but several had been true anthropological studies, done with research and care.

And this man had read the latest one.

To protect his standing at the Bureau, he used only his last name when writing -- Dr.B.P.Sandburg. They were all published in association with Rainier, who didn't mind letting one of their successful students give them free publicity. Most people probably thought he was a tenured professor there.

{This is so weird.} the thought rang in his head as they discussed the article, Blair saying only that he'd read it.

"You seem to know a lot about this," Phillip said. Both of his hands were resting on the table. He moved a long finger and it brushed Blair's.

Blair gasped softly and met Phillip's eyes.

"Yeah, well...it's more of a hobby now." Blair shrugged.

"I doubt that."

The potentially revealing conversation was cut off by the buzzing of Blair's cell phone, safely stashed in the inside pocket of his heavy black leather jacket.

"I gotta get this," he said bashfully, pulling it out. Only Jim would be calling him this late. The Ellison family were the only ones with the number, but it was way too late for one of the kids to need to talk to him.

"Um, hey." He caught himself before he snapped 'Sandburg,' his usual greeting.

"Chief? Where are you?"

"I'm out, Jim, or hadn't you noticed?" He grinned at the pun and noticed Phillip rolling his eyes.

"Are you...busy?" Jim said it so carefully.

"Not anymore."

There was a brief silence and then Jim sighed. "Good. We've got something to take care of. Can I pick you up?"

"You on the car phone?"

"I'm on 10th, just past Scott. Tell me where you are and I'll pick you up."
With a wince Blair thought about what it cost Jim to talk about this. The very fact that he knew which red-light district Blair currently preferred was news to the younger man.

"I'm at the diner on 12th and Harrison."

"Oh." He heard the relief in Jim's voice. He was undoubtedly glad that he wouldn't have to pick Blair up from some seedy club. "I'll be there in ten minutes."

"I'll be out front."

Closing the phone, he tucked it away with more care than the act required before looking up at Phillip. "I've gotta go."

"I guessed."

Taking a minute, Blair wondered what the tall black man had made of the conversation. {Do I want to give this guy a chance? Or have I blown it already? What did he think of that?}

"It's work," he began to explain, but Phillip shook his head. He wasn't smiling anymore. {What does he....*oh*.}

"That was my partner." Leaning forward, Blair rested a hand close to Phillip's. "The guy I *work* with. He's like way married. I'm godfather to his kids."

{Was that enough?}

"You don't have to explain it to me." Phillip's wonderful voice was rougher now. With disappointment?

"Yeah, I think I do." Watching him for any sign of rejection, Blair covered the big hand with his own slender one. The other man watched his face. "It's been a long time since a guy wanted to talk to me. That's mostly my fault, I've made it pretty clear to everyone that all I want is a good fuck, but nobody has tried to get past that in...just too long, man."

Phillip nodded. He was listening.

"I can't tell you everything about me right away. My job...isn't exactly compatible with alternative lifestyles. They tolerate me because I'm good at what I do...and Jim stands up for me."

"Jim's your partner."

"Almost ten years now." Blair grinned suddenly. "My best friend."

"So why are you telling me this?"

"Because you said you wanted a chance...and I'd like to give you one."

The big hand beneath his turned over and their fingers twined together.

Phillip smiled. "I can wait until you're ready to tell me more."

Knowing that time was running out, Blair said something he hadn't in years. "Would you have dinner with me?"
"Absolutely."

They were both grinning like idiots now.

"There's a Greek place over on Kemp...Tito's?"

"I know it."

"I'll meet you there, tomorrow, at seven, okay?" Blair's grin widened and his thumb lightly
caressed the back of Phillip's hand. "They dance on Friday nights."

A dark minivan pulled into the parking lot and rolled slowly past the windows. Blair sighed.

"That's Jim. I gotta go."

***

Stopping the car, Jim focused in on his partner...he was sitting in a booth across from a really big
black guy...and holding his hand.

{Careful, careful Chief. That almost looks romantic.} Jim shook his head ruefully. Blair didn't do
romantic, as far as he knew.

As if to prove his point, his partner stood and went around to lean down and kiss the tall man, long
and hard. {Probably someone he just met, too. Damn, he has got to stop doing that. One of these
days he's going to get into trouble.}

When Blair hopped into the van Jim had to suppress a shudder. He automatically reached for the
AC control, blasting it, and saw Blair sigh.

"Clothes in the back, Chief." he said.

This wasn't the first time Jim had grabbed Blair from a night out, and he'd known what to expect,
but seeing it was still a shock. The super-tight leather pants with a metallic black mesh shirt, nipple
ring glinting in the overhead light....his hair was still tossed from earlier.

And Blair knew that he smelled, too strongly for Jim to block it out. The Sentinel had difficulty
blocking his Guide's scent in any case, hence the air conditioner, the cold helping to numb his
nose.

It was almost four a.m. Blair had been clubbing since ten the night before. He'd gotten himself
fucked no less than three times, by three different guys, not counting one blowjob he'd given and
one he'd received. And he had no doubt that Jim could smell each and every one of them.

Sometimes he was sorry Jim had to see him like this, but he wasn't going to apologize. This was
who he was.

Going to the back of the van, he stripped efficiently and crawled into the casual clothes and a
sports jacket stored there just for these occasions. In a fit of whimsy he left the mesh shirt on
beneath the dark sweater and button-down blue shirt. Tucking the end of his belt into a loop, he
adjusted his trousers and went back to the front to sit and buckle in.

Wordlessly Jim handed him a pick and elastic tie for his hair. The spritz gel lay on the dashboard.

"Always taking care of me, huh, Jim? Thanks." Blair went to work on his hair while Jim covered
the case and drove.
"Doesn't he know how much it hurts me when he acts like this?" Jim felt an old, familiar sorrow well in his heart. "Why does he do this to himself?"

"Just returning the favor, Chief," was all he said.

***

They were driving out of town before Blair spoke up again. He'd been just sitting, thinking a little. He'd just made a huge change in his life and it frightened him somewhat, but excited him as well.

{Maybe I can still have a life with someone else in it. Someone who isn't Jim.}

Although he felt lonely most of the time, it seldom bothered him. He'd always been a loner. A cheerful, friendly, outgoing one, but still very private and mostly solitary. Jim was the only one he'd let in for years, and Jim had brought all the other people he was close to with him; Simon, Becca, the girls. His relationship with his mother never changed, Naomi's love the bedrock of his soul, present though she rarely was.

{Someone to go home to. To argue with about the dishes. To snuggle with to watch football -- no,} he grinned suddenly { -- I guess it would be basketball.}

The prospect was so enticing it was really quite scary. So he spoke up, though he would normally wait until Jim felt ready to brief him, not wanting his Sentinel asking any questions that might be raised by his sudden slight rise in heartbeat. "How far are we headed?" They passed the city limits marker.

"Seacouver. They've found a body, it fits the Wannabe profile."

"Scheiss."

Settling deeper into the comfortable seat, Blair closed his eyes. If he dozed off it would be okay, Jim knew that he often made case connections while asleep, especially in that half-asleep-but-not-really state between awake and dreams.

Wannabe. The name he had tagged his first serial killer with, because of his apparent fascination with Jeffrey Dahmer. Blair had discovered the pattern, picked out the other cases. Done the things a profiler does... and, as often happened, the case was now considered 'his'.

If every agent and every profiler had a case that they were best known for, Wannabe was Blair's. And whether he solved it or the guy disappeared off the face of the earth, his name would always be tagged to it, like Samantha Waters and her Jack-of-all-Trades. She was task force, not partnered like Blair, but they had met once. She had a daughter and a best friend to keep her sane, the way Blair had Jim and Becca and the kids.

{At least *my* killer isn't fixated on *me*.} he thought with relief. {Her 'Jack' had murdered her husband and driven her temporarily from the Bureau.}

They'd never gotten close to Wannabe. He was a traveler; there were cases matching his profile in six different states. They had a vague physical description from a young man who had escaped him, but Wannabe's use of date-rape drugs had fogged his memory. His escape had been a lucky accident.

Wannabe picked them up in a club, went back to their homes with them. Always managed to drug them, then raped and killed them. And then things got interesting.
He would cut out an organ -- usually the heart, sometimes the liver and once a kidney -- and cook it up right there in the man's kitchen. Then sit down and eat it, or most of it, often using the mutilated body as a table.

And he always left a note, written in black sharpie marker on the victim's left buttock.

"For Jeffrey."

***

When Jim finally dropped Blair off late the next day, he was depressed and exhausted and knew he'd have to rush to make his date.

{Do I really want to go through with this? If I stand the guy up he's never going to speak to me again, I know that.}

Sitting on his couch in his messy living room, toys and stacks of books and magazines and notes and files covering most horizontal surfaces, he looked around.

Without the children here it was so empty.

Away from Jim and the family, his life was empty. And he had to be away from them, for his own sanity, a lot of the time.

"It's time to grow up," he told himself, as Jim used to tease, before the man realized that he didn't really like what Blair was growing into.

He showered quickly, dressed casually -- jeans and boots and sweater, suede jacket -- and was only a few minutes late.

As he had suspected, Phillip was there before him. He stood and touched Blair's shoulder, bending down to kiss his cheek, but Blair tilted his head and met him with his mouth.

Phillip kissed softly, warmly, and then stood back, looking at him.

"Looks better." He smiled, a little sad.

"Looks normal." Blair corrected, sitting. He ordered an ouzo and studied the man who sat across from him.

Then Phillip began talking, to break the ice, and Blair let his heart listen for the first time in ten years.

***

"I thought this was about more than that." Phillip scolded when Blair pressed himself to him, rubbing a very obvious erection against the tall man's thigh.

"But it's about that too." Blair purred, holding onto Phillip's hips, his face pressed between the much taller man's pecs. "C'mon, man. I don't go more than a week, haven't in years. It's been months."

Phillip's huge hands closed on Blair's shoulders, pulled him back slightly.

"Are you saying that if I don't fuck you, you'll find somebody who will?"
Blair pulled away, angry.

"That was way harsh, man." He turned away and began looking for his coat. They were in a small private room at a popular Chinese restaurant. Tonight had been Phillip's turn to buy dinner.

A big hand closed on his shoulder and turned him back around, unresisting. "I'm sorry, little one. I didn't mean to be cruel."

"Could have fooled me." Unwilling to forgive yet.

"It's just...I'm just afraid. I've been used before. And I care about you. Deeply. But we've been dating for almost three months and I still don't know your last name. I know you've called the university, you know I'm who I say I am. When are you going to trust me?"

Sighing, Blair stared at the floor for a minute while Phillip waited patiently.

"Why don't we go someplace private and talk?" he said at last, looking up, meeting the dark brown eyes with his dark blue. "My place?"

"You have a place?" Phillip teased gently.

"Nah, I live at Jim's." It was more true than he wanted to admit, especially with Wannabe lurking in the shadows again. No leads, no new information. He'd probably left town. "You want to ride with or follow me?"

"I'd better follow. There's an early practice scheduled for tomorrow."

They were quiet as they walked out to their cars, each silently acknowledging this change in their relationship.

Phillip's face was carefully neutral when he pulled into Blair's driveway, behind the antique Corvair. He'd teased the younger man about it once, and Blair had cheerfully defended his choice of vehicle. He'd paid an arm and a leg to find one and have it fully restored, and the end result was less than beautiful to an aesthete, but his love for the silver convertible was clear.

It was a nice little house, in a nice little neighborhood. There were bigger, ranch-style homes a few streets over, in a more expensive area, but this seemed to be quiet.

"My place." Blair grinned up at him as he unlocked the door.

The living room was large and comfortably furnished, but cluttered. Books, papers, journals, magazines and...toys?

Phillip nearly tripped trying to avoid stepping on what appeared to be a giant stuffed panda, and Blair hastily began gathering things from the floor.

"JJ seems to have missed his dad's neatness gene." Blair piled toys into a chest in the corner. "He's worse than I am sometimes."

"JJ?" Phillip watched with amusement as the younger man tidied up. He'd never figured Blair for a fussy. Then he spotted the wall of framed photos in the hallway. "Do you mind?" He nodded toward them.

"That's why I brought you here. Look around. Make yourself at home." Blair half-grinned. "I'm going to make some tea, do you want some?"
"No, I'm good." Taking the invitation at face value, the tall man moved to the hall.

Family pictures. But whose family? A red-headed woman, clearly Blair's mother. They shared the same smile, the same bright eyes. Pictures of a younger Blair receiving diplomas.

A tall, muscular, balding white man. With his arm around Blair, on fishing trips, at a basketball game. Then the same man, with a woman and then many with the same woman and varying arrangements of children. Blair was present in most of them. School pictures of the same children.

"JJ." Blair came up beside him and pointed at the little blond boy. "Jessi. I was there when Becca delivered her, Jim was away at a conference. That was intense, let me tell you." His delighted grin of memory brought a smile from Phillip. "Tara, bane of the Ellison household." He sipped his mug of tea. "That's Jim and Becca. They've been my family for a long time. Becca's pregnant again, too."

Studying the pictures, Phillip slipped an arm around Blair and felt the smaller man press close to his side. He was shaking faintly.

"My diplomas." Blair nodded past the pictures. Phillip shifted to see them.

"Blair Peace Sandburg. Doctor of Anthropology." he glanced at Blair, startled. "You have a doctorate?"

"Yeah."

"You wrote that article." Phillip's tone was mildly accusing.

Blair shrugged. "Gotta keep my hand in. It's not what I do now."

"So just what do you do now?"

Blair pulled away and took his hand, leading him down the hall. They passed a bedroom filled with computer equipment and a daybed that was covered with more toys. Blair grinned.

"My office. The kids like to take turns staying over on the weekends."

Phillip just grinned. He was enjoying this first look into the real life of the man he was falling in love with. He allowed himself to be led into the master bedroom.

It was dominated by a king size black platform bed, covered with a dark marbled-green silk comforter. The floor was dark slate tile, oddly warm beneath his feet. A heated floor. He'd noticed Blair's dislike for cold, but this, combined with the huge silk-covered bed, was positively hedonistic.

There was a dresser with a tall mirror, a nightstand, a chest at the foot of the bed, and a tall TV cabinet on the far wall.

An ancient tapestry hung on the wall above the bed, the faded colors still vibrant. Phillip stopped at the door to study it.

"Lucifer being cast out of heaven," he said softly.

Beside him Blair nodded and squeezed his hand. "Yes. It's a reminder." Not elaborating on that cryptic statement, he went to the dresser and picked up a wallet.

Phillip came in and sat on the edge of the bed. Blair handed him the wallet. The big man turned it
over in his hands curiously. It looked like some sort of identification holder.

Meeting Blair's eyes for a long moment, the man opened it. And gasped. "You're kidding."

"Nope. Wanna see my gun?" Blair managed to say it with innuendo.

"You have a gun."

"Three, actually, but I usually only carry the Glock."

Phillip handed back the Bureau ID. "Well, I understand your paranoia now."

"It comes with the territory."

"But, you just don't...look like a federal agent." Phillip's gesture took in Blair's hair, the clothes -- Blair was in jeans and t-shirt and sweater and sneakers, very low-key.

"I'm a profiler. Psychological law enforcement." Blair grinned. He went to Phillip and pushed his knees apart to stand between them, resting his hands on the black man's waist. "So, I'm forgiven?"

"I understand now." Wrapping those long arms around him, Phillip pulled Blair in for a kiss. A hotter kiss than any they'd shared so far.

When they broke for air Blair was panting slightly. "Will you fuck me now?"

"You're impossible, you know that?" Great hands gripped the sides of his head. "Not tonight, little one. Let's take this slow."

"I don't do slow very well." Blair squirmed against Phillip's crotch, making the big man all-too-aware of their mutual arousal.

"I didn't say we weren't going to do *anything*." Lying back slowly, Phillip pulled Blair down on top of him.

"Thank god." Blair's chuckle was cut off when Phillip took his mouth again.

Later, when they were lying together quietly, Phillip stirred, sitting up. Drowsy and warm, Blair snuggled closer as he moved away, waking slightly.

"Where ya going?" his hand stroked the big man's thigh, a tad anxiously.

"I have an early practice." Lying back, he gathered him close again, enjoying the feel of him in his arms. Although he had known this man was sensual and seductive and sexy as hell, he still hadn't expected the strength of his own reaction to him. And he'd never imagined that a man who made an art form out of anonymous sex would be so affectionate afterwards. But he gave great cuddle, and took it better.

Letting himself be gathered, Blair wrapped his arms around the broad chest and nuzzled at the muscular column of throat. "Stay the night," he whispered into an ear before rimming it delicately. "I'll set the alarm for you."

"Are you sure, little one?" A hand in his hair tugged Blair's head back so Phil could look into his eyes. "I need you to be sure."
"Why?" The soft question was all he'd come to expect -- and dread -- from this man who knew nothing of subtlety in his personal life.

"Because..." a gulp, and then Phillip's hands framed that face, cradling it, thumbs stroking fine-carved cheekbones. "Because I'm falling in love with you."

A sigh, and those eyes closed for a moment. Phillip spoke again before they had a chance to open.

"I don't need you to say it back. I know things are... different, for you. I just want you to know, to understand, that I'm not playing here. Not anymore."

Without looking at him, his eyes still shut, Blair rested his cheek on Phillip's shoulder.

{If this were Jim, he could hear my heart and that would give him his answer.}

A deeper sigh.

{If this were Jim.}

But it was never going to be Jim, and he, Blair, deserved whatever happiness he could get from his life. He might not be in love with Phillip now, but he cared for him deeply and didn't want to lose him.

{The love will come, if I let it.} He wasn't sure he believed that, but just this wonderful sensation -- being held in strong arms, in his own bed, in his own home, by a man who knew who and what he was -- it was enough to make him want to.

He couldn't say he loved him. Not yet. But there were other ways to tell him how he felt, without using those words.

Sitting up, he opened his eyes, his hands moving to Phillips's shoulders. The black man's hands still caressed his face, his dark chocolate eyes soft and maybe anxious.

"This is my room, Phil." One slender hand gestured idly. "I've lived here a bit longer than five years. Becca went with me when I bought the furniture...she laughed, said I was getting weirder every day."

She had smiled that sad smile at him as she said it, too. The one that said she knew what he was doing -- creating a shrine to his love for Jim, the place he would take the older man if he ever, ever had the chance. Knowing that he would not.

Blair had lifted the then-tiny baby Jessi from her stroller and let her choose the bed color by handing her a handful of silk swatches, which made the salesman in the exclusive store stare and Becca laugh.

Phillip's eyes drew him back to the present.

"No one has even been in this bed with me before." Blair met those eyes and hoped that his own showed the truth of that. "No one but the kids when they sleep over. Absolutely not a lover. Ever."

"I'm honored." A soft sigh, and then the big mouth covered Blair's, giving him little choice but to kiss back or drown in those eyes. When he pulled away Phillip was smiling, his sweetest, most loving smile. "I'll stay the night."

"Good." Pressing him down with both hands, Blair swung a leg over Phillip's narrow hips and
rubbed himself sensuously against the larger man's body. The sheet caught between them grew warm quickly. "But I don't think we're going to be sleeping." He curled his body over for a kiss.

A groan and Phil opened his mouth to him. "You are insatiable," he gasped when he could speak again.

"I have three months' time to make up." Blair answered, a whisper against the throat.

"I'm so glad."

****

"Hey, Becca." Blair appeared in the bedroom doorway. Becca was stirring, just rousing from the nap the baby she was carrying had demanded.

"Problem, Blair?"

"Aw, heck no. I've got them under control." He grinned. "And the family room is in one piece."

She listened for a minute, hearing only a peaceful hum from downstairs.

"I pulled out the Legos. We're building a castle."

"Jim will love that." They shared a grin. The man of the house had been pulled away again for a week-long seminar. Fortunately Blair wasn't expected to attend, so he was staying over to help out.

But it meant he hadn't seen Phillip all week.

"When I come for dinner next Friday, would you mind if I brought...a friend?"

Becca perked up. Blair hadn't brought a friend over in *years*. "I'd love it. Is he somebody special?"

"Um, yeah. Kinda. I guess so." Now Blair was looking at the floor, awkward.

"Anything he won't eat?"

Blair's eyebrows raised and she saw the joke in his eyes, stopped him before he could say it out loud.

"Don't you dare," she protested laughingly.

"Then don't feed me lines like that," he teased back. "No, I don't think there are any dietary restrictions you need to worry about. I'll help out, I know you're pretty tired lately." He came into the room and patted the small five-month swell of her belly gently. "This little guy seems to be giving you a harder time than the others."

"He's never still. Reminds me of somebody I know." She leaned closer and he put his arms around her to hug gently.

"Look, you go back to sleep. I'll take the kids out for dinner and we'll catch a movie, give you some quiet."

"That would be great." Sighing, she lay back.

"I'll have my cell, so you call if you need me."
She smiled. He kissed her cheek and went to leave the room.

"Blair?"

"Yeah?"

"No junk food, okay?"

"Sure thing." His bland response made her roll her eyes.

"I mean it."

"Yes, mom."
Jim heard the footsteps on the porch before the door opened. Setting aside the salad bowl, he turned to watch the fun. From the couch, Becca grinned encouragement.

Jim was nervous about meeting this man. He wanted to like him, really wanted to, for Blair's sake. The younger man would be so much better off if he would settle down with someone, and this must be serious, if he was bringing him to meet them.

{What if I can't stand him? What if he's a flame?} Firmly tamping down that flash of internal homophobia, Jim resolved that he would make sure Blair's date felt welcome.

Jess heard the footsteps as soon as Jim and was already pelting to the door when it opened, to throw herself into her favorite grown-up's arms. "Papa Bear!" Her toddler name for him had stuck and all the children used it now.

Jim heard an amused, very deep voice whisper from outside the door. "Papa Bear?"

Blair caught the girl up and squeezed her tight, making her squeal. Tara and JJ, who hadn't heard them until the door opened, were on him in a flash, JJ attaching himself to a leg and sitting on his foot and then Tara proceeded to climb him. Holding an arm out to the side, Tara dangling from it, Blair shuffled the rest of the way in.

Behind him was the black man Jim had seen him at the diner with. {Maybe he's been seeing him that long.} Jim thought hopefully. {Maybe this is serious.}

Dressed in dark slacks and a loose-fitting, flowing shirt, the man was huge. Jim Ellison was seldom impressed by the size of another man, but, damn. {He's gonna squash Blair.} The thought made him wince. He didn't like thinking about Blair having sex, knowing his friend's preferences as well as he did.

He stepped forward, reaching to close the door, casually removing Tara from Blair's arm. Jessi sat up on Blair's hip, not much shorter than him at seven, and studied the guest solemnly.

"Welcome. I'm Jim Ellison and this is my nightmare." Jim grinned and offered a hand.

"Phillip Dobbs. Six-eight."

"Huh?" Jim shook the hand and processed the non-sequitur. "That must be the first question you get."

"Not from me." Blair said, and Jim shook his head.

"Come into the kitchen, Phillip, and I'll get you a beer while Blair makes nice with the natives."

The thankful glance Blair threw him wasn't missed by either of the two men as they moved past him.

Jim stopped at the couch and introduced Phillip to Becca, who was resting again.

"I was going to bring a bottle of wine, but remembered your condition." Phillip smiled at her, and offered a brown paper sack he'd been holding behind his back. "So I thought this might go over better."
Becca pulled out a half-gallon of Haagen Dazs Rocky Road. "You're going to fit right in." Her smile was welcoming.

Blair managed to work his way to the second sofa, where he collapsed beneath his burden. The children swarmed over him. Tara set herself on the back of the couch behind him, and immediately began trying to free his hair from the leather tie so she could braid it. Jessi curled on his lap and watched Phillip warily.

Not one to be left out, JJ dug a favorite book from beneath the sofa and climbed up to sit beside Blair. "Read me, Papa Bear?" he asked politely. He was quieter and calmer than his sisters, more sensitive. It had surprised Blair when they finally determined that he was not a Sentinel.

Blair accepted the book, throwing a searching look at Becca. Phillip was in the kitchen with Jim, a beer in his hand, leaning against a counter, apparently comfortable. Becca smiled, an I-think-he's-great smile. Relieved, Blair smiled back and began the story.

"Alexander and the Terrible, Horrible, No Good, Very Bad Day."

As he read, Jessi watched Phillip and JJ listened intently, one hand tucked under Blair's arm. Above him Tara made a frustrated noise and Blair winced as she yanked, the leather being knotted too tight for her five-year-old hands to get untied.

"Here, let me."

Blair startled. He'd been concentrating on the story, forcing himself to relax, aware of Jessi's weight and warmth in his lap and JJ's stillness beside him, he hadn't noticed Phillip's approach.

He saw that Jim and Becca were watching.

Phillip quickly got the knot untied so Tara could have her way with his hair. Blair tipped his head back and gave him a smile, so sweet that Jim had to look away.

"Thank you, mister." Tara wasn't sure what to make of him.

"Guys, this is my friend Phillip. Phillip, this is Tara, Jessica, and James Junior."

"He's tall," JJ observed with three-year-old clarity.

"He's nice," Tara said decisively, with a shake of her blond mop.

Jessi cuddled closer, still reserved. "Is he your boyfriend, Papa Bear?"

Blair snuggled his arm tighter around her as Phillip rested a hand on Blair's shoulder, just a touch, but it told Jim all he wanted to know.

{He's in love with Blair. Good.}

Becca looked up and caught the look on his face, smiled her agreement.

"Yes, m'cushla. Phillip is my boyfriend."

"Messie Jessi doesn't have a boyfriend," Tara teased.

"Be nice, mtoto."
Dinner was a success, at least until they started tossing around names for the baby.

"Since it's a boy, Chief," Jim said as the adults quit chuckling over Jessi's request that the new baby be named Christopher Robin -- she'd started reading Pooh stories to JJ recently -- "I want you to let us call him Blair. I've got my Jim Junior -- " he reached over and tousled the quiet child's fair hair, earning a grin, "you need a namesake."

Becca was grinning at him. Feeling very Johnny-on-the-spot, Blair leaned back in his chair. His hands clenched in his lap nervously.

There was a touch on his back. Not the familiar comfort of Jim's touch, but the offer of comfort from Phillip, a man who loved him.

"It just wouldn't feel right, Jim." he said apologetically, welcoming that hand.

"Then maybe you could just choose the name." Becca said softly, watching Blair's face change, seeing the worry in his eyes, the anxiety. When all was said and done, she knew him even better than Jim did, because she knew the whole truth. "I'd like that."

Blair nodded, then thought a minute. Then he grinned, abashed. "I have a name, but you'll hate it."

Leaning into Jim's shoulder with a sigh, Becca shook her head, smiling, but Jim looked wary.

"Okay, Chief...how weird is it?"

"Benedict." Blair said softly. "It means 'Blessed'."

Jim groaned and chuckled, understanding right away. "Benedict."

"We could call him Ben." Becca smiled. "I like Ben."

"Benny!" Jessi said loudly. Blair watched Jim wince and turn down his hearing, but didn't mention anything to him. Phillip wasn't ready for that. Blair didn't know if he ever would be.

{How can I have a relationship if I can't tell him?} he wondered, sighing. The pressure of Phil's hand on his back increased. {He'll know something is going on eventually.} Meeting Jim's eyes across the table, he saw his worries reflected in them.

Becca saw the discomfort and tried to smooth it over. "Jessica, Tara, James and Benedict. That sounds like a well-rounded family."

"Jim, Becca, Blair, Jessi, Tara, JJ and Ben." Jim corrected, smiling. "That sounds like our family."

Phil's hand stroked Blair's back and he smiled when the worry on Blair's face eased, wondering what had put it there.

"Okay, Chief. This 'Next' will be Benedict Stephen Ellison." Raising his beer, Jim made a toast out of the announcement.

His brother wasn't the most frequent guest to their house, but they did keep in touch, sharing a much more relaxed relationship than they had as kids. And Stephen's confirmed bachelor status made him an excellent uncle. He'd always been friendly to Blair, too, having realized long ago how important the younger man was to his brother and not caring about the why.

"Hear, hear." Phillip moved his hand, sliding it under the table to take Blair's free one and hold it tightly. "To Benedict, and his mother."
Becca blushed and drank her milk. Afterwards Blair got the kids into the family room while Jim took Becca up to bed. She was tired again, and the morning sickness seemed intent on hanging around all day, every day.

The suggestion of "Want to watch a movie?" was greeted with shouts that he quickly hushed, knowing how tired Becca was.

Throwing a laser disc into the player, Blair chose one of his personal favorites, Disney's *Beauty and the Beast*. It had been re-released just a year ago, with extra footage added, and he'd promptly bought it for the kids. He'd given Jim and Becca the player years ago when the electronic toy first became really popular, a Christmas gift.

Settling on the sofa, he was surrounded by children; Jessi commandeered his lap, JJ used his leg for a pillow and Tara sat on the side not mostly occupied by her older sister. Giving Phillip an apologetic glance, Blair snaked a hand over the cushions to take his and hold it tightly.

When Jim came back down later and sat in the armchair JJ abandoned Blair for a chance to snuggle in his dad's lap. He scrambled up, Jim wrapping those strong arms around his son and kissing the top of his blond head.

The sight made Blair remember a conversation they'd had the day Jim Junior was born, standing outside the nursery window. *"My son will never know what it feels like to be rejected by his father. I'm going to do my best to hold him and hug him and give him all the love he needs, Chief, no matter how hard it is for me."*

Jim had kept his promise; now JJ liked nothing better than to sit in his father's arms and be held. And Jim liked few things better than sitting there holding him...even when Blair and the kids all sang "Be Our Guest" at the top of their lungs. Jim and Phillip both winced and shared a smile at it.

Jim walked them to the sidewalk. They had walked from Blair's house. "Becca is sorry she couldn't spend more time with you."

"I understand." Though he stood close to Blair, Phillip seemed to understand that he couldn't be affectionate with him here, in public, around Jim. "I had a good time."

"Very exciting around here. Next time we'll do dishes," Jim deadpanned. Blair snorted and punched him in the shoulder. "See you Sunday night, Chief?"

"Jim, I haven't missed a Sunday dinner in almost six years. What do you think?"

"I think you'd better bring dessert. And it better not be fruit."

With another snort Blair led Phillip away.

***

{What woke me?}

Walking through the dark house, Jim sat on the sofa, and leaned back, staring at the ceiling. He had scanned the house as he came down the stairs, ascertaining that all of the children were sleeping soundly. Becca was as well, fortunately. There was no one outside, no prowler or stray dog or late-night jogger.

With a Sentinel's instinct Jim threw his senses outwards, knowing exactly what he was looking for, checking in on his Guide with the same frequency and ease he'd used when they lived in the same
loft, then the same house.

Blair's was the heartbeat he knew best, Blair's scent the one forever imprinted on his mind, Blair's voice the one that drew him, calmed him, more than any other ever could. Even Becca and the children weren't as completely known to him as Blair was. Though it made him feel guilty sometimes, it was a fact of life for Jim. His Guide would always be there, a part of his soul.

And then he heard it. A low moan, muffled somewhat, distinctly of pain. Blair's pain.

"Ooooooh...*Phillip*," Blair moaned again.

Focusing in tighter, Jim could hear Blair moving restlessly, the sound of skin rubbing on the raw silk sheets he loved.

The deep rumbling voice that answered was barely recognizable, it was so husky with passion.

"Shhhh, little one. Take it easy. Relax. I'm almost in."

"Fuck!" Blair yelled suddenly, making Jim jump. "Oh, fuck!"

Shuddering in sympathetic pain, Jim gave a second's thought to what he was doing, but decided that he needed to listen, to be sure that this guy stopped what he was doing to Blair if Blair told him to.

{Like you don't know, Ellison, just say it. He's fucking him, fucking him in the ass with an apparently large dick.}

"Owww!" A howl from Blair. "Phillip! Stop." His friend was panting, almost sobbing. Jim heard the sound of skin-on-skin, fingers stroking through hair...Phillip was petting Blair, soothing him.

Jim stood. He could be at Blair's in less than five minutes if he took the alley.

"Okay. It's okay. Take a breather, little one. I'll pull out if you want." Phillip crooned. "You're so beautiful. I just can't help wanting to fuck you, your ass is so pretty."

There were more sounds of skin-on-skin. Jim tried not to imagine where those huge hands were now.

Still panting, Blair's sounds of distress diminished. After several more minutes, he whispered. Jim had his hearing turned up, or he would have missed it.

"It's okay. I'm okay now. Keep going."

"Are you sure?" Jim heard the concern in Phillip's voice and mentally stood down from his first instinct to dash over to Blair's place and break the man's neck.

"Yeah. I -- ungh -- want this, Phil. We've waited so long. C'mon, lover, give it to me hard."

"You asked for it." Phillip chuckled, a deep, dark sound, and Blair groaned in response.

"That's incredible, man. So big...you fill me so full...oh, god, Phil, baby...I need you." Blair's voice dropped to that whisper again and Jim could almost see his friend as he must look at this moment...naked on that big bed, his skin pale against the dark green of the sheets, his round ass high in the air, a throbbing erection hanging down below... "Fuck me, Phillip. Fuck me hard."

Jim's eyes flew open to banish that vision. Now worried that he'd hear more than he wanted to, Jim pulled his senses back in, and got up to have a beer.
A while later he tentatively checked back in, to be sure Blair was okay. He didn't try to justify it to himself, it was just something he had to do. Like all things that came with the Sentinel/Guide relationship, Jim just accepted this need.

A low laugh and kissing sounds. Then another chuckle and Blair's rough laughter, and a contented sigh from him.

Sitting again on his sofa in his dark, quiet house, Jim smiled despite his unease.

It sounded like his Blair was in love.

***

"Hhhhuh? What time izzit?" Blair rolled and landed firmly on the very large body that was currently sharing his bed. "Phillip?"

"It's yours," the black man sighed, reaching a long arm to the nightstand and picking up Blair's cell phone.

"Thanks, lover." Sitting up, feeling a hand lightly stroking his back, Blair answered the phone. "Sandburg."

Phillip sat up when Blair's voice changed to the soothing tones he recognized now. After four months as Blair's significant other, four months as a complete part of his life, he'd come to realize that there was lot more between the man he loved and his partner. One of the reasons they were here, and not sleeping at Phillip's condo, though they had done so a few times, was Blair's need to be near Jim. For the job, he said.

Right. For the job.

"Jim. Jimmm. Calm down. Have you called the ambulance? Okay. I'm on my way. I'll be there in ten minutes, okay. Breathe, Jim. Take a deep breath..."

As his words soothed his partner, Blair climbed out of the bed, pulling on jeans and a t-shirt, free hand fumbling for his boots.

Out of the bed as soon as Blair was, Phillip snagged them and passed them over, getting into his own casual clothes quickly.

"You're not going to lose her, Jim. Trust me on this one. Becca is going to be fine, she's given birth three times already. She's strong, Jim. Jim, you have to be strong for her now..."

Dressed, Blair headed for the door. Phillip grabbed both their coats and held Blair's for him while he agilely juggled the phone from hand-to-hand and got it on, then stood while Phillip zipped it.

"We're on our way, Jim. The kids will be fine, I'll take care of them, you know that..." Blair continued to talk while jogging down the darkened sidewalk, turning into the alley for the shortcut the kids used, Phillip right beside him.

As he jogged alongside Blair, wondering at the way the younger man could still talk and keep his voice so smooth, Phillip thought briefly of the day they had just spent. Blair had been willing to spend a Saturday away from the kids, as long as Becca or Jim didn't need him, and they had spent the day wandering the museum and having a fancy dinner...
Where Phillip had proposed. With his heart in his throat. He knew he was pushing it, but he had to
know now if Blair was willing to make that commitment to him...because he was afraid to compete
with Jim Ellison forever.

He'd grown used to middle-of-the-night calls. Seeing Blair come home wrung out, such pain in his
eyes that he hid in the shower literally for hours. Gone with him to the Ellison's for his 'therapy,' as
he called his time spent with the kids, before he did what he had to do at work.

But he would never get used to the love Blair hid. To an outsider it was painfully, starkly visible.
Blair loved Jim. Deeply, desperately, with everything he was.

Phillip wasn't sure he wanted to be second best. But he'd fallen in love and was willing to try.

Blair had asked for time to think about his answer.
The ambulance was just pulling up when they arrived. Jessi ran out of the house, her face pale,
tears streaking down it. "Papa Bear! Papa Bear! Mommy's bleeding!"

Blair snatched her up and crushed her to him before she even had a chance to jump, dropping the
phone, uncaring when it cracked and buzzed and fell silent. Phillip, a regular visitor now and very
popular for super-high piggyback rides, grabbed Tara and JJ as they came out the door.

Then the EMT's were bringing Becca out, Jim beside her, his face locked into the emotionless
mode that told Blair he was terrified beyond control.

Setting Jessi down beside Phil with a quick hug, Blair took Becca's hand and squeezed it, walking
with them to the waiting vehicle. "How's it going, momma?"

"Blair...." she panted. "It's not good."

"You're going to be fine, Rebecca." Blair leaned close to whisper the words. "I can feel it." Her
sigh told him that she trusted him enough to believe that. Jim just swallowed and kissed her
forehead.

"You riding with us?" an EMT asked. Jim nodded, unable to speak.

"Go on, Jim. It will be all right," Blair urged.

Jim climbed into the emergency vehicle with his wife. Blair returned to Phillip and picked Jessi up
again, and led them all inside. Sitting on the couch, the five of them indulged in a major snuggle-
fest.

***

The phone rang almost three hours later. Without disturbing the little girls sleeping in his arms,
Blair snatched it up almost before the sound faded.

"Sandburg."

Beside him, JJ on his shoulder, Phillip stirred. He'd dozed lightly.

"Hey, Jim. Yeah, Becca's okay. I knew she would be."

Blair paused and Phillip reached to squeeze his hand as the bright blue eyes filled with tears. "Ah,
Jim. I'm so sorry, man. So very very sorry." The tears spilled over to run slowly down his face.
"No, don't worry about it. You know I'm here, I'll take care of everything. You -" a sob escaped his
lips and his chest began heaving. "-- you take care of Rebecca, Jim. She's what's important right now." There was a pause while Blair choked back another sob.

His own throat tightening at Blair's words -- he knew what had just happened -- Phillip pulled a tissue from the coffee table with his free hand and tenderly brushed Blair's cheek, but the younger man shook his head and pulled away.

"I know, Jim. I know. You'll get through this. We all will. I'll tell the kids you love them. Yes, I'll hug JJ especially hard." Pulling further away, he lowered the phone from his ear and stared at it disbelieving.

Gently Phillip took it from his hand and replaced it on the base. He didn't try to comfort Blair again, just watched him.

After a few minutes Blair got himself under control. "We need to get the kids to bed," he said, slowly, as if testing his ability to speak. "They should go to school in the morning, stick with their routine."

"That's a good idea." Standing, Phil gathered JJ into one arm. "Hand me Tara and you can get Jessi."

Thus organized, they went upstairs.

Phillip tucked JJ in, the little boy sleeping soundly after the excitement of the night. He heard Blair crooning softly to the girls, stepped into the room to watch as Blair covered them both in Jessi's bed and lay down beside them when Tara turned and began crying in her sleep.

Feeling left out, even rejected, Phillip watched as both girls clung to Blair and he held them, dry-eyed, being strong for them.

"I'll be downstairs." he whispered. Blair nodded, and Phillip saw the awareness of his pain in the younger man's eyes.

***

"Phillip?" a small voice, a small hand touching his leg. "Where's mommy?"

Straightening from his position on the couch, the big man looked at the clock and sighed. It was just past seven. He needed to get a move on if he wasn't going to be late for practice. It was bad form for the coach to be late. But, of course, this was a family emergency. Blair was his family, and the Ellisons were Blair's.

"Where's my mommy?" JJ asked again, his voice quavering. The small hand clutched the leg of Phil's jeans.

"She's at the hospital, Jay," Blair said from where he came down the stairs, moving like an old man. He held out his arms and JJ was in them before he hit the bottom step. "Your Daddy is with her and she's fine." He nuzzled the boy's head; his eyes, when he raised them to meet Phil's, were deeply sad.

"Is my brother here?" JJ looked up into Blair's eyes, his own the same bright blue as Jim's.

"Not yet." Blair put JJ down with another hug. "I gotta get you guys to school today. Can you wake up your sisters and put on the clothes mama laid out for you?"
"I'm a big boy, Papa Bear," Jay said sternly, resenting the question.

"Then get to work, soldier."

JJ scampered up the stairs.

Blair came and sat beside Phillip, watching him. Then he swayed, and leaned close.

Phillip gathered him up, held him tight. "The baby didn't make it, did he?" he asked quietly, feeling the body in his arms shaking. Blair clung to him, turning his face into the broad chest.

"Nn -- no." A sob, then Blair was pulling back, wiping his eyes with his sleeve. "I gotta call the office. Could you -- pour some cereal for the kids real quick?"

"Sure, lover." Hiding the pain of the withdrawal, Phillip stood and went to help as best he could.

He had the kids eating, all of them fairly subdued, instant oatmeal and juice, by the time Blair got off the phone. He'd been talking to personnel, arranging for some time off for Jim and himself.

At the principal's office at Herman Melville Elementary, Blair said, "The girls don't know yet, Mrs. Dornan. I'll tell them when they get home." Blair was so tired; his energy was failing him. "But they know something is wrong, so if they have trouble today, cut them some slack, okay?"

"I'll send a message to all the teachers, Dr. Sandburg." Mrs. Dornan said sympathetically. "I spoke to Mrs. Ellison just last week at the PTA meeting. She was very excited about the new baby. Is there anything we can do for her and Mr. Ellison?"

"We haven't had a chance to discuss things, I'll be sure to let you know when the memorial will be and what Jim and Becca want...just have everybody keep an eye on the girls, okay?"

He received a promise of that, with an offer to have them talk to the school counselor if the news disrupted their lives too much. Polite, caring, she still gave Blair the occasional inquisitive look, as if she was still trying to place his exact position in the Ellison family. She knew, of course, that he was listed on their paperwork as an alternate emergency contact, that he was Jim's partner at the Bureau and that he brought the girls to school once or twice every week. Popular at PTA meetings for his skill with electronics, he'd been the man to finally fix their aging PA system so it didn't blast a 30-second ear-splitting squeal every time it was turned on.

But he knew she still wondered.

***

Phillip met him in the parking lot. Climbing out of his van, which he drove 'strictly for the leg room,' he met Blair just as the younger man was opening his door.

"I thought you had practice," Blair said shortly.

"I cancelled it. I was afraid I'd miss you and have to catch you at the hospital."

Blair shrugged, his eyes flat and dull. "I'm not going to the hospital."

Not replying to that, the tall man reached past him and took his keys from his hand, gently steering Blair to the van. "Wherever you're going, I'm taking you."

A lifeless nod, and Blair climbed into the high seat, to let Phil buckle his seatbelt, and stare out the window as they drove back to Jim's place.
Once there, Blair stood for several long minutes in the family. His eyes fell on the baby swing that stood in the corner, where the playpen would join it later -- would have joined it later -- as it had for all the other babies that had come into this house.

Standing behind him, afraid to touch and be rejected again, Phillip waited. And, finally, Blair spoke. Quietly, thin-lipped, controlled.

"I have to be strong now, lover. For Jim. This is going to be so hard for them..." He trailed off, a sob escaping. "I gotta do everything I can to help."

"Let's start with clearing out the nursery," Phil suggested quietly. "When my sister Kristen lost her baby, that's what my mom did first. Before she got home from the hospital."

"That's a good idea." Blair led the way up the stairs, to the little room beside the master suite. It had been originally intended as a dressing room, or perhaps a very large closet, but it had always been the nursery here.

The crib was the same one the other three had used. A sturdy Jenny Lind, painted mint green. Pooh Bear decorated the walls, and Rebecca's grandmother's rocking chair sat in the place of honor by the dresser.

"I think I'll take the stuff to my place," Blair said, running a finger along the lowered edge of the crib, dropping his hand to gently touch the bright bumper that ran around the inside...Pooh and Piglet and Tigger following Eeyore on a butterfly hunt, little Roo trailing behind with handfuls of flowers. "That way they won't even have to see it in the garage."

They were halfway through, the crib dismantled, Blair easily finding the battered box and storage containers everything was kept in -- Jim's neat-nick ways flourishing in the garage as well as at work -- when Blair's phone rang.

"Hi. Yeah, I'm at the house. They are?" a frown creased his face and his hand clenched into a fist. "I don't know, Jim. Maybe I should...okay, if that's what you want. Anything you want, man. How's Becca?"

He listened for a few more minutes. Phillip watched his eyes fill with tears and tried to think of something he could do to help. He had one idea, but wasn't sure how well it would go over.

{I'll just do it. He won't object after it's done.}

"Just tell me what you want, Jim, you know it's done." Another pause, tears spilling over silently, not even a sniffle. "Okay. Okay, I got it. Yeah, partner. I know."

Acting on his impulse, Phillip slipped downstairs to use the kitchen phone.

"Ma? Yes, it's me. Listen, are you busy for the next few days...?"

Blair didn't discuss the phone call with him until they were back in the van, driving the stuff to his house. "Jim wants me to make the arrangements. He said something simple...they have a family plot, it's for markers only, they want a cremation."

"What...what did he die from?"

"Some kind of lung deformity. I think there were other problems. I didn't ask." He blinked hard, once. "There's another problem. The Carrs are coming. They should be here tonight. Jim wants me to stay in the house and take care of the kids, be in charge. They won't like that."
Phillip knew about Becca's parents. "What time are they coming in?"

"They'll get a car at the airport. No way they're going to let me pick them up."

Pulling into Blair's driveway, Phillip stopped him as he got out of the van. "I know you're hurting, little one." He kept the hand on Blair's chest even when the younger man looked away. "Please let me help you."

Blair looked back, eyes wide, filled with pain. "I want to, Phil. I do. It's just...I have to be strong. Until Jim's okay."

"Let me be strong with you."

With a smothered sob Blair leaned over the console and let the big man embrace him, folding him into long arms and pressing him to a solid chest. He choked a little, and was quiet, not crying, just gulping for air.

"You -- you know I can't answer you now." the words were muffled by Phil's jacket, Blair's face pressed to it. "But I need you, Phillip. I don't think I can do this without you."

"Shhh, little one." Holding him tightly, stroking the curly hair, Phillip soothed. "You don't have to. You don't have to."

***

The nursery was empty except for the rocking chair. Blair debated moving it, but was afraid something would happen to it in his garage.

Home from school, the kids were in the family room, on the couch. Jessi was still and silent, JJ looked frightened, and Tara was reacting to the stress with her typical burst of activity.

Dinner was on the stove, a primavera sauce simmering, enough for ten people. Blair stood with Phillip in the kitchen, hands knotting together.

"You ready to tell them?" Phil asked.

"I have to."

"Do you want me to go?"

"No...I don't know. Is there something you need to do?"

"Nothing more important than you."

"Then stay, please."

In the family room, Blair sat on the floor. Jessi crawled into his lap and Tara bounced down to throw herself at him. JJ just sat, very still. Too sensitive, he felt the tension more than his sisters and knew something was really wrong.

Phillip sat beside him and wrapped an arm around his little body. The blond head, which needed a haircut, leaned against his side and a little hand clutched at him as it had that morning.

"I have to tell you guys something," Blair started, both of the girls in his arms.

Jessi just stared up at him with Jim's eyes. Tara's eyes were starting to fill. "I want mommy," she
said, a wail threatening.

"Mommy's at the hospital, mtoto. She's fine, and so is daddy."

"What about Baby Ben?" Jessi asked directly, as was her nature. Blair could tell from her eyes that she already knew.

"Your baby brother was sick, m’cushla,” he said softly. "He wasn't strong enough to live for very long."

"Benny's dead?" Jessi said bluntly. Tara began to wail.

On the couch JJ stared at Blair. "No brother?"

"He'll always be your brother, little man, but he's not going to grow up here with us."

Now Jessi was sniffling with Tara, who was sobbing broken-hearted. It tipped JJ, who began to cry as well, letting Philip gather him and comfort him.

Blair held the girls. He knew there would be more talk later, but for now they just needed to get through the first shock. Then the healing could begin.

It would be so much easier for them than it would for Jim and Becca.

The tears continued for a while, and were just starting to die down when the doorbell rang. Blair looked at Phil, wide-eyed; his fear of Jim's in-laws was well-founded.

His lover smiled reassuringly, getting up, JJ still cuddled close. "I think it's for me."

Blair stayed where he was, on the floor, and stared as Phillip opened the door to an older black woman. Not that much older, she looked very young, her skin smooth and coffee-colored, and she spoke with a gentle Jamaican accent. "Hello." Glancing from the small woman to Phillip, Blair thought he saw some resemblance. "Phillip?"

"Blair, this is my mother, Jackie. Mom, this is the guy I've been telling you about -- Blair." The way he said it made the younger man's heart catch.

"Your mother?" Blair's face showed some confusion. Jessi raised her head from his shoulder, eyes swollen, nose running. "Mrs. Dobbs," he said softly.

"Just Jackie." Sitting on the couch, she handed Blair a tissue that he used to wipe Jessi's nose, the girl not objecting, too upset. "I'm glad to meet you, though terribly sorry for the circumstances."

"I thought she could help." Sitting beside his mom, dwarfing her the way he did Blair, Phillip looked worried.

"Okay." Still looking confused, Blair just closed his eyes and held the girls closer.

"It smells like dinner is ready," Jackie said, standing and heading purposefully to the kitchen. "Why don't you two men take care of cleaning the children up and I'll get the food on the table."

Jackie set the table with a minimum of fuss, pouring milk and making a quick salad. Phillip stood and passed JJ over to Blair, leaving him loaded with sniffling children, and fetched a warm wet cloth to wash their faces and hands.

At last they were all at the table, Tara still in Blair's lap, refusing to release her hold on his shirt. JJ
seemed to be recovering the best, but it was hard to tell, he was so quiet most of the time anyhow.

Jackie and Phillip spoke quietly, talking about his sister's children and the varsity team's chances. Blair ate a few bites and concentrated on getting the girls to eat, coaxing about half a meal into them.

"I've been looking forward to meeting you," she spoke to Blair as they finished up, as Phillip went to make him some tea.

"Phil- he mentioned talking to you about me." Unsure what to say, his usual good nature dimmed, Blair knew his voice was listless.

"He told me about you the day after your first date." She smiled gently. "Greek food and dancing. I think it was the most fun he'd had in ages, and I told him you would be good for him."

"I guess so." Blair managed a little smile that didn't last long.

"Why don't you get the girls started getting ready for bed and we'll clean up down here." Phil leaned over him and kissed the top of his head.

"Need to change the sheets in the guestroom, for Becca's parents." Blair sighed, closing his eyes briefly.

"I'll do that." Standing, the quiet woman held out her hand to Jessi. "Jessi, why don't you show me where your momma keeps the sheets and things."

After a nervous glance at Blair and a smile from Phillip, the little redhead took the hand. As they climbed the stairs, Blair was relieved to hear her start talking. More quietly than usual, but talking.

***

"Hey, soldier! What are you doing, trying to drown me?" With a laugh Blair dodged a splash directed at him by JJ. On his knees beside the tub in the big bathroom, he was stripped to the waist but still half-soaked as he let the little boy play, not discouraging him at all, thinking that it was a release after the emotional trauma earlier.

Then the door swung open and Mrs. Carr stepped in. "Hello, Blair," she said civilly enough. "Why don't I take over so you can get some things done?"

Turning to see her, seeing the worry on Jay's little face, Blair shook his head. "Thank you, Mrs. Carr, but I've got it. Why don't you go down and keep an eye on the girls? My friend Phillip is there, but they probably want you."

Seeing her digest the information, he wasn't surprised when the frown grew. "Phillip is that tall man who answered the door?" She was trying to be polite, he could tell, and he appreciated it.

"Yes, and his mother, Jackie. They came to help out this morning. We took down the nursery, but I didn't know what to do with the rocking chair."

The look she threw at a confused JJ said everything she didn't out loud -- about exactly how she felt to see her grandson naked in a room with a half-naked homosexual. But the smile stayed on her face, barely, and she turned away. "Maybe we should put it in his room, where Rebecca can sit in it if she wants to rock him to sleep..." her words faded as she left and Blair went back to playing with Jay, relieved that it had gone so well.
Forty minutes later Blair went back downstairs. He'd tried unsuccessfully to get JJ to bed, but the upset of the day had made the little boy too clingy to sleep. Giving in at last, Blair cradled him to his chest, Jay clutching his shirt with one hand and sucking the middle two fingers on the other, a habit they'd all thought broken a year ago.

Mr. Carr rose at once and swiftly said, "I'll take him." His voice was flat and toneless. He looked tired, and very, very old. The older man had never made as much of a fuss about Blair as his wife did, but tonight he seemed more concerned than usual. He held out his arms. JJ whined a little and clung tighter to Blair.

"Thanks, but I don't think he'll come to you." With that and a small shrug Blair walked past him. "I just got him settled." Going into the family room, he didn't wait for a response, though he heard the man following him.

Mrs. Carr was on the big sofa, Tara and Jessi on either side of her. Jackie was beside Jessi, her long brown fingers braiding her red hair as she hummed something lilting. Looking uncomfortable, Phillip was watching the news from the second armchair, leaving Jim's chair empty. Blair frowned when Mr. Carr sat in it, but said nothing to antagonize. Taking a seat on the smaller sofa, he checked the time. "It's almost eight," he said quietly. "Guess what, guys? Daddy should be home soon."

"What about Mommy?" Tara asked, her voice shaking.

"Mommy will be home in a couple of days," Becca's mother answered before Blair had a chance to. "Granpa and Grandma are going to take care of you until then." She hugged both girls tightly.

"Blair takes care of us when Mommy and Daddy are gone." Jessi turned her head, Jackie hanging on to the end of the second tight French plait.

"Well, this time I'm going to," she said calmly. "Blair has other things to do."

Green and blue eyes filled with tears as both little girls stared at him.

Silently, Blair cursed the woman for turning the children's fragile emotional state into a battle for territory.

"No, I don't," he said gently but firmly to the girls. "I have nothing more important to do than stay here with you. Granpa and Grandma are here to visit and help, but I'm not going away. I'll be right here with you, until both of your parents are home." {And probably for some time after that.} he added to himself. Levelly, he met the eyes of the woman trying to wish him away from her grandchildren, and saw her hands tighten slightly on the girls; Tara didn't notice, but Jessi winced at the contact. But both girls looked more relieved.

For the thousandth time Blair prayed that nothing would ever happen to Becca and Jim; he knew what kind of a court battle he would face for the kids. Though both Ellisons had made it clear in legal terms that they wanted Blair to gain custody in the case of their deaths, he knew how much weight that would hold when tried in court against the grandparents and with a conservative judge. Although they tried to be tolerant, Becca's parents would want the kids with them, as much out of love and duty as because of Blair's sexuality, and they'd pull every legal trick to keep them away from Blair forever. Even now, family courts were still too often stuck in medieval attitudes about children as chattel and the fitness of homosexuals to raise them.
He would have to leave the country, and take them with him. Just after Tara's birth he'd started a bank account just for that purpose, with an automatic payroll deduction. He prayed often that he would never have to use it, but if he did, the money was there and the kids would stay with him, no matter what. Jim had agreed that that would be the best course of action and together they had made other arrangements, unknown to the rest of the family because Becca would be hurt by it; Jim's Black Ops background and Blair's ease at hiding Jim's abilities were natural allies in the deception. Jim had gotten passports for the kids and kept them updated. They'd discussed where Blair should go, and which countries had the most liberal policies; Norway, Sweden and Switzerland were at the top of the list. With his credentials he could surely get a teaching position once they arrived under cover of vacationing. He just prayed that it never came to that.

Phillip stood, restless. He went and leaned over the sofa, speaking quietly into his mother's ear. Blair raised an inquiring eyebrow, but was distracted when Jessi sat up and stared at the door. He shook his head at her slightly, warning her not to give away her abilities in front of the Carrs. He had a feeling they'd share William Ellison's understanding about a child with Sentinel abilities, putting the freakishness of the gift on a par with homosexuality. Settling back, she gave a tentative smile that he returned, teasing the braids in her hair.

And then the door opened. And Jim, looking world-weary and beaten down, more hopeless than Blair had ever seen him, came in.

JJ sat up. "Daddy?" His face was still marked by tears, but he pulled his fingers from his mouth.

"Oh, baby." Collapsing on the sofa beside Blair, Jim reached for his son. His partner handed him over, seeing the tears in the pale blue eyes of his best friend. Jessi and Tara stood and walked over to both men and their little brother.

"We'll be going now." Jackie stood, Phillip coming to join her. "I'll be back tomorrow to help out, Blair."

"Thank you," he said. Jim was still and silent, breathing in deep gasps, holding JJ tightly. Tara shifted over so she was hugging both of them, but Jessi stayed tight by Blair. "Philip.." he didn't know what to say.

"It's okay, little one." Stopping on his way to the door, the tall man bent over the curly-haired figure on the couch and kissed his forehead gently. "I'll see you tomorrow."

"Thank you for being here," he said softly.

"Hey. It was no problem. I wish we could do more." Phillip patted Jim's shoulder with one huge hand.

"It was nice meeting you. Thank you for coming." Blair told Jackie. She just smiled and then they left.

And Jim sat on the couch beside Blair, his son in his arms, his Guide beside him. For about three minutes.

"Blair, not in front of the children." Becca's mother was almost pleading; it was clear she'd tried to bottle her distaste. "Jim, can't you ask him to at least not do that?"

"I don't need this right now, Donna," Jim said, not opening his eyes. "Becca is expecting you at the hospital. Visiting hours are only until eleven, you'd better get going."
"When we come back Blair can go home. I'll take care of the kids." She sounded desperate. The pity of the whole thing was that she honestly thought she was protecting the children; she refused to see Blair as anything but a threat to their safety.

"That's not your decision," Jim said wearily.

Mr. Carr stood, and took his wife's arm. "We'll discuss it with Rebecca." He sounded more angry than upset. Rejected? Hurt by more than the loss of a grandchild.

"If you say a word to upset my wife now I'll have you barred from the hospital." Sitting up straight, still cuddling JJ, Jim gave them a look that had quelled countless criminals. "I can do it. Don't push me."

Donna Carr stared at her daughter's husband like he'd grown a new head. And then they walked out the door without another word. Blair stared after them, shock written on his face.

"Jim, I..."

"You will not stay away until they're gone, Sandburg." The snarl startled Blair. "There is no way in hell Becca or I will survive this without you, not to mention the kids."

Meeting the pale blue eyes, glad to see some life in them, even if it was anger, Blair nodded. "Of course, Jim. I'm beside you. I'll do whatever you need."

After a few more minutes Jim stood. "Let's get these guys to bed, Chef. I better get back to the hospital and make sure they took me seriously."

"How is she?" Asking very softly, Sentinel-soft, all-too aware of the other, younger sentinel in the room.

"Jessica, go on upstairs and we'll be up in just a minute to tuck you in, okay?"

With a frown the redhead obediently began climbing the stairs, Blair and Jim following after a minute, Blair carrying Tara.

"She's devastated, Blair." Jim's voice was rough with emotion. "She's convinced it somehow her fault, that she did something wrong. The doctors say it wasn't genetic, it just happened, but...but..."

"People want reasons for things, Jim. We both know that. When the pain isn't quite so fresh she'll believe, you just have to keep telling her."

"Her mother isn't going to be a help."

"I know. Look, let's put all three kids into Jessi's bed, and I'll sleep in Tara's, in case they need me during the night. You can stay at the hospital or come home, whichever is best for you."

"Yeah, okay. Is the room ready for them?" He nodded back down the stairs.

"Phillip's mom took care of it."

"He's a good man, Blair." Jim took a moment to look his friend in the eye. "He seems to care a lot about you." They were leaning over the bed now, tucking the kids in, JJ between the girls.

"He asked me to marry him, Jim." Not knowing if now was the right time to tell his partner, Blair still needed to share it with him. Perhaps someone else's problem could ease a little of the terrible pain.
"I can tell he loves you." Jim leaned and kissed each child in turn. He didn't ask what Blair was going to do.

"I asked him for time to think about it." Blair's dark blue eyes told Jim that he was aware of the problems it could cause at work and in their lives, but Jim's tired eyes sent a firm message of support, assuring him that everything would get worked out. "Lock up when you go, I'm going to stay up here," he said softly, sitting on the edge of the bed and picking a thick book from the top of the stack.

As Jim went down the stairs he listened to his Guide's smooth voice as it read the opening stanza of a favorite poem:

"In Xanadu did Kubla Khan a stately pleasure dome decree..."
Chapter 5

A small frightened voice woke Blair.

"Papa Bear? I want mommy."

Sitting up, feeling the weight of the youngest Ellison child pressed to his chest, Blair realized that he'd fallen asleep at the foot of the bed. JJ had crawled down to snuggle up to him. Tara stirred and now Jessi woke too.

"Blair?" Jessi's use of the childhood nickname was fading. "Are you going to sleep here with us?"

"Do you need me to, m'cushla?" he asked, setting JJ down and standing to strip, leaving him in his boxers and a t-shirt. Normally this would have been okay, but with the Carrs in the house -- the bedside clock showed it was just past midnight -- he knew that would be asking for trouble. But all of his spare clothes were in the guestroom.

Her nod was solemn, serious.

{Maybe I have a pair of sweats in my bag downstairs...}

"I'm gonna run get some britches, cubs, I'll be right back."

"Right back?" JJ echoed, crawling back up to snuggle to Jessi.

"Yes, right back, soldier-boy."

Seeing the light on below, Blair paused before going down the stairs. He hadn't put his jeans back on, assuming the Carrs would be in bed, but they were in the family room watching CNN.

"Hey." A nod, and he walked right past them, out the kitchen door that led to the garage. {They better not lock me out.} he thought, getting into his trunk and finding nothing in his gym bag except a single pair of nylon shorts. {Those won't be much help.}

Back inside, he found Mrs. Carr missing. Taking the stairs two at a time, he knocked on the guestroom door, and, getting no answer, slipped in and went to the closet, where he had a shelf of clothing.

"What are you doing?" Casual, friendly, polite. No more than to be expected when he was in what was currently their bedroom.

"Getting some pants." Pulling a pair of blue sweats off the shelf he tugged them on before turning to face her. "I'm sorry, but all of my spare stuff is in here."

"Blair.." she was trying, he could tell, and he appreciated it. "Don't you think it would be better for the children if we watched them until Rebecca is better?"

"They know me, Donna." he said softly. "I know them...it's just easier this way."

"Easier isn't always better."

"I'll be glad for any help you can give me, but Jim wants me to stay and so I stay."

She had no reply for that.
{She doesn't understand.} Shaking his head, Blair went back to the girls' room, leaving her alone.

Jessi scooted to the side and made room for him in the middle. Immediately JJ crawled onto his chest, Blair anchoring him with an arm, and Tara, still mostly asleep, cuddled to that side. He extended the other arm and wrapped it around Jessi when she snuggled close.

"Pull the covers up," he said softly, and she did.

They were quiet for a little while. Blair heard a thump from the room down the hall, separated from them by the bathroom, and opened his eyes. Jessi was staring at the wall as if she could see through it.

"What are they doing?" she whispered.

"I don't know. Can you tell me?" A little sentinel exercise couldn't hurt.

Closing her eyes, she concentrated fiercely. "Um...something big. They're moving something big and soft."

"Not a piece of furniture?"

"No..."

"Okay, what's in the room that could make that sound if it were moved?"

She snuggled her head closer to his shoulder and listened again. "The mattress?"

"They could be turning the mattress on the bed, that would explain it."

"Why would they do that, Papa Bear?"

"Some people just like to sleep on the fresh side," he explained gently, his hand idly stroking the fine wisps of hair that had escaped the braid. "Go to sleep. You still have to go to school in the morning."

There was silence for a few more minutes.

"Blair?"

"Yes, Jessi?"

"Is mommy really okay?"

"She's very sad, but she's going to be fine."

"I was gonna help with the new baby Ben."

"I know you were. You're a good helper."

"I'm sad he died."

"Me too, m’cushla. Me, too."

***

There were voices in the hallway now...Blair half-sat, trying not to disturb the younger children, still sleeping.
The door opened with no warning, the light from the hall dazzling Blair's eyes.

"Jim?"

Turning to stare at the crowded bed, Jim smiled. It was brief and it held more pain than pleasure, but it was a smile.

"Move over, Jess." he said softly, taking off his own clothes. "I think I'll sleep in here with you guys tonight."

Biting back a gasp, and knowing that Jim heard it anyhow, Blair met his eyes. Seeing the sadness on Jim's face, he didn't offer to move to the other bed, instead he shifted Tara over and took her place by the wall, keeping JJ with him as he turned on his side, cuddling the little boy to his chest. Tara mumbled and rolled over and Jessi lay her head on her father's chest as he stretched out on her pillows.

{This is not what I had in mind, God.} Blair thought ruefully, lying there in the dark, the man he truly loved less than three feet away, separated from him by three sleeping children and a couple of thousand emotional lightyears.

{Be careful what you wish for.} The thought was so clear that he almost laughed. {I should have remembered that one.}

***

The next two days were busy for Blair. He went to the hospital and saw Becca at last. She cried in his arms, Jim holding her from the other side, and he cried freely with her.

He made the arrangements for the cremation, ordered the marker stone, and put the obituary in the paper, all over Mrs. Carr's increasingly verbal objections.

On the day of the memorial, scheduled for that afternoon, Becca came home to a cold war.

"I don't see why he's still here," Donna scolded her daughter as Jim got her comfortable in their big bed. Blair had taken the kids to the neighborhood park to give them a chance to get settled; Jessi, especially, had needed distance from her grandparents. "I'm here, and I'm sure he has other things to do with his life."

"Nothing is more important to Blair than his family," Jim said quietly, not wanting another argument.

"But you aren't his family...that crazy woman, she's his family." Donna had not, of course, been impressed with Naomi when they had met at the wedding.

"We are his family, and Naomi's too." Becca insisted tiredly, exhausted, refusing to repeat this argument. "Mom, if you can't deal with Blair being here, maybe you should go home today after the service."

"I'm here to help you, dear."

"Trying to convince me to make Blair leave is not helping." She was so pale from the blood loss that her skin was white, and the red spots caused by her anger stood out sharply on her cheeks.

"No, I think this will be best. I'm home, Blair can help around the house until I'm better...I think you should go home tonight."
Donna was livid. "You're kicking me out of your house because of that man?!" The word 'freak' resounded unspoken.

That was enough for Jim. He jumped up and took her by the shoulder, steering her out of the bedroom. "No, Donna, she's not. I am. I won't have you around upsetting her." He slammed the door in her face and went to comfort his wife, who was crying again. He barely managed to get her calmed down and cleaned up before Blair returned with the children.

The service was quiet and sad and sweet. They all cried. The cremation had been performed the day before, with Jim and Blair and Phillip attending, the younger man leaning heavily on his lover, Jim standing stoically alone. But he'd let Blair hug him afterwards.

The little carved box, one of Blair's own antique ones that he had offered to Jim for this purpose, was buried in the soil and the stone set above it. Becca almost broke down, Jim supporting her on one side and Blair on the other. They had kept it family only, and requested that contributions be sent to the Make-A-Wish foundation instead of flowers.

Benedict Stephen Ellison

son, brother, nephew, grandchild, godchild

A beloved blessing

Blair had been unsure of the words, but Jim had insisted that he couldn't choose any and he didn't want Becca to have to. The Carrs, of course, had objected, but as long as Jim thought it was suitable, Blair didn't care.

There was an open house afterwards, Jackie having organized it in her quiet way. Teachers, agents, Bureau personnel, the parents of other children, neighbors, friends...so many people came and offered condolences that the Ellisons lost count. But Jackie kept up with the guestbook and Phillip, on her orders, put the name of each guest on an envelope so the thank-yous would all get mailed without too much trouble for Becca.

Then it was late and the Carrs left reluctantly, giving Blair cold looks. The kids were in bed, Jackie had left for Phillip's condo, and Jim was upstairs with Becca. This left Blair and Phillip alone in the family room.

"I'm going to stay here a few more nights." The smaller man sat next to his lover and then, with a sigh, leaned into him.

"I figured. Just remember, little one; while they're leaning on you, you can lean on me."

"Thank you, Phillip. You have no idea what that means to me."

"Maybe." Wrapping his arms around the smaller man, Phillip nuzzled into his neck, and then kissed his way to his lips, feeling the beard shadow and tasting the remains of the days' tears.

When he tried to kiss him Blair opened his mouth and let him, but didn't participate, making the older man feel guilty for trying.

"It's not you," Blair said when he pulled away, pressing his face to the broad chest.
"I know." Sighing, Phillip held him, and his thoughts, close. {That's the problem. It's not me you want. But if I could never touch you again I would still love you.} He sighed and kissed the top of the curly head. {I hope you know that. I hope you believe it.}

Still in his arms, Blair was thinking as well, with deep sadness. {If only Jim could hold me like this. Kiss me and tell me to lean on him...but he needs me now and the one thing he really doesn't need is his gay partner looking to him for comfort.} It wasn't fair and it hurt so much...Blair hoped he was justified taking comfort where he could get it. Hoped Phillip would forgive him when he found out.

Jim was up when Blair finally went up to bed. In the kitchen, he was just sitting at the table, staring at his beer.

"Jim?" Sitting across from him, Blair waved a hand in front of his face to be sure the older man wasn't zoning. When the bright blue eyes blinked he half-smiled, and then sighed. "Are you ready to talk about it?"

"It was so hard, Chief." The words were low and rough. Jim's eyes dropped to the table, staring at his clasped hands now instead of the brown bottle. "She almost died. All I could see was the blood...it was so bright, and it was everywhere...they shoved me out of the room and into the hall and I was all alone.. I thought I heard her die. Then I couldn't hear anything."

Now he looked up and the tears that filled his eyes caught the light.

"I thought about you and I listened for your voice and then I could hear again...and she was breathing. Her heart was beating. And the doctors were trying to revive the baby...do you know how horrible a defibrillator sounds? I wanted to call you but I wanted you here with the kids..." he trailed off. Blair stood, taking a deep breath, and walked slowly around the table, giving Jim every chance to reject him.

When he was behind his friend, he leaned over him and carefully wrapped his arms around him. "I was there, Jim. I'll always be wherever you are. All you have to do is look for me." Cautiously, he nuzzled his face into the soft hair. Offering comfort, he took it as well, when Jim's hands came up to close over his own clasped ones.

Taking a deep breath, Blair let it out slowly. This might be the most he ever got of Jim. Probably would be.

"I'm here, for as long as you need me. I'll be beside you, Jim. You'll never have to face life alone."

The sigh from his partner was like a pane of glass cracking, and then the tears started falling.

Jim cried with quiet, gulping sobs, for the fear he'd felt then and the pain he felt now, and, although Blair didn't know it, for the love he would never be able to return fully.

***

"That feels so good." Rolling to his back, Blair smiled up at Phillip, body relaxed and pliant as the older man moved to mount him, hooking Blair's legs over his shoulders and moving his hips onto his own folded knees. Splaying wide, Blair moaned long and low as Phillip pushed in slowly, his huge cock stretching the younger man to the limit.

"You feel so good," Phillip countered, beginning a slow rhythm, stroking in and out steadily. Blair rolled his head to one side and reached a hand down to caress his own cock, which was swelling again. "So tight...you've got a perfect ass, little one. I dream of fucking you like this for the rest of
our lives. When I'm too old and feeble, will you ride me?"

"Ungh..." not answering, Blair lifted his hips to meet Philip's thrusts, staring to work on his own cock with more determination. "Yeah, like that, man. Just like that."

Leaning in close, folding the limber legs back to the furry chest, Phillip sought Blair's mouth to kiss. The younger man opened to him, kissing him hungrily, eagerly, wanting that connection to distract him from the powerful sensations he was feeling.

Lately -- since the baby's death -- he had been wondering about himself. Even now, while Philip pounded him deliciously, he couldn't help thinking. His mind was in control here, he couldn't just let go the way he used to.

{Too many people to hurt now -- and Philip is one of them.}

Coming in a series of violent spurts, Blair heard Philip's familiar grunt and clenched his legs around the big man's waist, wanting it to be as good for him as Blair could make it.

Then Philip rolled off him and pulled Blair into an embrace and they kissed some more; not feverishly, but soothingly, bringing their bodies down from the high they had achieved.

{I have to tell him. I can't marry him. Can't give him the time and attention he deserves and still keep my commitment to Jim and the family.}

Breathing easily now, tasting the cooling sweat that covered Phil's body, snuggling close, Blair closed his eyes and enjoyed being held. He wouldn't be getting much of this after tonight. Unless Phil was willing to keep it casual...and that wouldn't be fair to him.

With a deep sigh, Blair allowed himself a moment of regret. {I wish I could just do it. Just go ahead and say it -- yes, I'll marry you. And damn the consequences. Jim is a fully functional sentinel, he doesn't need me anymore. Jess is well on her way to having complete control over her senses....}

Philip's big hands were stroking Blair's body, caressing and soothing as he hummed almost silently, another habit of his that Blair found endearing.

{But I'm Jim's Guide. I can't just do that. It would never work.}

Beneath him, Philip fell silent. Then he spoke, and his words were weighted with sadness.

"It's not going to work, is it?"

Knowing he should pull away, suddenly terrified to lose even this, Blair instead clung tighter to the larger man.

"I'm sorry," he whispered. "You can't know how sorry I am, Phil."

"Not as sorry as I am, little one." the bigger man responded to his need, cuddling him closer, holding him tighter. "I would have loved to make you happy."

"I know."

They spent the rest of the night in silence.

***
The next morning Blair got up before Philip. He sat on the side of the bed, fully dressed, and woke the other man with a sweet kiss. "I'll be gone until at least eight."

"I understand. Be careful, okay?" Pulling him down for a harder kiss, Phil released him too quickly.

"Call me," Blair said awkwardly, standing and looking down at him. {He's really beautiful. Every bit as much as Jim is.}

"You know I will." Huge hands clenched in his lap, the big man stared back, his dark eyes immeasurably sad.

"Philip, I..."

"I know, little one. I know. Go on, you'll be late for work."

One more kiss -- this one as gentle as their first, so many months ago -- and Blair was walking out the door.

He knew that when he came back that evening everything that was Philip's would be gone.

Jim didn't understand why his partner was quiet and moody all week. They spent most of it catching up on paperwork, and got a break in an old case that panned out, so there was a good bust to top it off.

It wasn't until Sunday night dinner, when Blair came alone, that he realized what had happened.

Over the next few weeks he watched his partner with increasing worry, expecting him to pick up his previous lifestyle as if he'd never left it. Jim hadn't been looking forward to losing even more of Blair's time and attention to another man, but he scolded himself and tried to remember that Blair needed a life outside the family. With Philip he would have been safe, taken care of, nurtured and protected. Loved the way he deserved to be.

When it became clear that Blair had become a monk, he was relieved, but, for some undefinable reason, even sadder.

*****

(2007)

"Sandburg."

Barely lifting his head from the ancient text he was studying, digital phone pressed close to his ear, Special Agent Blair Sandburg kept his voice low out of respect for the two other people that shared the research room with him.

He knew both of them vaguely. The woman was a professor of literature, and the younger man was a librarian here, working on a novel. Over the past few months, as Blair had begun to spend more time here, expanding the boundaries of his research, he had got to know them a bit, in that odd way you can know someone without really knowing anything about them. He knew the young librarian wouldn't say anything to him for bringing his phone in here, which was technically not allowed, and that the woman professor resented that.

Then again, she'd resented him from the start. In the first month he'd started coming here she had asked him out for coffee two or unattractive -- she was slightly overweight, but had wonderful eyes and dark hair and lots of curves he could see a man appreciating -- but since Phillip, Blair didn't
even try anymore. Jim Ellison, and Jim's family, were his life.

"Um, Bear?" Jessi's voice was worried.

"M'cushla, hello, darling." Jessi was never nervous about calling him, so Blair was on edge right away. "What's wrong, sweetheart?"

"Daddy said to call you and tell you to come right home -- you have to go to work."

"Why didn't he call himself? Is he busy?" Already standing and beginning to pack his books away, Blair caught the curious looks of his fellow researchers.

"He's in the bedroom with Mommy. Blair, Momma's crying, I can hear her."

"I'll be there in fifteen minutes, Jess, you need to stay calm. Where are your sister and brother?"

"In the treehouse out back. Daddy said JJ could go up the ladder if he was very careful."

"Go out and keep an eye on them, can you do that, be a big girl for me? And don't listen to your parents, m'cushla, it's not polite."

"Can I take some cookies out with me?"

Reluctantly, Blair grinned, the phone caught between his ear and shoulder as he buckled up his backpack. "Yes, you can have some cookies, but only two each. 'Kay? I'll be there soon."

"Okay. I love you, Papa Bear."

Hearing the worry in her voice, Blair stopped what he was doing and held the phone with both hands, his voice dropping too low for anyone else to hear.

"I love you too. Can you hear my heart? It's beating so nice and steady...just listen to it in your mind, and I'll be there before you know it, all right?"

"I can always hear your heart, Papa Bear." There was amusement in the voice now. "That's 'cause you're my Guide."

"Right. And your Guide is telling you that everything is going to be fine. Okay? Bye now."

"Bye, Blair. I'm listening." She hung up while Blair listened.

Catching a glance from the librarian, Blair shrugged. "Trouble at home." Opening the outer pocket of his backpack, he removed his backup weapon, a small .38 that fit neatly into the waistband of his jeans.

The librarian widened his eyes, but he'd seen this before. "Off to save the world?" he asked half-joking. Blair had given the library a copy of his papers because he didn't like to go anywhere without his weapon now.

"I'd rather it were a false alarm," Blair answered honestly.

"See you next week?"

"If we get this cleared up." Shouldering the bag, gun warming against his back, Blair nodded at him and the woman. "Goodnight."
Her frown was the only response he got.

***

As soon as he pulled the Corvair into the driveway happy cries of "Blair!" and "Papa Bear!" rang out and the children bolted through the gate from the backyard to pile onto him. Ever-exuberant, Tara leapt onto the hood of the silver car, while JJ tugged ineffectually at his door, the 60's steel too heavy for even a sturdy four-year-old. Blair had to open it carefully to avoid bumping him, and then the little blond boy was holding up his arms, begging to be carried. His face was dotted with chocolate.

Lifting him easily to his hip, Blair held out the other arm for Tara, who climbed onto his back like a monkey, Blair holding both of her feet in one hand for her to balance on.

Standing to one side, her arms crossed, looking far too serious for an eight-year-old, Jessi wasn't smiling.

"Come on, m’cushla, it can't be that bad." Blair walked over, laden with children, and rested a hand on her strawberry-blonde hair, coming free from the tight pig tails her mother had put it into. "Let's go inside and I'll talk to your dad."

When he went up the two steps to the front door Tara squirmed and Blair grabbed for her over his shoulder with the hand that wasn't holding JJ. "Be still, mtoto, I don't want to drop you."

"Your gun is hard," she complained, wriggling down from her perch. "You don't put it there."

"Well, I'm wearing it there today." Blair said with a grimace. Jim's children were familiar with guns, were well-educated about them -- but he would never be comfortable with guns and children in the same room, or even the same house. It was just another compromise he'd made to live this life.

Inside, Blair got the smaller children settled in the playroom. He and Jim had spent most of their free time for six months enlarging a utility closet into the garage and finishing it off to build the area, but it was soundproofed and gave the kids a safe indoor place to play after dark and when the weather was bad, without bringing the house down with their noise. There was a small slide, a miniature trampoline, and several ride-on toys, besides the blocks and Legos and coloring books and other things that fed a child's imagination. The TV was in the family room where viewing could be supervised.

Although JJ made a face that threatened to become tears, Blair closed the lowest one-third door and stationed Jessi at the kitchen table to keep an eye on things. Tara immediately started bouncing on the trampoline, and JJ crawled up to lie beside her feet and get jostled.

Leaning over Jessi at the table, Blair pressed his face to her hair, kissing her head. "Have you been listening?"

"I tried not to," she said, sadly. "But Daddy is mad, and Mommy is crying."

"I'm going to go up and see what's wrong now, okay? Don't let Tara get too loud."

Her crystal-blue eyes stared up at him, and he saw clearly how worried she was. Her parents didn't fight, not like this.

"It will be all right." Meeting her eyes until she smiled, Blair kissed her one more time. Then he slowly went up the stairs, knowing that Jim would hear him coming. The bedroom door opened
just as he stepped into the hall. Standing very still, Jim held it open with one arm, and Blair ducked beneath it to enter.

The air was thick with tension. Becca was sitting at the window, on the small sofa she'd chosen for that spot. In her jeans and loose blouse she looked the same as always. But her eyes were reddened from crying and her hands were clenched into fists in her lap. When she looked up at Blair, her face drew into a grimace that was half anger and half pain.

Stopping in the middle of the room, Blair took a deep breath. "Maybe I shouldn't be here."

He was stopped by Rebecca's tight and angry voice. "No, stay, Blair. Maybe you can explain this to him, make him understand. He doesn't seem to hear what I'm saying."

Half-turning so that he could see both of them, Blair looked to Jim, his voice raised in a soft question. "Explain what, man?"

"Explain," Jim ground out, jaw tensing and teeth grinding, arms crossed over his chest, voice low and harsh, "Why my wife ignored my wishes and did exactly what I asked her not to do."

"Becca?" Blair's voice quavered, but he couldn't prevent it. What did this mean, what had happened, what would happen to him and the kids -??

Her reply was soft, and a touch defiant. "Blair, I'm pregnant."

"Oh!" As quickly as he grinned Blair felt it crumple into uncertainty, glancing quickly at Jim. "Oh. But I thought, um, you were, uh..."

"Exactly, Chief." Jim snarled. "She was gonna not do this again."

After they had lost baby Ben, Jim had decided that he didn't want any more children. But having himself sterilized was out of the question, because of his always unpredictable response to medications, so he'd had to rely on Rebecca to cooperate with him. She had been reluctant, refused to have the surgery herself, telling Blair that she thought she could change his mind. Remembering Jim's terror when Ben had died and Becca herself had come close, Blair had doubted that, but kept his opinion to himself. Now, a year later, Blair realized that she had made the decision for herself.

"Oh, man, Becca," he sighed, fear coloring the tone.

"The doctor said that what happened last time was a fluke. An accident, unlikely to happen again." she stared past Blair at her angry husband. "I want another baby, Jim. I need one. I feel -- incomplete. When Ben died, it felt like a part of me died as well."

"I asked you not to do this." Jim was still snarling and Blair took an involuntary half-step forward, putting himself directly between them, one hand rising, palm out, as if to hold the older man back. "I told you how I felt and I asked you not to do this! And you lied to me!"

"I didn't lie!" Leaping to her feet Becca shouted back at him. "You never asked! You just assumed I'd obey your orders! Well, I'm not in your platoon, Captain Ellison, and we're not in the eighteenth century any more, either! I'll do what I want with my body!"

"GUYS!" Blair shouted, making them both stop and stare. "The kids are listening. Jessi is listening. If you're gonna fight, at least let me get them out of the house!"

Backing down, Jim shook his head, looking at the floor, his jaw jumping with tension. "Can't. We
got a call. In Florida."

"They can give it someone else. Tell Garry you have a family emergency."

"Chief." Now Jim looked at him, his face hard and cold. "It's Wannabe."

"Oh, crap. Talk about timing." Looking from his Sentinel to his next-best friend, Blair grasped at a straw. "I'll go without you."

"NO!" They both spoke at once.

"Then what will we do?" Frustrated, Blair swung his head back and forth, as if he were watching a tennis match.

"We're going to catch a plane to the sunshine state, and my wife is going to do her own thing," Jim answered, the look he gave Rebecca harsh. "She's not going to listen to me anyhow."

"That's not fair, James," Becca rebutted. "You didn't listen to me. I've been telling you for months that I wanted a baby. But you ignored me."

"I told you how I felt about it." Jim shrugged. "You went and ahead and did it anyhow."

"If you didn't want to participate all you had to do was keep your legs crossed, or go sleep with Blair," she snarled -- and then her eyes widened and she stared at Blair, her face drained of color. "Oh god, Blair, I meant -"

Right in the solar plexus. His own face felt cold and pale. Ducking his head, fighting the urge to curl into a ball of pain at her words, or to lash out in retaliation, Blair headed quickly for the door, stumbling as he shook off Jim's hand on his shoulder. "I'm going to check on the kids," he said, almost calmly. "See you downstairs, man." He didn't, quite, slam the door in Jim's stunned face.

He knew what she'd meant. He really did. Didn't make it hurt any less.

Therapy. His therapy was downstairs, in this house that was the source of so much pain as well as joy. JJ received him with a squeal, beaming with the innocence of a child with ordinary hearing. Jessi and Tara bounced on the trampoline, trying to outdo each other in shrieking.

A few minutes later Jim joined them at the playroom door and found Blair on the floor with JJ in his lap, the little boy running a toy car up Blair's arm, over his shoulders, down the other arm and across his crossed legs to repeat the journey. Making the required 'vroom vroom' sounds, Blair just glanced at Jim. His mouth was tight, but there was no other outward evidence that he was upset. "My bag's packed," he said after a moment. "You ready?"

"Yeah." Watching as Blair untangled himself from the child, Jim opened the playroom door and found Blair on the floor with JJ in his lap, the little boy running a toy car up Blair's arm, over his shoulders, down the other arm and across his crossed legs to repeat the journey. Making the required 'vroom vroom' sounds, Blair just glanced at Jim. His mouth was tight, but there was no other outward evidence that he was upset. "My bag's packed," he said after a moment. "You ready?"

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By the time they got out of the playroom and had their things gathered by the front door, Becca was downstairs, with Jessi holding her hand. Tears threatened all around. Jim moved to ease the stress. "Here, son, take Papa Bear's bag to the car, can you do that? Jessi, you take mine, and Tara take Blair's other one..." Assigning the four bags of various sizes to the children, he hefted his largest one -- his military duffle bag, ancient, worn olive green, but still favored -- leaned over and kissed Becca on the cheek, and murmured a restrained goodbye. "We shouldn't be long. We'll talk when we get back." Surrounded by children, JJ struggling with Blair's laptop case and leaning on
his father's leg, Jim left the house.

Becca stared after him. After a moment she shifted her focus to Blair and reached to cup his chin. An inch taller than he was, she brought it up so she could meet his eyes.

He spoke before she could, wanting to banish the anguish he saw there. "I know what you meant, Becca. It's not your fault that's a tender spot for me. And I didn't mean to make things worse."

"Blair, you're the glue that holds us all together. You make things work around here. Without you I don't know where Jim and I would be now, after Ben and everything. I'm just sorry that it hurts you so much to be here."

Blair managed a small smile. "It's a good pain."

"There's no such thing."

Blair nodded and gave a shrug. "Then it's a pain I can live with, that I consider worth the cost." Her eyes lowered, then came back up. She didn't look in Jim's direction as she leaned in to whisper. "I know it's a lot to ask -- but can you talk to him? Please? I need this baby, but not if it's going to tear us apart."

"I'll make him understand."

"Most of the time, you're the only one who can."

He smiled and tried for levity. "At least I have that." He had no idea of how sad he looked. She didn't tell him.

There was no goodbye between them this time. Blair just kissed her cheek, turned around, and left.

***

They avoided the subject -- something they weren't good at, so it was obvious. As a team and as friends they were used to talking in, around, and through things. Deliberately not talking about something that they both knew required it went against the grain.

So they avoided -- to the airport, through check in and weapons check, while waiting at the gate for a delayed flight, and then through a long hour on the tarmac before a six-hour flight. At least the Bureau had let them use their frequent flyer miles to upgrade to first class, which was a tremendous relief to Jim's legs. No drinking, but they had good-quality mineral water for Jim and guava juice for Blair.

About once every thirty minutes Blair would look over at Jim as if he were trying to figure out how to start, and Jim would stare him down. When they got to the top of that last hour Blair finally got his nerve up. "She didn't do it to hurt you."

"Doesn't change it." Jim snarled softly, aware of the people around them. "She betrayed my trust, Chief. She took my love and used it to get what she wanted. I trusted her, Sandburg -- "

Blair's hand waved in front of his face, the movement sharp and clean, breaking off the potential rant. "And she trusted you to understand how she feels, how much she's still hurting. I know you wish Ben had lived, but you've gone on with your life, Jim. You spend more time than ever with the kids now and I know that's your way of coping. But she isn't over it and I don't understand why you don't see that."
"Having another baby to replace him isn't right."

"She doesn't want to replace him,*" Blair hissed, exasperated. "She wants a baby to love so her heart won't ache so much."

"Pretty words aren't going to fix this, Chief." The finality in Jim's voice was chilling. "I don't know if I can forgive her."

"You damn well better." Blair whispered. "Because if you screw this up, if you lose her and the kids over this, I'm not sure I'll be able to forgive you." Turning to look out the window, he could feel Jim's glare boring holes into the back of his skull. But he could withstand that, and he did, refusing to look at or speak to his friend until the plane landed in Florida.

***

"As soon as we saw this I knew it had to be in the computer," Smythe said without looking over his shoulder as he got out of the late model Ford, walking quickly across the parking lot of a large apartment complex. It had been emptied of vehicles but there were still gawkers standing around. "Surprised when it came up with your names, but there ya go." He shrugged and stepped over the yellow police tape that blocked the entrance to unit G3, on the ground floor, on the right. The door was past the ugly concrete-and-steel stairs.

"We've had to clean up after this bastard before." Blair ducked under the yellow tape Jim held for him. "Unless this is the work of a copycat, this guy gets around." He looked for anything that would start him down the path that would lead them again to the killer. Jim was in full bloodhound mode, eyes and ears and nose ready to let Blair know if anything was different.

The Miami detective Blair guessed to be the son of Honduran immigrants, judging from his face and the remaining trace of the musical accent, despite his unlikely last name. "Smythe, not 'Smith,'" he'd informed Jim, and spelled it out to Ellison despite the fact that Sandburg was the one taking notes. In fact, to Blair's quiet amusement and Jim's growing displeasure, Smythe had yet to look directly at Sandburg, all of his comments either delivered while he stared fixedly at Ellison or at his rear-view mirror, or at the sidewalk, or at a passing cloud. Blair wondered what Smythe would do if he suddenly shouted "Boo!" at him.

There were a couple of uniforms at the door that Smythe waved away, which led to some awkward maneuvering in the small space. Blair pushed back beneath the stairs. Gripping his elbow Jim pulled him forward and in front of his body so that Blair could be the first one into the apartment. Smythe came up behind Jim. "Nobody's touched anything but the ME, that warning came up when I ran the MO, but it wasn't easy to keep the men out, if ya know what I mean."

Nodding, fully aware that the locals resented being told what to do, especially via computer screen, Jim watched carefully as Blair stepped into the living room of the apartment. It was pretty typical - - the brown shag carpet that would turn your feet orange if you walked on it barefoot, small kitchen separated from small living room by a formica-topped island, appliances tucked away beneath cracked cabinet doors. As always, the smells overwhelmed Blair as they entered the place. Wannabe's trademark odors, all right. Blood. Decay. And the delicious smell of fried liver.

"Shit," said Smythe.

"Tell me about it," Ellison said in the same cool voice. Neither he nor Blair could eat organ meats any more, and he had to shut off his smell entirely if Becca chose liver or kidneys when they ate out.
There was a small round table sitting under a hanging light fixture on a patch of vinyl tile decorated with lavender flowers to the right of the kitchen, the dining area. The table was neatly set with one plate and glass, a placemat, napkin and silverware. The plate was dark blue, the napkin, folded neatly beside it, white with a border of blue flowers. Paper, but expensive. The plate was still stained with dark juices. A fork and knife lay akimbo on the plate.

Beside the table lay the founder of the feast. The young man's face was contorted in an expression of terror and pain. A wound gaped under his ribcage where unlicensed surgery had been performed on his bruised, naked body.

A young handsome man, murdered and cannibalized. As had happened six times before in ten years, in the States. Four times in Canada. Three times in England. Twice in Spain. Once in Italy. A Jeffrey Dahmer wannabe, or Wannabe and his copycats.

"Name's Cory Anderson," Smythe spoke up. "Automotive tech at a GM dealership, 26, lived alone. Once engaged, currently single."

Stopping just inside the door, Jim watched as Blair approached the victim's body carefully. They'd come a long, long way from the days when Blair had turned away at the sight of a corpse.

Blair didn't even bend down when he faced Cory. "He didn't finish. Come here, Jim."

"What's missing?" Jim asked, moving closer.

Blair gestured at the expanse of smooth, hairless chest. Wannabe had recently taken to carving a specialized message on the front of each corpse, in addition to the Sharpie "For Jeffrey" on the victim's left buttock.

"No message," Jim answered his own question. "Copycat? Changed his MO? We don't deserve his words anymore?" His eyes narrowed as he stared at the corpse's chest. "Hang on a sec..."

"Anything?" Blair asked casually after a long moment.

"The scratches are there. Very faint. CRUNCH CRUNCH," Jim muttered to his Guide. For Smythe's benefit he said, "Hard to tell, better wait for Forensics."

"Sweet Krishna," Blair murmured. Out loud he added, "So he got as far as the rough draft." They'd found the preliminary to Wannabe's carved testimonial scratched into two previous victims. "Which means he does the rough draft, maybe while the organ's cooking, eats the organ, then he carves the message. He was interrupted during dinner. Check the silverware, Jim."

"Didn't line them up against the plate," Jim completed Blair's unspoken thought. "Looks like he just dropped them. I think you've called it, Chief."

"But by whom? Phone wouldn't stop him. This guy have any friends we know of that would just drop by?"

"Neighbor says he spent most weekends alone, on his computer usually. It's in the bedroom," Smythe said. "Nice setup. Expensive. Maybe he trusted an online dating service he shouldn't have, huh?"

"No, it doesn't fit," Blair said. "Wannabe's a stalker, but real-time, not cyber-stalking. He enjoys the physical world too much. He likes to watch his victims, get to know them before he invites himself over for dinner and a date." Some quiet clinical portion of his mind considered the mental Kevlar provided by the cruel cop-humor he'd picked up in this gruesome job.
"Friends say Anderson was straight." Smythe looked hard at Blair.

"They also say he was brunette," Blair replied smoothly, looking down at the brown-haired corpse. "Doesn't matter to Wannabe. The conquest is the important thing here, the devouring of his victim, and the message left behind. He must be really pissed that he missed his chance to impart a valuable lesson to us. He's going to strike again, soon, to make up the lapse. Unless we stop him."

"So what happened?" Jim stood and looked around himself. "Salesman?"

"I don't know. Maybe it took too long? Someone came to the door? Wannabe wouldn't like being interrupted while he ate, but that shouldn't stop him from dealing with it and then finishing up later."

Jim sounded pleased. "If he left in a hurry or without cleaning after, he might have left something that will lead us back to him." He turned on Smythe, snapping orders. "I want forensics in here ASAP, I'm going to supervise the way they handle this, and I want the media kept out of this, got it?"

Answering resentfully, but resigned, Smythe just nodded.

Still kneeling beside the dead man, Blair continued to study him. Cory Anderson wasn't talking, but his house, and his body, were. Loudly. What would he tell them before they were done? "If yours is the death that sticks this sick bastard in jail, Cory, you didn't die for nothing."

"That guy really a homo?"

Blair winced. Smythe would have to work on that stage whisper of his.

"That guy is really one of the best profilers in the country, Smythe," Jim snapped. "If you've got a problem with that we can go home right now."

"Down, boy," Blair muttered to Sentinel ears without looking away from Cory. The murder scene was not the place to re-educate cops. Jim usually knew that; this business with the baby had really put a bug up his ass, and all his walls were up.
Chapter 6

Sitting at the conference table, picking with one hand at a bedraggled salad, Blair kept his attention focused on the files spread open around him. He knew them well, all of them, they were like old friends to him now; he knew their names, their occupations, the different ways they'd all lived, the identical way they'd all died. At the other end of the table, moderately closer to Jim, was Smythe and two younger detectives, all of them looking from Ellison, who was practically throwing off sparks from his hasty conversation with Becca in the hotel room minutes before, to his silent, grim-faced partner.

The five-minute electronic contact had done nothing to patch things between the angry couple. Both were playing the role of wounded party, from the sound of things; Blair had felt uneasy being privy to the intense one-sided conversation; he could feel the control Jim was exuding to not shout over the line.

"Becca, I said we'd talk about it. We can't do it now, we've got a meeting in twenty minutes!"

"Because Sandburg isn't speaking to me until I do, that's why. I don't like being manipulated and I don't like having the two of you gang up on me."

"Yes, I'll call you tonight. Whenever we turn in. In the morning if it's too late." Jim glared over his shoulder. "You want to talk to Sandburg?"

"All right, then. Goodnight, Becca. Kiss the kids for me." Jim put the phone away, then turned and crossed his arms over his chest, anger radiating from him. "There. I talked to her. You happy? Are you going to quit this cold-shoulder routine now?"

Blair shrugged, unhappy.

Things hadn't warmed much in twenty minutes. People at the table could sense the rift between the partners and were uneasy. Blair kept his eyes mostly on his unappetizing lump of soggy vegetables and Jim was managing to sit aggressively.

"Everything fits except the lack of writing," Ellison began curtly. "Sandburg?"

"The pathologist says there are a few light scratches that may have been preliminary to words." Ellison's findings were Sentinel-based and wouldn't hold up until they were verified. "We found that on two of the other victims -- he likes to check his spacing and get them nice and even. Forensics may have picked up a partial print from the handle of the spatula he used when he cooked the liver."

"How long to run the print?" Smythe asked Ellison.

"I sent it in," Blair said ironically to Smythe's profile. The man still wouldn't look at him. "If there's a hit we should know in a day or two."

"But it wasn't much of a print." Jim added darkly, glaring at Smythe. "Talk to us, Sandburg."

"Okay...." Folding his hands on the table in front of himself, closing his eyes and taking a deep breath, Blair took a minute to center himself. The others watched. Most cops didn't get a chance to work with an FBI profiler in their careers and they seemed to think it was fascinating. "We know the basics. He's neat, he's clean, he's probably obsessive. He stalks, so he probably isn't noticeable physically. He seems to have developed a sense of humor, from what -- "
"Where'dya get that?" Smythe objected. His detectives smirked at their boss's interruption of the weird outsider.

A power-stealer whose machismo was threatened. Smythe probably interrupted female detectives and belittled their findings too. "From the way he arranges things," Blair explained calmly, betraying none of his anger. "That whole Martha Stewart table-setting, almost as if he's inviting his victim to the dinner. His usual choice of phrases -- BITE ME, CHECK THE MENU, APPLES FOR DESSERT. He's taunting us, but at the same time it's like he wants us to get in on the joke." Blair tapped lightly under the table to divert Jim's glare away from Smythe. Bad enough Jim had a bug up his ass, he did *not* need to get it in a sling while he was down here. "All the victims are men in their twenties, young, and handsome."

Smythe snorted and looked toward his men.

"Did you wish to add something, Detective?" Blair asked politely.

"Funny you should notice that," Smythe said cattily, still not looking at Blair; one of his detectives laughed nervously. "Planning to ask 'em out for a date yourself?"

That tore it. This guy needed a bite on the muzzle, now, or he was gonna get Jim in trouble for brawling. "Jim, gimme something," Blair muttered without moving his lips.

Ellison blinked away from his full-bore laser glare at Smythe's back, drew a deep breath, blinked again. Did not, quite, smile. He casually tapped a little Morse code on the table.

"I notice a lot of things, Smythe," Blair added calmly. "For example, you've worn the same pair of underwear for a couple of days -- and the Old Spice isn't masking it very well. Wife mad at you? Won't do your laundry?"

"That's none of your fucking business!" Smythe snapped, whipping around to finally glare into Blair's eyes. Too late, he pulled himself back -- but unlike his underwear, his hypocrisy was now waving in the wind for all to see. His underlings were smirking at his expense now, and looking at Blair with amused respect rather than with Smythe's contempt.

Blair kept his eyes demurely on the report before him as he muttered a Sentinel-soft "Thanks" to his purse-mouthed partner. The head wolf had reasserted his hold on the pack -- with a little assistance from an obliging panther. The unspoken exchange felt good, the pair of them once again teaming up to counteract an outside attack.

Blair continued as if nothing had been said. "The victims' looks are relevant. I'd say Wannabe's in his late thirties to mid forties, most likely plain-looking if not homely. He kills these guys precisely because they're young and attractive; eating them may be his way of taking those qualities into himself, or to punish them for being what he is not. He once was, though. I'll bet he was very handsome when he was his victims' ages."

"Think he was disfigured somehow?" Jim asked, closing and stacking folders. Only Blair could see the microscopic quivers of restrained laughter. It had been too long since Jim had laughed.

"No. He just got older and no one wanted him anymore. At least, not the ones he wants."

"Is he gay?" the younger of the new guys asked.

"No. Several of the victims were, but there's nothing sexual in the way he's responding to them or in the way he's killing them. It's their youth and beauty he wants. He's like the Wicked Queen in Snow White, eating her rival's heart to once again be fairest in the land."
A silence hung in the stuffy overheated air and then Jim stood. "Let's get a cup of coffee and something you can eat, Chief." The words were stiff, but Jim touched his shoulder gently as he stood.

"This thing doesn't look like it was ever edible." Blair pushed the salad away and joined him.

"Call us when the print comes back." Jim said, on the way out the door.

Ten minutes later they were sitting in a 24-hour diner preparing to order. As the waitress approached Blair suddenly sat up straighter, grabbing for a napkin as he coughed raggedly.

"Jesus, Chief!" Pushing his hand out of the way Jim retrieved one for him and watched as Blair used it to cover his mouth as he coughed. "You okay?" He raised his hand, offering to pound the smaller man on the back if it would help.

After a minute or more the attack faded and Blair wiped his mouth, shaking his head. "I can't seem to shake this cold."

"You got it from Tara." Jim grinned. "So it has to be a tough one."

Blair grinned himself; this, and the exchange at the table, proved the world was right once again. They ordered, Jim getting a cheeseburger and fries while Blair ordered another salad (he was definitely not in the mood for meat), and then settled back with their coffee.

"It's the protector thing." Jim said conversationally, sipping his coffee.

"I know." Blair met his eyes. "Even when I don't need protecting." Jim grinned wryly and tapped on the table; both men snickered. "That was perfect, Jim. If that asshole's determined to make me an enemy, I might as well give him a reason."

"Bigoted son of a --"

"No, I'm three-F to him, Jim. I'm not just a fag -- I'm a Fed, and a foreigner. As I recall, Detective Ellison didn't care much for Feds barging into Cascade from somewhere outside to take over his cases either."

"That was different," Jim groused, glaring into his coffee.

"It always is when it's someone else," Blair said smoothly, earning another glare.

"Asshole."

"Now that's the Jim Ellison I remember. Not that slope-browed hominid who seems to think that women are property."

Jim exhaled and shook his head sharply. "No, Chief. Nice try. But I can't reconcile myself to what Becca--"

"Excuse me?" Blair said softly, but there was no amusement in his glare. He would not let Jim's eyes drop. "What Becca did?"

Faced with those eyes, Jim glared back. Then, finally, he dropped his gaze before that unrelenting wolf's stare. ". . .to what...we've done."

"Thank you. Finally."
"Goddammit, Chief, neither one of you is even listening to me! You have no idea how I feel about this --"

"Then tell me, Jim, just tell me!" Blair snapped.

Jim drew a breath between his teeth. His fists clenched. "Everything inside me is raging over this. I'm furious, I am just so angry I can't see or think --"

"Fear!" Blair hurled the word between them like a grenade. "That's what your anger and your betrayal-sense are covering up -- your fear!" The click had sounded loud, right in the middle of Jim's tirade. Of *course*, anger to hide the fear, monumental anger to hide bottomless terror --

Face to face with a stunned, white-eyed man, Blair thought for one microsecond that Jim would strike him for the first time in his life. His voice leveled, lowered; a lance that drove deep to disarm his opponent. "Fear, Jim. Anger -- and violence," he warned, glaring, seeing the way Jim had tensed as if for a fight, "have always been your reactions to fear, and to things you couldn't control. I have spent a decade studying you, man; I know my subject."

"She betrayed me --" Jim was foundering.

"Everyone who doesn't do what you want is a betrayer, is that it, Jim?" Blair met the cold glare eye for eye. "What's the deal? Do you not want this baby that's coming? Then I'll adopt it and raise it. If you can do your job while raising three children, I can do it raising one."

"That's ridiculous," Jim snapped. But his cheekbones were stark.

"Can't afford a fourth, is that it? I'm a bachelor, I can handle the food and medical bills --"

"That has nothing to do with it, and you know it!"

"Then what is it?!" Blair hissed.

"I don't want them to die!"

Every head in the diner turned toward the suddenly motionless table.

The sight of Jim's face contorted in stark terror etched into Blair's mind and heart, just before Ellison looked toward the wall of their booth in a pitiful search for privacy. Blair looked toward the blank wall too.

"I don't--want them--to die," Jim whispered fiercely, his clenched fists contorting his paper napkin, his eyes staring blindly at the wall, his lungs taking air like a bellows. And now Blair knew just how Jim's face had looked as he'd listened to the machine screaming his son's death from behind a closed door, waiting to hear it scream his wife's death. His own eyes wide and stinging, Blair said nothing.

Jim shuddered, exhaled hard. "This fucker. This bastard." His fists thumped on the table, hard enough to rattle the silverware. "I -- dream. I'm eating a steak, a big juicy one. Everything on it. I look down from the table and Becca's on the floor dead with this big bloody hole in her belly. I look back at the plate and it's Ben. I killed Becca and I've been eating Ben."

He still blamed himself for that terrible pregnancy, the useless birth -- oh, that would put you off the joyful news...No wonder. No wonder he'd been such a prick about this. "We're gonna land this one, Jim. We'll stick that liver-eating son of a bitch in jail, and he'll be away from people forever."
Jim dropped his head into his hands. Blair longed to stroke his hair, cradle that big head to his chest, drop a kiss on the top... He clenched his hands into fists to keep them from touching; this was his own pain to bear.

"Jim, some things are bigger than death, or the fear of death. And one of them is a woman's maternal instinct, and her love for her children. That's what gives Becca the courage to risk danger and heartbreak again, and go into an adventure where you can't protect her.

"You've risked your life to keep your family safe and well. You consider them worth the risk. Is what Becca's doing any different?"

Jim's closed hands shook, a little. He did not look at Blair.

"We'll eat. We'll go back to our room. And you might want to make a phone call before you go to bed tonight."

Jim's head nodded.

"Don't try to protect her, you can't. Suppose you might as well expend that instinct on me." Blair smiled wryly. "And I think Becca knows. She feels it toward the children. You feel it toward me, even more than toward Becca or even the kids at some level."


"It has to be true, Jim. I love all of your children, but when I see Jessi something inside of me just jumps for joy. A part that the others don't touch."

"The part I reach?" Jim asked quietly.

"Yeah. The Guide part. It's like I am *so* happy to be doing what I'm meant to do. Deep inside, to-the-bone-soul-deep happy." He stopped talking and shrugged.

"The way being around you feeds some part of me that Becca can't?"

"I'd like to think so." With a quick grin, so practiced that even Jim couldn't tell it was forced, Blair got them back to the real subject. "She needs this baby, Jim. There's nothing to worry about, she's young and strong and she's done this several times before. When she was carrying Ben we both knew she was sick from the minute she conceived, but she's already 10 weeks along and feeling fine."

"It still feels like I've been tricked." Jim muttered. But the heat was gone. The rage was understood, and with that understanding brought to ground.

"Not tricked." Blair said, his hand reaching across the table touch lightly on Jim's wrist, a feather-stroke of fingers. "Just not told right away. I think she just wanted to enjoy it a little while before the fireworks started."

Noting when the hand moved away, Jim smiled at his friend. "She's right, you know. We would have split up that first year if you hadn't been there, to help us see things from each other's side. The love was there, but neither of us had any good examples of how to build a successful marriage. I tried and failed and her parents are so far apart they don't even seem to be in the same room when they are."

"You're my friends. I'm good at getting people to understand things. The whole Sentinel thing had to be a shock for her. But she stuck with it, and so did you."
"And so did you." Looking up, Jim saw their food coming out. "But I'll tell ya, Chief, there are definitely going to be fireworks for this baby."

Accepting his plates, Blair cocked an eyebrow, questioning.

"If you don't let us name this one after you." Picking up his burger, Jim took a large bite and chewed thoughtfully. "It's good your name can be for either a boy or a girl because now we don't have to worry about it."

Staring, looking perturbed, Blair poked his fork at the new salad, a big improvement over the previous one.

"If you say no Becca and I will probably fight about it," Jim added, before taking another bite. Blair hadn't missed the glint in his friend's eye.

"And you say I'm being manipulative?" Blair half-growled. "You say you're being ganged up on?"

"Blair Ellison. With Catherine or Simon as a middle name." Jim kept eating, ignoring the dirty looks his partner shot at him.

"It's not like I'll ever have any kids of my own, man." Suddenly smiling, Blair gave in. "I would be flattered."

"Anything to keep us from fighting, right, Chief?" Jim said lightly.

"Right." Turning his attention to his own food, Blair quickly caught up to Jim, devouring everything with his regained appetite. The coughing fit was forgotten, and only when ten years had passed would Jim remember.

***

Back in the hotel room, Blair entered notes on the case and answered his mail, lulled by the sound of Jim's voice talking to Becca, running up a magnificent phone bill from this hotel room. When Jim finally unbent and apologized, he did nothing halfway. As could Blair, Becca would hear the weariness and stress in his voice, the fear he'd been hiding, the love he could never hide but which manifested itself in peculiar disguises. When Jim's voice became even more tender, Blair knew without listening in that Jim was talking to the children -- Jessi first, who would be soothed despite the late hour by the peace she could hear in her father's voice.

Riding on the cushion of regained equilibrium, Blair tapped a few more sentences into his report, adding the line about the Wicked Queen eating Snow White's heart. Made a nice dramatic addition. Poisoned apples. APPLES FOR DESSERT.

He blinked. He looked at the phrases again. CRUNCH. BITE. MENU. APPLES.

"We'll go camping when we get back, honey, just us and Papa Bear, we can practice --"

"Computers!" Blair shouted.

Jim almost dropped the receiver. "Chief?"

"He's a computer guy! They're computer puns!" Blair shouted. "But 'bite' instead of 'byte,' b-y-t-e, you know? That's the handle!" He snatched up his cellphone and punched in a number. "Sandburg. I've just had a thought. Narrow the search. Concentrate that print match against software companies' security files."
Jim stood behind him staring at the screen; he must have made some hasty goodbyes after that prolonged phone call.

"Yeah, all of them. Thanks. Bye."

The phone rang less than half an hour later.

Jim listened and smiled grimly. "Bingo, Chief. The print is a partial match -- ten points -- to a Robert Pulasko of Chicago. Former programmer for SunSpots Software, company went belly-up in the late 90s. Pulasko vanished, no trace of him since." Their small portable printer chugged and purred as it spat out the fax of the company's old ID picture of Robert Pulasko.

Blair looked at Pulasko. Age 36 at the time the picture was taken, 6'3", brown hair, green eyes, long narrow nose, no scars or distinguishing marks, a lean face accentuated by thinning brown hair, a level stare. They always looked so normal.

"Phone records came back too. Cory Anderson ordered pizza almost an hour before he died. Smythe located the delivery boy, he thinks that may be what interrupted him."

"Does Pulasko have an address here in town?"

"Checking that now." Starting the rental car, Jim gave Blair another smile. "Maybe we'll get him this time, Chief."

"We need to, man." Blair looked out the window as they drove the darkened city streets. "We need to." He'd promised Cory. The same way he'd promised Tom Mender, Ryan Chen, Donald Hasnefski -- all of them -- that they'd be the last victims.

***

"Tell me about the man." Sitting on a sofa in a lower-class suburban household, Blair looked right at home despite his suit and tie. The heater was set too high and the humidity in the room was making his hair curl fiercely, strands of it escaping the tie he'd clubbed it back in, curling and sticking to his neck and forehead.

Tony DeAtley was twenty, freckled and pimpled, tending to the pudgy. He was still living at home, trying to go to school while helping support his mom and a horde of little brothers and sisters, nieces and nephews.

"I didn't see him until I was getting back in my car." It was a 1972 Chevy Impala, gas guzzler and general-all-around junk heap, but Blair knew how the kid felt about it. It was his, it was paid for, and it ran. "I knocked for like ten minutes, and thought I heard somebody inside. But nobody ever came to open it and so I went back to the car. Called my manager on the cellphone -- they give them to us for safety now -- and he said to hang on, one of the cooks that works there might need a ride to work. I was close to where she lived, so he wanted me to wait while he called and checked the directions. Her mom had been sick for a while and she'd been having trouble getting there but she was saving money for a choir trip or something and he was trying to give her a break...

"Sounds like a nice guy," Jim interrupted the tale. "The man that came out of the apartment. What did he look like?"

"Get outta here, you brats!" Tony shouted, making Blair jump.

Both men looked in the direction of the shout. Several pairs of dark eyes peeking around a doorframe scattered with echoes of giggles.
"Uh, sorry. They just haveta stick their noses into everything," he apologized to Blair. "Mom won't be home from work till morning and I don't make 'em go to bed on the weekends, it just isn't worth it."

"That's okay. Jim's a father himself, we know exactly what you mean." Blair said with an affectionate grin at his partner. The Ellison children always went to bed on time, weekend or not.

"So I was sitting in my car waiting for the phone to ring and the damned door opened. At first I thought he'd just gotten around to it -- like, maybe he was in the shower or something, but he didn't even glance at me. And I was kinda pissed, so I didn't say anything to him. He got into this van parked across the street and took off."

"What was he wearing?" Jim asked, coming to stand on his other side, trying not to loom and intimidate the young man.

"Y'know, the usual. Jeans, dark glasses, heavy coat and gloves. I think his t-shirt was red, the coat wasn't zipped up all the way."

The FBI agents exchanged glances over his head. The shirt may have been red, but more likely it had been soaked with Cory Anderson's blood.

"Can you describe the van?"

"Oh, yeah. It was white and looked like it had some logo on the side, some kind of computer company. I thought maybe he was doing repairs for the guy's machine."

"The name?" Blair leaned closer and Jim could smell the excitement on him.

Tony paused and looked worried. "If I testify about this, will this guy try to kill me?"

"If we do it right he'll never know about you," Blair reassured.

"We have a lot of physical evidence." Jim added. "If it matches him then we won't need you in court."

"Just wondering." Tony said. "It started with an S. Like Sundance or Showdown, something like that."

After thanking the guy -- Blair slipped him a fifty and told him to order pizza for the kids, which made Tony wrinkle his nose and say firmly "Tacos" -- they left.

By the time they got back to the station Smyth had an address for Shockwave computers. And under current employees, no Robert Pulasko -- but an employee matching Pulasko's picture came up named Jeffrey Deaver. More word-play for Jeffrey. "I suppose we have to watch out for Tod Bundy and Charles Mansfield now," Blair muttered, and Jim snorted. Shockwave had a warehouse location in Miami, used to store obsolete components. They were shipped here and then taken by an auction house that peddled them in third-world countries where they were still more advanced than what was normally available.

A SWAT team was called, plans put together. In less time than Blair would have imagined they were on their way. It seemed like they might have actually got a lead on their guy.

It was a cloudy, overcast night, cold and dark and damp. Bundled up, the heavy kevlar pulling at his shoulders and making his want to scrunch down, Blair huddled with Jim outside the warehouse door.
There was a van parked outside, but no way of knowing if it was Pulasko's or one of the two regular employees. If Pulasko worked for the computer company he might travel enough to make his hobby less noticeable.

"We've got one man inside." Jim said quietly. Blair relayed the information through the headset he wore and got an answer from Smythe.

"He wants to go in with guns in front," he told his partner. "But if that isn't Pulasko..."

Twisting his own headpiece to where he could speak into it, Jim snarled softly. "That might not be our guy in there. We don't want to tip him off if he is. Sandburg and I are going to do it the easy way -- we'll walk up to the front door and knock."

Rolling his eyes, Blair expressed his enthusiasm with this plan, but stood when Jim did, ignoring Smythe's muttered comments about glory-hounds.

There was a small door next to the big truck door and there Blair rapped his knuckles loudly. Beside him, a couple of steps away, Jim had his weapon at the ready.

"Hello, anyone there?" Blair called.

"Coming!" A man's voice answered. Waving a hand Blair checked to be sure his jacket was covering his kevlar and messed his hair over the headset. Jim stepped out of sight to the side just in time.

"Yes?" A man, forty or so, thin but tall, well groomed. Dull gray-brown hair, green eyes over bags, sagging cheeklines framing a long narrow nose. Jeans and a dark coat. This was the face of evil.

"Jeff Deaver?" Blair asked, just to be sure.

"Yes." The man had his hands in his pockets, but didn't seem to be a threat. "May I help you?"

Reaching into his jacket, Blair moved one hand behind his back to grip his gun, and used the other the pull out his identification wallet. "Agent Blair Sandb--"

A wall hit Blair from the side just as he saw the gun leave Deaver's pocket. He hit the ground as three shots went off in quick succession, ringing in his ears at this close range. The wall on top of him gave a muffled cry of pain in Jim's voice.

*JIM!*

SWAT members were everywhere, shouting, swarming like army ants. Cries from inside the warehouse seemed far away.

Blair moved through the noise and confusion of men like an ice-cutter through the Arctic Ocean. Up he rose, shoving aside the limp figure of Robert Pulasko sprawled over his fallen partner, and knelt beside his Sentinel. *Jim if you've made this baby an orphan I swear to God I'll kill you--*

Jim was breathing. Gasping in pain. Blair tore open the shirt to stop the bleeding. And found none. The bullet had lodged in the very bottom of the Kevlar vest -- it had ridden up when Jim had lunged to put himself between Blair and the bullet -- just enough to bruise his sternum and ribs. A fraction of an inch lower and he'd have gotten it right in stomach, if not the spine.

"Y'okay?" the downed man breathed.
"You bastard, you stupid fucking bastard," Blair snarled, biting back his sobs of relief. "I was wearing a vest! You're the one with a wife, kids who need you -- what the fuck did I tell you about protecting people who don't need it?"

"Always need it," Jim whispered, every breath a whine of pain. "Always running into the fire, Chief."

Hopeless. He was hopeless. When the moment came for instinct over thought, his Guide's safety would always come before his duty to his family. "All right all right, find the pain, dial it down, you can do it, Jim, oh god Becca's gonna kill me for this one..."

Smythe was calling for an ambulance while the bleeding Pulasko was surrounded by police. They needed to keep him alive, to pry all the names out of him. How many missing-persons reports, how many "killer or killers unknown" files would close? Blair shared a look with Jim even as the pain cleared from Ellison's face.

"This could be a medal for you, Chief," Jim said.

"Screw the medal, man." Blair exhaled and rested a hand over Jim's bruised liver. In his mind he saw a host of spirits -- young, beautiful, male -- whisper their thanks as they finally, peacefully, vanished. "It's over, Jim. It's over."

***

Jim spent the night in the hospital for observation and was released the next day. He bore some nasty bruises that turned every color in the rainbow before they faded two weeks later, but was otherwise unharmed.

In the aftermath of the shooting they ended up stuck in Miami for five days, which annoyed Jim and Becca but made Blair guiltily happy. While they waited for a final ruling on the shooting by the Miami PD they did some time at the beach and visited a couple of aquariums (and Blair went off on his own with a couple of guys). Knowing Jim was in good hands, Becca stayed home with the kids -- and had to deal with one tantrum when Tara asked why she couldn't get a Kevlar vest like Daddy's.

The shooting was ruled justified, of course. Pulasko had pulled his gun first and started shooting without warning. He was still in critical condition, but had been moved from the ICU; police now waited to get all the secrets from the warped and twisted paths of the man's brain -- that would eventually divulge forty names over thirty countries in ten years.

Five days later they were ready to go home; although in some pain, Jim had the dial turned down far enough to manage.

"This is cool and all, but I don't feel like we're the ones that got him," Blair grumbled quietly beside Jim on the plane. "It was that fingerprint that got him, really. Plain old-fashioned forensics work."

"You were the one that narrowed it down, Chief," Jim soothed. "He might have vanished and kept killing somewhere else if you hadn't picked up the connection."

"It was a guess, a long shot. I got lucky. Luckier than Cory Anderson and the others." Blair was saddened.

"But now the relatives of those people, their families and loved ones, know who killed them, and that justice has been done. They know he isn't going to kill anyone else. Pulasko's staring at life or death -- even if he survives the shooting."
Blair just stared out the window, feeling that moment when the plane left the ground, taking a deep breath. "It doesn't feel like enough."

Jim's hand landed on his shoulder and squeezed. "It never does, does it?" Then Jim's hand slapped Blair's cheek lightly, affectionately. "When we get home, you're going to help me paint the nursery again. What color do you think Blair Catherine is going to like, hm?"

"Blair Rainbow will like yellow best at that age, I think." Turning to look at Jim, Blair smiled widely, mischievously.

"Rainbow? Rainbow? You think I'm saddling any of my kids with a middle name like Rainbow, Blair Peace Sandburg, we've got a lot to talk about..."

The scuffle was short and Blair let Jim win.

****

Dr. Rothell warned Rebecca that the child was a high-risk candidate for Down's Syndrome. "I've taught Downs children," Becca responded. "They were some of the most responsive and loving children I've ever met. Love them and they love you right back."

All three kids wanted a little brother. "There's too many girls in this family," JJ complained at one Sunday dinner. "If it's a girl, Papa Bear says we'll take her to Denmark and make her a boy," Tara responded. That triggered a little private talk with Daddy and Papa Bear, once the table had died down.

Amid all this, as if in apology for Becca's previous tragic experience, this pregnancy was ease itself. Becca threw up in the morning and got a little puffy but otherwise was hale and healthy; she kept her appetite, swam and went for walks with the family, took her vitamins. She swelled and blossomed like a summer rose.

The baby was nearly as restless as Benny, but this one calmed down enough to let Becca sleep when Jim stroked her shifting belly and sang quiet lullabyes against the taut skin; that was a strong indication that another little Sentinel was preparing to join them. Jessi was thrilled, and started making plans to show the new kid the ropes.

Neither parent even pretended to make the kids go to bed the night Becca went into labor; Jessi was very conscientious about timing her mom's contractions with the watch Blair had given her for her ninth birthday, and only when they were five minutes apart did she calmly tell her father to call the doctor and get ready for the hospital. "Everything will be okay, Blair," she said against her mother's stomach, stroking the taut belly.

Jessi was right. After seven hours of labor, healthy and sound in mind and body, beating all the odds, Blair Simon Ellison was born.

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(2008)

Jim strode into the principal's office, Blair a step behind. Blair was worried. {Not good, kids, not good. Jim and I get a day off, and this is when you do something that lands you here after school?}

Jessi and Tara had had the usual rough time smart girls got in school, especially if they were not interested in playing the social games, but while Tara tended to respond in kind and Jessi preferred avoiding confrontation, neither girl was the type to get into official trouble.
Becca had gotten the call at 2:30, and had announced it to the stunned room. Blair and JJ had looked up from the National Geographic they were reading; Jim had slowly stood up from the couch, setting aside the sports section. Assuring Becca that they'd handle the situation, the two men had left her with the six-year-old and had gone off to bail out the other two.

As the non-authority figure, Blair would not interfere with whatever punishment the parents meted out. But he could at least provide non-verbal moral support to the girls.

Both looked like they needed it. They sat in adjoining chairs on the other side of the principal's desk. Jess had a wavery red-eyed look of fear at being in trouble, but Tara's lips were pinched with fury. The younger girl's eyes were red and wide-open, and her nostrils had the dark-red look of a just-stopped nosebleed; she held an icebag on her scraped bare knee. Jess looked like she wanted to crawl into a hole rather than face the wrath to come, but not her younger sister.

A black-haired freckle-faced boy sat opposite the girls; he looked a year older than Jessi and was half a head taller than her. One of his eyes was black and swollen and his nose was red and swollen; a woman who was obviously his mother (she and the boy wore identical gold crosses around their necks) soothed him from behind and glared at the girls. Tara glared back.

At the sight of the men, Jessi's chin quivered as if she was trying to hold back the tears by main force; her lips shook with the effort she was exerting. Tara looked unrepentant. The tear-eyed boy stared at the new arrivals, then at the girls with a look of triumph; his mother petted him.

Principal Dornan stood, and adjusted her wire-framed glasses.

"Mr. Ellison. Dr. Sandburg. I'm sorry I had to call you in for this. But Tara started a fight on the playground this afternoon with Kevin MacIlvane, that also involved Jessi. The girls said they wouldn't say anything until you appeared."

{Cop's kids all right -- remain silent until your counsel shows.} Blair bit back a grin.

Jim stared in disbelief and anger at his 7- and 9-year-old daughters. "We're here now. Is this true? Did you start a fight?"

"No," Tara said shortly. Jessi shook her head, her lips still pinched together.

"That's a lie!" Kevin snapped, his teeth glinting with braces. "She hit me first!" He sniffed a little more, and his mother glared at all three adults and Jess.

"He started it!" Tara snapped, an angry tear leaking out of one wide-open eye.

"Did you hit him first?" Jim said, in the quiet deadly voice he used to interrogate suspects; Blair winced, but made sure Tara didn't see it. He would not interfere with parental discipline. "Answer me, young woman!"

Tara's lips tightened.

Jessi shut her eyes.

"I had to!" Tara said. "Jessi heard him say -- he said -- " She stopped, obviously choked with fury.

"I don't care what he said. You do not hit people for what they say about you," Jim snapped. "You walk away when people call you names. You do not hit them!"

"I should think not," snapped Mrs. McIlvane, her hands stroking the teary Kevin's shoulders. "I want my son in a school that's safe for him to be on the playground without fearing for his life from
bullies!" She glared at Jim, obviously blaming this big burly father for having created these unladylike monsters, and stared in puzzlement at Blair.

"He didn't call me names!" Tara burst out, trying to control the sobs that were now shaking her body like a miniature earthquake. "He was -- he was just -- so mean! Even when we went over and talked to him, he wouldn't stop!" Her fist clenched on the icebag.

Jessi bowed her head. Blair suspected she was bitterly ashamed of her part in this. This was one time when being a Sentinel was a distinct disadvantage. If she hadn't overheard something not meant for her ears... He sneaked a peek at the boy. Tall, good-looking, doted on by his mother; yeah, that kind of boy tended to grow up thinking he was God's gift to the world. The good-looking boys were the cruelest at this age. But Blair kept silent. He did not know the story, but it was no excuse for Tara or Jessi to hit in exchange for a few cruel words, and he would not interfere with any punishment they got.

"I don't care what anyone said," Jim said in his steely quiet voice. "You do not hit anyone --"

"He called Blair a faggot!" Jessi burst out.

Some part of Blair's dispassionate observer mind took note of the five seconds of frigid, dead silence from everyone in the room. Kevin's mother's eyes widened. Kevin looked up at his mother with an imploring look. The principal's face froze. He couldn't see Jim's face.

"And he kept saying it," Tara snarled, glaring at the bigger boy. "Even when we told him to stop it. He just laughed and said meaner things!"

"I, I told him Blair was gay," Jessi whispered, "that's the right word, not to use those nasty words, but he just kept calling him things --" she choked. But in her red eyes was the same anger that burned in Tara's.

"I told him to shut up, but he wouldn't," Tara said coldly, "and that's when I hit the son-of-a-bitch."

Blair convulsed with an effort to hide his reaction as a coughing spell. He didn't dare look at Jim. Oh, he was in for it now. There were rules for the kids' language around the parents, but none around Blair.

Kevin's mother's face contorted. Her neatly-manicured nails dug into Kevin's shoulders. "What kind of girls use language like that!" she hissed. "Is this what you're teaching them in this school?"

Dornan looked weary, as if she'd run into this woman before on similar subjects.

Blair managed to quell everything tumbling inside him. This called for decisive action. He pushed his way past the stunned, speechless Jim to face the wounded party, as forthright as ever in a crisis. "Mrs. McIlvane, I'm Blair Sandburg, a friend of the Ellison family. I've helped raise the girls since they were born, we're very close." He held out his hand and smiled his most charming smile. "I'm very sorry about how this fight started. It was wrong of both girls, and they will be punished for this." He hardened his heart to a sniff behind him. {Take your licks, kids -- this is life.}

Kevin stared up at Blair from this close range; the boy's sneer was gone, and now he looked like a kid staring down the gullet of a Spielberg *T. rex*. He started shaking; his lip quivered; his eyes were like saucers. "Mommy," he whimpered.

Mrs. McIlvane did not take Blair's hand. She looked at it, then at his face, staring at his long hair, at his earrings. She looked at Jim, then back at Blair. Her face creased and crumpled into a pinched look of revulsion. Blair knew who had carefully taught Kevin his attitude even before she
tightened her grip on the boy and pulled him away physically from Blair. "You are...Blair? And are you a...a -- " The word she could not say was making her face uglier.

"I'm gay," Blair said simply, never losing eye contact. "But I don't want Kevin to get into trouble for --"

Instantly the woman stood between Kevin and Blair, terror and hate an ugly scar on her face. "Get away from my son!" she snarled.

"Mrs. McIlvane," Principal Dornan said loudly. But now her eyes too stared at Blair in a new way. The subject had never come up before.

"If you touch him I'll kill you!"

Blair retreated -- don't get between a grizzly and her cub.

Jim started forward. "Mrs. McIlvane, there is nothing for you --"

"Get away from my son! Away from this school!" Mrs. McIlvane shrieked at Jim. "Both of you and your perverted lifestyle! My God, how could anyone let two homosexuals near children!" She stared at the girls as if they'd each grown another head, the hate in her face showing that she now understood how such monsters had come to be. "I'll do everything in my power to get these girls away from you and into a normal home!"

"Shouldn't you ask my wife first?" Jim's deadly quiet voice cut through her hysteria, but his jaw muscle was flexing with a herculean effort to hold back what he truly wanted to say.

{Oh, great. So much for the little discipline session.} Blair glanced sideways at the girls, trying to look apologetic for this hostile takeover of the parent-teacher meeting.

Tara and Jessi were both staring at Mrs. McIlvane.

Suddenly Blair had to leave the room, he just had to.

"Excuse me," he said in a choked voice to the stunned principal, and pushed his way to the exit.

Just as the door closed behind him he heard Mrs. McIlvane shriek, "Stop him! Stop him before he finds some poor innocent little boy and --"

As angry adult voices crescendoed behind him, Blair hurried down the empty hall, far down the hall -- he didn't want Jessi to have any chance of hearing him, even though her filtering abilities were still undeveloped. Besides, he wouldn't be alone for long.

Sure enough, Jim caught up with him not a minute later. But the look of distress on Ellison's face instantly turned to bewilderment. Jim obviously hadn't expected to find Blair doubled over, laughing as soundlessly as he could.

"Chief? Chief, I'm so sorry -- "

Blair waved a hand, helpless, then wrapped it around his middle again, giggling. Right now the bulletin board behind him was the only thing keeping him upright.

"What the hell are you laughing about?" Jim snapped. "It's not funny! I saw where Kevin got his attitude, but Tara can't go starting brawls over --"

"Did you see the look on her face, Jim?" Blair gasped.
"That homophobic bitch? Oh, yeah --"

"No, no, no – Tara’s face, Jim, Tara’s. And Jessi’s," Blair choked, trying to tame the wild laugh inside him to a controllable chuckle. Finally he turned to his angry, confused friend, still chuckling. "They were staring at her. Jim, I have seen that look a hundred times before. On your face, every time some dickweed was tried to kill me." He laughed again at the blank look on Ellison's face. "Oh, man -- both of them looked like they were ready to haul Mrs. McIlvane across Dornan's desk and cut out her heart with a stone knife!" He dashed tears from his eyes and beamed at the flustered man. "Jim, you may have passed on your Sentinel genes to Jessi – but you gave your Blessed Protector genes to both of those Amazons!"

At the dumbfounded look on Jim's face, Blair collapsed, again, lost to his mirth. Soon, he heard a rusty, violent chuckle. Jim was doing his damnedest to hold it back, he was a father, he had to set an example, be a good role model --

Soon both men were sliding to the floor, helpless. Fortunately this was an after-school punishment session, or they'd have garnered more than a few curious stares.

When Jim could speak again he gasped, "Oh, god -- how am I going to punish them? I have to, Chief, you know that --"

"Tests," Blair said, hiccups. "A whole week of Sentinel tests after school for Jessi, instead of TV or computer or playing with her friends. Have Tara sit in on the sessions and watch what I do. That'll give me plenty of time to talk this over with them, too."

Jim nodded. "Done. Now, let's get back before either of them challenges that bitch to a knife-fight." He stood and offered a hand to Blair.

"My money's on the girls. You really shouldn't let them watch those old Xena reruns." The two men headed back to the principal's office. "And for god's sake, Jim, wipe that grin off your face or that woman will kill you."

Jim rubbed the back of his neck and looked at his friend. The distressed look was back. "Blair. This could get ugly, if Mrs. McIlvane tries to do something official."

Blair gave a dismissive snort. "If push comes to shove, you and Becca show up at a few PTA meetings and give them a photo op. Handsome man and his lovely wife, pillars of the community, parents of three adorable children who prove that getting a piggyback ride from a gay man doesn't warp you for life. See how long Grendel and his mother hold up against that."
Blair stood in the far corner of the garage, facing a sullen, blindfolded girl. A sullen non-blindfolded girl stood beside him, scratching an itch.

"Now, try to figure out what object I touch," the Guide said.

"I'm boooored!" the Sentinel whined.

"At least you've got something to do, Messie!" Tara snapped.

"Shut up, stupid, this is your fault!"

"Yeah, well if you hadn't heard what that dick said we wouldn't be here, so there!"

"I can't help it!" Jessi whined again. "It's not my fault I heard him, I just did!"

"That's why you're doing tests instead of something fun, Jess. You need a lot of work on controlling, so you don't 'overhear' stuff you don't want to, or shouldn't."

"Well I can't hear stuff, why am I here?" Tara growled. Her hand and knee were still bandaged.

"Moral support. And for throwing the first punch. You shouldn't hit kids bigger than you." Blair managed to keep his face stern. The memory of an 11-year-old boy cowed by a pugnacious third-grader still overwhelmed him and Jim with more glee than was right. Tara had taken to Daddy's self-defense lessons the way Jessi had taken to Blair's Sentinel guidance; the little monster wanted to be a cop when she grew up, and Jim already pitied her future captain. "Big kids travel in packs, and they don't fight fair. You're lucky a bunch of Kevin's friends didn't beat you up."

"The other boys just stood there and laughed at him," Jessi said. "They're still teasing him about getting beat up by two little girls." She made a face. "I'm not little."

"Trust me, hon -- that is a really nasty punishment all by itself. Now shh." Blair scratched lightly. "And no hints from you, Scarlett."

"As if," Tara said huffily.

"That's a board," Jessi said. "Duh."

"And this?" Another faint scratching.

Jess cocked her head. "Like a board, but hollow. No, lighter. What's in here... Car, no. Rake, no. There's metal, just a little bit, light board, what the hell?..."

Blair took pity on her. He picked up an object and flung it at what he'd been scratching. A solid thunk.

Jess' face brightened. "Oh, the dart board, the dart board!"

"How many steps away are you from it?" Again, Blair scratched the dartboard.

Jess exhaled. As Blair had blindfolded her and Tara had led her around in circles, she did not know visually where she was -- all distances had to be gauged by other methods. "Um...four, no, five steps, long ones."
"Walk toward it."

"One, two, three." Jess stopped a half-inch from the Volvo between her and the dart board on the wall beside Blair and Tara. "And the car is two long steps!" she said triumphantly.

"Bingo."

"Boring," Tara said loudly, not impressed in the least with her sister's gifts.

"Mom must have driven it to the store at lunchtime, it's still warm." Jess still hadn't touched the car. She exhaled loudly. "Goddamnit, I hate being grounded."

"You're supposed to hate being grounded. That's so you won't do something to get grounded again."

"Well, Kevin deserved it for what he said!" Jessi snapped, as full of righteous fury at a wound to her Guide as her father would be. "And he said worse things -- things I didn't want to say in front of you guys. He is like so stupid! It's not fair!"

Blair's voice was as stern as Jim's. "Listen, both of you. Words won't hurt me. It's not worth you getting into trouble over. Okay, radar up. What is Tara holding in her hand?"

"Ick. A comic book. Why do they smell so bad?"

"The chemicals that treat the wood pulp. That's her left hand. What's in her right hand?"

"Cheater."

"Filter out the comic book. Come on, you can do it. Take your time, do it right."

Jess cocked her head, tried to listen, flared her nostrils. "Um...ick...um...oh, this is nice, sweet...um...apple. No, pear!"

"Got it."

Tara took a bite of the pear. "Blair, why was Kevin's mom so scary? She was even meaner than Kevin! I thought she was going to hit you!"

"Now we know where Kevin gets it, right?" Blair said wryly. "He's just doing what his mother taught him. Some people are scared of gay people." He tossed something across the garage, where it landed with a clatter.

"Frisbee," Jess said. "The hollow-ring one, it hit the croquet set, it's seven long steps behind me."

"Just testing."

"Yeah, well his mom's stupid too," Tara snapped. "She thought you were gonna hit Kevin!"

"Naw, she thought Blair was gonna bite Kevin and make him gay too," Jess said disgustedly. "Like a werewolf or something."

"Oh, as if," Tara sneered.

"Yeah, he's like got girls around him all the time. He makes fun of the smart girls, and some girls even pretend they're stupid so he'll like them! Just 'cause he's *cuuuute.*" Jessica sneered the word. "If Hitler was cute, they'd want to be his girlfriend too!"
Blair burst out laughing. "Oh, 'cushla, that is so in-one."

Tara folded her arms with a look of supreme disgust. "I am never having a boyfriend. Ever."

"Me neither," Jessica said.

Blair refrained from telling them that they might change their minds as they grew older; from Tara, at least, he got the sense that she meant exactly what she said. "It's going to be bad for you two at school for a while. Kevin might get other kids to start teasing you about me. They might start saying you're lesbians, because you stuck up for me. There are some really, really nasty words people use for gays. But I do not want you to get into any more fights over this, do you hear me?"

Jessi nodded, her face angry and grim. "'Just walk away,' I know," she sneered, mimicking the words she'd heard too many times. "That is such total bullshit."

"Well, you could try teaching your friends. Keep telling them that the right word is 'gay,' let them know that I've never hurt you or the other kids, and I very rarely wear ballgowns and glass slippers."

Both girls giggled. Blair smiled. So far, the punishment was going very well.

***

(2009)

"Well, it's about time!" Tara said as Jessi emerged from the bathroom. "Thought you'd fallen in!"

Her friend Kimmy shushed her.

Jessi sniffed her hands and made a face. "Phew, and I just spent five minutes washing my hands!"

Her friends Barb and Ellen laughed as the five girls headed down the hall. "Well, Jessi, you're the one who wanted to pet the trout when they started jumping all over the food," Barb said. "That's gross."

"No, they felt nice. Kinda weird. But you can feel all the scales, it's like smooth pebbles. But they smell bad. Must be that awful fish food they give 'em."

"Well, they smell great when they're fried," Ellen said, grinning.

"Yeah, I wish they'd let us bring fishing poles in here," Barb added.

"It still seems mean," Kimmy said behind them, where she was walking with Tara. "I mean, they're just hatching all these baby fish to put 'em in the lake so people can catch 'em."

"It's like a farm for fish, Kimmy," Tara said. "The way we raise cows instead of hunting buffalo or something. And some of them must escape, maybe swim to the ocean." The older girls loftily ignored the one-grade-younger kids.

The girls made their way down the hall toward the school bus waiting outside. The driver glared at them and the other kids yelled and laughed; they were already on, and the girls realized that they were the last ones out of the hatchery.

"Hurry up, girls, hurry up!" Ms. Buckles called over the idling bus engine. "This is not your private limousine!"

"Ha ha ha, that's sooo funny," Barb muttered under her breath as she got on.
Jessi started up, then stopped. She looked at the hood of the bus.

"Come on, come on, hurry up!" the driver snapped, his breath reeking of the cigarettes he wasn't allowed to smoke while he was driving the kids.

"Um... um, excuse me," Jessi said, and backed out.

"Don't be a spaz, Ellison," Ellen said, and stepped in.

Tara grabbed Kimmy's hand before she could step up after Barb, and stared at her older sister.

"Jessi, get on the bus," Ms. Buckles said impatiently. "You've already been to the bathroom --"

"No, Ms. Buckles, it's not that." Jessi looked at the bus engine again, then back to the chaperone.

"The bus sounds... funny. Kind of like a, a hiccup in the engine."

"Every bus engine has its own unique sound, that's how they get after a few years," Ms. Buckles said, "now stop stalling and get on the bus, Miss Ellison."

"But this sounds...it sounds wrong."

"I don't hear anything wrong, Miss Ellison. You're being paranoid about the normal sounds an engine makes. And you're holding everyone up!" The teacher glared at the 10-year-old.

"Get on the bus, kid!" snapped the driver. "We gotta get going!"

Angry kids' voices echoed the driver.

"Get on, Ellison!"

"We wanna go home!"

"Jessi is a pussy! Jessi is a pussy!"

"Did you smell someone farting, Ellison?"

"Let her walk home, geez!"

"Carsick! Carsick! Jessi's gonna barf!"

"Miss Ellison, do you really want me to tell your parents that you're a troublemaker?" Ms. Buckles snapped. "That you're not to be allowed on another field trip for the rest of the year?"

Tara frowned.

Jessi shook. Tears started in her eyes.

***

The phone rang at Ellison's desk. Jim looked up from the piles of cloth samples he'd been handling.

"Thank God, anything's got to be better than cataloguing potshards," Blair said, and turned away from his laptop.

Jim made a face at his partner as he set a piece of charred brown canvas down and reached for the phone. "Ellison. Yes." A pause. "Yes. Yes, they are."
Blair watched the one-way conversation. When he saw Jim's face go gray, he stood up, facing his Sentinel. Jim's eyes were blank, his free hand hung limp at his side. Oh, Christ, this was a zone-out, a big one, Jim hadn't had one in years --

"When?" Jim croaked. His lips were fading to blue.

Oh, God, he didn't want to know, he didn't want to know what this was, oh god --

"We'll be right there," Jim said thickly, and set the receiver down on the desk.

It was Blair who pulled the receiver from Jim's hand and set it back in the phone cradle. He straddled the slumped figure in his chair and put his hands on Jim's pale cold cheeks, staring into the sightless blue eyes. "Jim? Jim! C'mon, man, snap out of this, don't make me slap you! Break free of this!"

The pale eyes shifted, found Blair's. The cold lips moved. "That was the school. A school bus crashed on the way home from the hatchery. At least two children are dead, they don't know how many injured. Jessi and Tara were on that field trip."

"Oh God." Blair heaved for breath and shook his head to clear it, feeling an anvil land on his heart. "Oh God." He blinked hard.

"They've got paramedics at the site now." Jim rose up.

"I'll take care of this, you call Becca."

They were on automatic pilot, all mental activity geared toward dealing with the emergency. Blair let the right people know where they were going, who paled and whispered, "Go," and he and Jim left in a dreadful silence, broken only by the unbroken ringing of Jim's cell phone, and the message on the answering machine at home.

"She's out," Blair murmured, all but bundling the wooden Ellison into the passenger side of his Corvair. He felt cold and sick inside. "Car phone -- "

"Van's in the shop."

"The hatchery's just off 34, isn't it?" At Jim's single nod, Blair drove out of the parking lot and toward the mainway that led to the cluster of highway connections.

They were driving against the traffic flow -- a small mercy, not to be caught in the end-of-day jam. They said nothing. Blair drove in silence, letting Jim continue to call home in vain.

There was no protection of distance for Blair, nothing he could say or do. The two girls were his as much as they were Jim's -- what he felt for them was surely an echo of what was raging through Jim's heart now.

{They're alive, they must be alive, surely they're alive.} Broken bones would mend, torn flesh would mend, and the girls would be happy and healthy again, safe and sound, with their whole lives ahead of them. Blair could say nothing; his tongue was stone.

It was an hour's drive to the hatchery with moderate traffic; in somewhat less time than an hour Blair saw the flashing red and blue lights. Cops, ambulances. Oncoming traffic packed thick, oozing past the long yellow carcass of the bus like scavenger ants. Blair pulled over, feeling as if someone had walked on his grave. Jim was out of the car before he'd come to a complete stop, flashing his FBI I.D. at a cop about to harangue them about parking on a highway shoulder and
making his way across the lanes. The cop came in handy, stopping traffic to let the two men slip between vehicles to the nearest ambulance.

The cries and sobs of hurt children mingled with the shouts of the medics and cops directing the scene. One ambulance was still and silent, its lights off -- as silent as the covered bodies within.

First things first -- save the living. Jim made his way to the mangled, twisted bus, shouting something about his medic training, every sense turned on high trying to find his children. Blair followed him, prepared to kick him if need be to free him from a zone-out, lending a hand in treating pinned, gasping kids right through the broken windows before moving them out to a place where they could be immobilized for the trip to the hospital. He looked as far as he could. But all he saw was blood and pain.

Jim kept a running, muttering commentary. "Don't see them in here, don't smell them, don't hear them." He kept assisting, on autopilot. "They're not here, Chief, not here."

Blair looked around at the kids on stretchers, or sitting on the ground with bloody arms or legs splinted. No sign of them. Probably on their way to the hospital, surely on their way to the hospital...

But his eyes betrayed his heart. They looked at the still, silent ambulance.

Eliminate the impossible. Whatever remains, however improbable...

Even as Jim moved toward the deadcart, looking like he should be one of its passengers, Blair fell in beside him. No way in hell was Jim going to do this alone.

Three children dead.

One cop guarded the closed rear doors of the ambulance. Blair said nothing as Jim groped for his I.D., a tiny delay, postponing what he had to do. How many times as a cop had Jim seen a doctor pull back a sheet and say, "Mr. and Mrs. Smith, is this your child?"

The cop nodded when the badge was finally shown to her. Jim mumbled something that put a look of sorrow on the woman's face. She turned to open the door of the silent ambulance.

Jim stiffened; his head shot up, turning to one side. Blair turned to look in that direction.

It wasn't Becca he saw first, holding the one-year-old Blair and pushing her way through the crowd. It was the tall girl beside her with the flash of red hair, and the shorter girl with the dirty blonde hair tugging JJ by the hand. Moving toward them under their own power. Both girls alive, unhurt, unmarked.

"Dad! Daddy! Papa Bear!"

All the blood rushed back to Blair's heart; he could breathe again. But he stood straight despite the rush of giddiness; Jim had slumped, clutching Blair's arm for support. A breath of air shuddered out of Jim, sounding like a phantom escaping.

Jessi's face was crumpled with horror and grief, looking around her at the carnage. "Oh my god," she wailed. "Oh, my god..."

And then she and Tara were in their father's arms.

A loud wailing behind them signified another reunion; Mrs. Shoji hugging her daughter Kim, both
of them crying.

Blair found himself holding Becca and the baby while JJ hugged him hard around the leg from the other side; it was hard to tell which of the adults was shaking harder. "They called me from the hatchery to pick them up," she whispered. "Kimmy was with them. I was so angry at them for not getting on that bus! So angry!"

***

Blair held out a small brown bottle. "Come on, Jess. One good sniff."

"Screw you. Get the hell out of here," snarled Jessi. Her face was buried in her pillow; she had not left her room for two days.

"Jess, I'm trying to get your nose back on-line. Jim says you haven't been able to smell anything since the crash," Blair didn't mention the fact that she hadn't eaten in that length of time either.

"I didn't stop them," Jessi sobbed. "I couldn't save them. They wouldn't listen to me!"

"They're listening to you now. This is one good thing that has come out of a very terrible thing." Blair didn't try to touch or comfort her. It wasn't what she wanted. "It's the way this world is, m'cushla.* Very, very often safety measures aren't enacted until someone dies."

"Yeah, well it sucks," she whispered. "It won't bring Barb back. I should have -- should have made them get off. Tara did it with Kimmy -- if I'd done it Barb would still be alive." She started sobbing again. "They were so mad at me. I didn't like that sound -- but I was so afraid of them making fun of me. I almost got on. But Tara pulled me back."

"Hon, your sister's always been that way. This is the same kid that decked a fifth-grader when she was in third grade. Tara doesn't care what anyone thinks of her -- she's the exception to the rule."

"Yeah," Jess sniffed. "Kimmy was scared her mom would punish her, but Tara wouldn't let her go on the bus. Tara said Kimmy should tell her mom that we made her get off the bus, so Tara'd get the blame."

Blair nodded. Tara Ellison and Kim Shoji seemed to be joined at the head, and Tara had already been grounded once for clobbering a kid who'd teased Kimmy; the best way to punish Tara was to forbid her to play at the Shojis. For Kimmy, Tara made her best classroom Valentines, and sent special friendship gifts like rings and bracelets. Often Blair sent a silent prayer to whatever goddess watched Tara that Kimmy would also turn out to like girls better than boys. He didn't want to see another gay heart broken over another hopeless straight.

"I wasn't brave enough," Jessi whispered. "It's my fault Barb's dead!" She buried her face in her arms. "Oh God, I could smell blood everywhere, and burning rubber, and hot metal, and lots of the kids wet their pants -- oh, God, I never want to smell anything again!"

"Jess." Blair's voice was quiet, but firm. "You have to smell again. You have a gift, and you have to use it."

"Fuck my gift! I don't want it any more!" Jess began sobbing in earnest, face buried in the pillow.

"You're not alone. You're not the first to feel that way. You know the story of the Trojan War, don't you?"

"Paris, Helen, wooden horse, Achilles, Hector, yeah. So what?"
"Do you know the story of Cassandra?"

She shook her head.

"She was a young priestess in the temple of Artemis in Troy, sworn to virginity. One day the god Apollo appeared in the temple and demanded that she sleep with him. Cassandra was trapped between two gods -- if she slept with him she would break her vow and anger Artemis, and if she turned him down she would anger Apollo. She turned him down. In his fury, Apollo gave her the gift of prophecy -- and made that gift a curse by making sure she would never be believed.

"Cassandra foresaw the Trojan War. She told the king all she saw -- Paris' abduction of Helen, the arrival of the Greeks, the ten years of war, the destruction of Troy, her own rape in the temple by the soldier Ajax -- and the royal court laughed at her. She could do nothing to save her people because they wouldn't believe her.

"Then one day the Greek sails appeared on the horizon. And it all took place the way she said. And she couldn't stop it."

Jessi lifted her head from her pillow, blinking her swollen red eyes to focus on her teacher.

Blair met her gaze with compassion. "Don't you think Cassandra must have blamed herself for what happened? If I'd only tried harder, she might have thought. Or made people leave. Or slept with Apollo in the first place. But all she did was obey her vow. She didn't make Paris steal Helen. She didn't arm the Greeks and put them in those ships.

"Jessi, your senses saved your sister and Kim Shoji, as well as yourself," Blair continued, as relentless as he ever was with her stubborn father. "If you didn't have the gift, you three would have been on that bus anyway -- and wound up in the hospital or dead.

"It's not your fault the bus crashed -- that's because no one fixed it for two years." Because cheapskate bastard voters consistently vetoed funds for school equipment...Blair dialed down his rage. It wasn't the time or place for political commentary. "And it's not your fault that Barb's injuries were too bad for her to survive. It is your fault that three people didn't get hurt by not getting on that goddamn bus in the first place. I know it doesn't bring Barb back. But you can save other people and their friends. As horrible as this is, hon, this will absolutely guarantee that you're never ignored again when you find something wrong. And you will. You can't just sit back and do nothing. You're too much like your dad that way, too."

Jess sat up, groping for the box of tissues Blair proffered. She blew her nose hard, several times. "It sucks," she muttered.

"I know. The only happy endings are in Disney movies. There is a lot of darkness in the world, Jess. We can either sit in the dark and swear at it, or we can light a candle. It's not much, but it's better than swearing -- or wishing a candle was a floodlight.

"A very wise man once told your dad that a Sentinel is always a Sentinel -- if he or she chooses to be. If you choose to turn away from your gifts, you are cursing the darkness. If you choose to do what you can to help others with your gifts, you are lighting a candle."

"I don't want to light a damn candle -- I want to stop the damn pain!" Jess snapped, watering up again and taking more tissues. "Blair, all I wanted to do when I got there and saw everything, and heard it and smelled it -- I just wanted to make it go away. I wanted to make the kids stop screaming and bleeding. I wanted to stop smelling their blood!"
"Well, you stopped smelling the blood. It didn't help, did it?"

Jess glared at him, eyes red and green.

Blair leaned forward, intense, skewering that angry green glare with his own stare. "You know what will help those kids, and take away that blood smell for you? Knowing how to take care of them. Knowing how to fix the broken bones and the internal injuries and the bleeding heads. You can use your Sentinel gifts that way -- seeing wounds too small for others to find, feeling for internal injuries, smelling problems others can't, hearing changes in breathing and heartbeat without using a stethoscope. You can be a doctor, and stop the pain that way."

Jess stared at him. She blinked hard. "How did you *know*?" she whispered.

Blair smiled a little. "The way you looked at the doctors who took care of your mom when she was so sick, and the questions you asked them and the nurses. The way you bandaged your dolls when you played hospital after that. Lots of things.

"Your dad's been a soldier and a policeman all his life. He was already a cop when he rediscovered his gifts -- and they made him a better cop, and one of the best FBI agents in the country. He's the only model you've had of being a Sentinel. But you don't have to be a cop to be a Sentinel. Let Tara be the next Detective Ellison and bring home the medals. You become the best damn doctor you can, and that's using your gifts too."

Blair let Jess collect herself in a long silence after that; let her totter to the bathroom to wash her face and return to sit quietly on the bed, sniffing a little as her old sobs subsided. He said nothing.

It was Jess who broke the silence as she blinked and looked toward the door. "Is Dad making cookies? I think I smell vanilla."

Blair slowly, slowly smiled. And he held up the forgotten brown bottle he'd brought into the room. "One drop diluted in a quart of water."

Slowly, Jessica smiled, her eyes still red and puffy. "It smells great." Her face fell a little and she looked down. "I'm sorry, Papa Bear. What I said to you -- "

Blair sat on the bed and hugged the stuffing out of her. She responded with a grip that equaled his own. "Hon, you should have heard the things your dad used to call me," he said drolly, and she giggled. "Right," he said briskly, dispelling the heavy atmosphere as he stood up and checked his watch. "The library closes in two hours. Let's have dinner, and go get some books. Physician's Desk Reference, Gray's Anatomy, the Merck Manual, for starters. And we start looking at the best medical schools and what they need you to know."

"*Blairrr,*" Jessica grumbled as she followed her teacher out the door, "I'm not even in junior high yet."

"You can never start too early, Ix Chel." Jess grinned at being called the Mayan goddess of medicine. "You just might be able to pick and choose which medical school you want, if you --"

"Mmm," Jess said, interrupting. She stopped at the top of the stairs, inhaling. Blair could have heard her stomach rumbling from the next room; it was the sweetest sound he'd heard all day. "Lasagna, corn, salad -- light Italian -- basil biscuits. Brownies."

Blair grinned like a hare. "What kind of las--"

"Vegetarian, with lots of mozzarella. Eggplant, broccoli, spinach, zucchini--"
"Okay, okay!" Blair laughed. "I believe you!"

Jess turned to look at Blair, still standing beside her. Ten years old; one more year of growth and she would look him in the eye, two years and she would gaze down at him from her father's height.

"I believe you, Cassandra," Blair said softly. He hugged her around the shoulders again. "And they will too."

"They'd better," Jess said unsmiling. Then her face scrunched up. "Oh, pew! Little B needs a new diaper."

"It's a tough job, being a Sentinel," Blair said serenely.

"Screw you, Big B," Jess retorted, thumping down the stairs to find Tara and make her take her turn changing their baby brother.

***

Not surprisingly, the Cascade school bus tragedy was the impetus that finally resulted in a bond measure passing that set aside money for school equipment repairs and maintenance. Mark and Helen Basarnian, Barb's parents, threw themselves into the campaign and were present at the unveiling of the first new school bus in years.

Meanwhile Jessi had a new job volunteering in the school nurse's office -- and the unofficial duty of listening to all the school bus engines before the kids would get on in the afternoon.

***

(2010)

For ten years Jim Ellison and Blair Sandburg had been one of the most successful FBI teams ever. The job the two men did, their dedication to each other as partners, earned them respect and admiration. Sandburg's sexual identity soon ceased to be an issue...he was even encouraged in his pursuits by men who had previously thought of themselves as homophobes. His humor, intelligence and never-flagging energy earned him the goodwill of his peers.

But when Jim accepted a kick up to Assistant Director, Dr. Sandburg returned to the calling he'd left behind.

****

"He has everything he needs now," Blair said to Rebecca as he bounced the squealing Blair Simon on his knee; Little B had been a calm baby but at Terrible Two could not stay still a minute -- he made Tara look positively sedate.

The most bizarre thing about the baby was that young Blair had the Sentinel gift, he responded to every test -- but with the child Blair felt only the same equivocal love he felt for the entire Ellison brood, not the deep-rooted joy and belonging he'd felt for Jessi from birth. He could be a helper, a beloved uncle, a teacher -- but he was not B's Guide. Maybe one of the other kids, or a friend he'd meet in school, would be the one. But this one would not need his constant attention, as Jessi had.

The other kids were playing a game of hide and seek with their friends in the back yard -- and since Jessi was It, she had her eyes closed to make it more fair for the others. It was always a kick to see the girl stalk her playmates using only sound and smell; she was positively eerie in a swimming pool when they played Marco Polo, gliding up to her victims silent as a shark. At the age of eleven Jessica Ellison was a better Sentinel than her old man, her gift encouraged and
nurtured from birth.

This one, too, would be loved and nurtured. Blair had no worries about how little Blair would fare - not with a dad and big sister who would understand and encourage him, not with two other siblings who could integrate him into the rest of the world. There was a brilliant mind lurking behind Tara's brassy courage, and a gentle creative role model in Jim Jr.

Rebecca nodded. "I know what you haven't said yet, Blair. You're ready to find your own life again."

"I'll be back to visit." He didn't say that it wouldn't be often. The pain had finally grown too great. It was sad, this taste of empty-nest syndrome, but it was also freeing. For too long Blair had sublimated an unrequited love with lust. Now it was not lust that stirred in Blair, but wanderlust. He had been in one place longer than he'd ever been in his entire life. It had been too long since he'd crossed international datelines, sweated out a relapse of malaria, exchanged folktales with village women over a meal of midge patties or roasted termites, pushed his way through creepers and undergrowth in the dank heat of equatorial tropics, spoke languages other than English. The profiler was sinking in the west; the scholar was rising once again from the east. "I'm just getting the urge to pick up my pack and go walkabout."

Rebecca nodded and didn't add what they both knew. "We'll miss you."

They were been interrupted by an argument between Jessi and Tara, who was defended by seven-year-old JJ.

Blair handed Little B off to his mom and scooped up the older boy, leaving the girls to sort themselves out. "Hey, Jim Junior. Why don't we go see if we can find anything to eat in this place?"

He knew that the only thing he would miss more than Jim's voice was the laughter of Jim's children.

****
(2011)

Waist-deep in crystal blue water, Jim Ellison tossed his oldest son over his shoulder while the generally quiet boy laughed out loud, protesting.

"No, dad, no, not that!"

"Yes that!" Jim bellowed happily, spinning in place, making JJ dizzy. Then he let him go and the momentum carried his squirming body through the air and he landed with a terrific splash several feet away, to surface coughing and shouting.

"That sucked! It was great! Do it again?!"

"Later, son." His eyes fixed on the beach, Jim’s attention was caught by something.

Becca and Blair were sharing a blanket spread on the hot sand, his Guide lying face down, head pillowed on his arms. The girls had bought him a new swimsuit the day before, properly appalled by the brilliantly psychedelic knee-length shorts he'd brought for himself. The tight blue Speedo wasn't much more than a scrap of lycra and he had objected, laughing, but, but when they had pouted in unison -- and there weren't many things the girls did together voluntarily anymore -- Blair had agreed to wear it with a reluctance Jim hadn't understood. It wasn't modesty, he'd seen Blair run around naked in the jungle, seen him in the leather-and-mesh outfits he used to wear when he
went clubbing; modesty just didn't seem to be an important part of Blair's psychological makeup. From this angle the Speedo hugged his butt tightly, his legs slightly spread, his back smooth and tanned...

...and his ribs showing clearly at the sides.

Standing in the water, Jim frowned. His hands moved to his hips and he focussed more closely on the pair. They were talking about something. Becca looked concerned -- her hand was lying on Blair's shoulder. If he dared listen in on them his wife would somehow know and she would never forgive him. It was a promise she had demanded before they married, after they told her about the Sentinel stuff. He could not eavesdrop on her conversations. Yes, she understood that he checked on her with his hearing whenever he was in range, but if she was talking to someone or even herself he pulled back immediately. He'd never broken that promise and he wasn't going to start now.

But the longer he thought about it, the worse Blair looked. Trying to remember the last time he'd seen Blair dressed in less than jeans or sweats and heavy shirts, he was startled to realize that it had been since before B was born, now a hefty three-year-old sleeping under an umbrella beside Becca. Blair loved heat but he hadn't used to be *that* thin-blooded. And the sturdy, stocky body Jim remembered from untold hours of gym time and martial arts drills -- the heavily muscled shoulders, the deceptively muscled back, the sturdy thighs... looking at Blair now he realized that Blair had been changing subtly but substantially over the last two years. He must be thirty or even forty pounds lighter, Jim thought, distressed. Does he even eat on those expeditions? Another, more insidious thought tickled at the back of his brain but he banished it without letting it fully form. Some things just weren't to be considered. Some things simply were not allowed to happen, so he didn't allow the thought to come.

Striding out of the water, feeling strong and healthy and younger than his fifty-one years, he watched Blair as he approached, saw the grey in the shoulder-length hair. Turning over, Blair waved to him as he came up and the hollows between his ribs stood out sharply, like the dark circles under his eyes. Dropping to the blanket a foot away from him, Jim crossed his legs Indian-style and dropped his elbows to his knees, leaning forward and sniffing suspiciously.

Blair chuckled. "What? Do I need a shower already?"

"No." Leaning back, Jim crossed his arms over his chest, taking on a Blessed Protector stance. "You don't look so good, Chief."

"Well, thanks, Jim, you look like shit yourself." The wide grin belied the statement. "I told you I had a bout of malaria last month in Portugal. It was one of the resistant ones, didn't give up easy."

"So you're okay?"

Blair rolled his eyes. "I'm fine, Henny Penny," Becca laughed, also a veteran of Jim's mother-henning.

There were no rules about when and how Jim could listen to Blair, never had been. They would have been impossible to obey anyhow. But Blair's heart was beating calmly and his breathing was even and there was no physical indication that he was telling anything other than the truth.

"Okay." Jim grinned back at him. "Nice suit."

"Your daughters are perverts." Rolling to his side, Blair curled up and closed his eyes.

"Jet lagged?" Becca asked sympathetically. They had flown in yesterday morning, after a normal
ten-hour flight. Blair had come from India, a trip requiring at least six flight changes and a round twenty-four hours, arriving last night to drop exhausted into his bed in the condo they had rented.

Well, actually, Blair had rented it, as his contribution to the family vacation, their first one since they left the bureau. It was also Jim's birthday present because Blair hadn't been able to make it home on the actual day. He'd sent a painfully bright Hawaiian shirt and a card suggesting this vacation. Jim had said it was too expensive but Blair had badgered him into it, mostly via email, telling him Jim could return the favor when he turned fifty.

"Seriously," Blair replied to the query while Jim pondered silently. The condo was one of several on this strip of private beach and Jim didn't want to wonder how Blair was paying for it. His anthropological career had taken wings as soon as he'd returned to it, but the older man still didn't think it paid that well.

"Here." Becca patted his head and Blair lifted up obediently, letting her slide a folded-up beach towel beneath it to use as a pillow. Sighing, he drew his arms to his chest and quickly dozed off. Jim kept looking at him. "He's just tired, Big Guy," Becca teased by using Blair's old nickname for him. "I swear he does more in an hour than most people do in a day."

"He always has." Memories of Blair when they first met, a whirlwind of activity, never still, even when he was sitting still.

"Mom! Come in the water!" Jessi and Tara bounced side-by-side in the water, waving at her, their big beach ball held between them. Eagerly she got up, untying the wrap she was wearing like a skirt, and jogged down to the water, Jim watching with appreciation. Five pregnancies had brought changes to her figure, thickened her waist, but at thirty-eight she was still as young and beautiful as he remembered her being the first day they met. If someone had told him twenty years ago that he would meet an elementary school teacher fifteen years his junior and make a life with her he probably would have arrested them for illegal drug use. But he had, and the last thirteen years had been the best of his life. It was almost as if his life hadn't really started until he met her. Well, that wasn't entirely true. His life had started the day Blair Sandburg had tackled him under a garbage truck and saved his life for the first time. Without Blair he would have never found the courage to meet Becca or marry or have these wonderful, frustrating, aggravating children.

Moving to check on B, he brushed against Blair, who shifted closer, making a quiet noise. His hand crept out and touched Jim's leg.

Looking at that hand, Jim wondered when it had shrunk. The strong, square hands he remembered as larger than his own now seemed smaller, thinner, almost fragile, the bones standing out in the back of it, normally well-trimmed nails more broken than trimmed.

Blair sighed and moved again, his hand tightening on Jim's calf where it rested. Reaching over him to grab Becca's beach-back chair, Jim settled it behind himself and leaned back, not moving his leg. This had never happened before, Blair had never reached for him like this except when he was injured or sick. In the hospital after being overdosed on Golden he had done this and Jim had let him, had held his hand as any friend might do for another, as a Sentinel should surely do for his Guide.

Relaxing, Jim decided that Becca was right. Blair was just tired from too much travel and too much work. This vacation was exactly what he needed. If he wanted to sleep on the beach with his hand on Jim's leg for comfort, that was okay. Briefly he covered the hand with his own, surprised by the coolness of Blair's skin, and then he closed his own eyes for a nap. He was on vacation, after all. The happy sounds of his children's squeals soothed him to sleep, his Guide's heartbeat thrumming steadily in his ears.
"Is everybody ready for the movie?" Hurrying through the condo, still trying to get her hair pinned up, Becca stopped in front of Blair, who was surfing the net on his laptop. "I can't get this, Blair, help?"

"GOTCHA, momma." He rose from the chair and Jim, across the room on the sofa, fighting with Tara's short blond tangle, watched with concern as Blair seemed to move slowly. Sensing his distraction Tara took advantage of it and pulled away, scampering out to the rental car with her hair still knotted and tangled in the back, pleased with her escape. Standing behind Becca Blair used both hands to slowly, neatly braid her dark red hair. Jim came over, the brush hanging uselessly in his hand, and stood close to them, watching.

"Jim? Did you finish with Tara? I don't want her looking like an urchin."

"She, um, she got away."

"Before you were finished? I know she hates it, but it's got to be done." With an exasperated sigh Becca turned and gave Blair a peck on the cheek. "Thanks, sweetheart. Have a good time tonight, we'll see you in the morning." Taking the hairbrush from Jim's hand she scolded mildly. "I'll just do it while you drive -- can you get B from his bed? I put him in there with some toys so he wouldn't crawl all over and get filthy. Where's Jessi?"

"In the car." Jim was still watching Blair, who was grinning, amused at the domestic scene. "You're not coming with us?"

"I told you I have a date, man." Punching him lightly in the shoulder, Blair's grin faded.

"You haven't been here twenty-four hours, when did you have time to make a date?"

"It's someone I met on a mailing list -- we've been chatting for nearly two years. He's from here, so I'm going to meet up with him."

"An anthropologist?" Not even noticing when Becca rolled her eyes and headed back after the baby herself, Jim stepped closer to Blair and opened his nostrils.

"He's a geologist, Jim. A grad student. Too young for me, really, so it's not actually a date date."

"You smell like medicine," Jim said softly, accusing.

"Of course I do!" Waving his hands between them, Blair heaved a God-give-me-patience sigh. "I have to take the malaria medication for six months after an attack. I'm fine, Jim."

Coming back out with the squirming boy in her arms, Becca shot Blair a glance. "Jim, we're going to be late."

"I'm coming." With an effort he pulled his attention away from Blair and accepted the child, who settled somewhat in his arms. "You gonna be home tonight, Chief?"

"Maybe." Blair shrugged. "Maybe not. We might just get to talking, you know? You guys have a good time."

"DADDYyy! Jessi's calling me names!"

Jim followed his wife out, intent upon stopping another Ellison war.
Names. Well, at least they weren't pinching or hitting each other yet -- the shrill scream from Jessi put an end to that thought. Smiling, Blair pushed his hair back from his face, noting that his hands were shaking again, and went back to his room to shower.

An hour later Blair pulled into the parking lot of the Oahu Hilton and gave the keys to the valet, who smiled at him. The leathers and cruising clothes had been filtered from his wardrobe over the past few years as he'd moved into fulltime celibacy, but he'd hung onto his leather jacket, now a well-worn classic. Over dark grey trousers and a lightweight white turtleneck, the dressiest thing he'd brought with him, it made him look bulkier and he looked good with his hair left down, the grey strands adding a hint of experience. He wasn't really planning on having sex tonight, but if the opportunity arose he'd decided on the drive over that he wouldn't turn it down. It had been a very long time, and it had been so hard to be away from Jim at first. Distance hadn't lessened his feelings, although the immediate ache had faded to a background pain that was quickly being added to a list of them. He hadn't lied to Jim. He was fine, as much as he'd ever been. The mailing list he'd joined, a somewhat exclusive one set up for people in scientific fields, was designed to disseminate information and give advice for coping under the sometimes extreme circumstances they often found themselves in.

Meeting Sasha in the chatroom had been serendipitous. They had so much in common, Blair could really see himself in the younger man, nearly twelve years his junior. Upon discovering that they would both on the island at the same time, they'd arranged a meeting.

The bar was crowded and dark. A piano player tinkled through new age tunes. Stopping at the bar, Blair took the nearest stool and sat facing the room, eyes searching. When the man by the wall directly across from himself stood he held his breath and stared at him. They had agreed to wear white shirts and leather jackets, since they both had them. This man, who looked to be the right age, was wearing a tight white t-shirt and a brown suede bomber jacket. There didn't seem to be anyone else there who matched the description, but Blair waited while he worked his way over and then he was standing there in front of him, looking him over carefully while Blair returned the appraisal. A little taller than he was, shorter than Jim. Muscular with thick black hair that covered his ears and a short, thick beard. Swarthy skin, dark eyes that seemed too old. The way Blair knew his eyes had looked when he was twenty-eight and Jim met Becca.

He held out his hand. "Sasha Lliteras?"

"Blair Sandburg. I am so thrilled to meet you in person." A deep voice lightened by still-youthful enthusiasm. "I got us a table, come sit down." Their hands clasped warmly and Blair tightened his grip, just to see what he would do. Sasha returned the pressure and Blair saw the first hint of desire flush his rough face.

"Let me grab a drink." Turning, Blair waited for the bartender to get to him, feeling it as the younger man leaned over him and spoke in his ear. It wasn't overly loud in the bar, but loud enough to require speaking above a whisper.

"You look better than I expected. Why didn't you tell me you were georgeous?" The words were followed by a teasing laugh and Blair relaxed back into the broad chest behind him. Sasha laid a hand on his shoulder and squeezed.

"Didn't occur to me." Blair chuckled back. This was turning out better than he'd expected. From their conversations over the past year he knew Sasha was articulate, brilliant, artistic and sensitive, but he hadn't expected him to be so attractive, in a rough-and-ready kind of way. Discovering that he could be attracted to someone again was a wonderful feeling and he was going to enjoy it.
The bartender got Blair's rum-and-coke and then he and Sasha were at the table, where it was a little quieter, and they picked up their last net conversation right where they'd left it off.

"So the trip to Portugal was a success?" Sasha asked, after they'd covered his newest paper in Today's Geology, about a set of lava vent tubes he was here to study. There were no eruptions occurring on Oahu but he thought there would be soon -- say, in the next five hundred years or so.

"It was really good. But when I got sick the rest of the team kind of panicked and insisted that we cut it short. I think they thought I was just going to curl up and die right then. But I felt really rotten so I let them haul me back to a hospital in the States -- never go to a foreign hospital if you can help it -- and the doctors there gave me a hard time about being out of the country."

"You do what ya gotta do." Reaching across the table, Sasha took Blair's hand, fingers caressing his. Blair stared at them, seeing the differences; Sasha's hand was rough and heavily calloused, more so than his own, and larger, stronger. It made his own look fragile and he was reminded of Phillip. "You have to live your life, or otherwise the disease wins. Can't let it take everything from you."

"Exactly." Looking back up, Blair smiled, and his friend smiled back.

"I told you I've got to go to the little islands in the morning, to do a week-long thing. I'd change it but the rest of the team would want to know why, and I don't think 'I've met up with an internet buddy' would cut it. But you'll be here when I get back, right?"

"I can be here in the morning, if you like," Blair said softly, his own fingers gently stimulating Sasha's. "I know we've never really talked about that...but I'm here, and you're here and I'd really like to spend the night with you."

The younger man sucked in a deep breath and Blair couldn't tell if he was surprised or offended. But he didn't pull his hand away.

"We both know how important it is to take your chances when you see them." He added, hesitant now, "I thought, from some of our conversations, that you might be interested..." Trailing off he left room for Sasha to fill in the blanks.

"I was going to ask you to." The man half-rose and touched Blair's hair. "I mean, I didn't know what you looked like or anything, but I felt we'd made some sort of connection. And it's so hard to be careful with everyone else." His grin returned, making him look younger yet. "I never thought you'd be the one to say it first. Or if you'd even be attracted to me."

"You're wonderful," Blair told him firmly. "Perfect. Yes, I'm attracted to you."

"I was hoping...I've been hoping since we arranged to meet last week."

"We can go to your place or I can get us a room." Blair leaned his face into the hand that was stroking his cheek. "You're probably sharing with a teammate, though."

"I was hoping, so I already got one here for the night."

"What would you have done if I'd said no?" Blair teased, feeling ten years younger.

"Gotten wasted and passed out upstairs in a very expensive room."

"Very expensive? Then we'd better not waste it. Let's go on up. I'll get some wine and something to eat..."
Sasha held his hand as they left the bar, and Blair put his arm around the man's waist, eager to be close to him. It had been a very long time since he'd been physically close to someone that he had feelings for. Not feelings of love or even particularly strong desire, but warm affection and attraction -- he could work with that.

Still, when they were in the room and Sasha was stripping off his bomber jacket and dropping his boots beside the bed, Blair hesitated. Looking at him, hands on his thighs, big dark eyes soft, Sasha sighed. "Are you going to change your mind?"

"No," Blair said firmly. "I just haven't -- since I found out."

"I've known for almost six years, it's not such a strange thing to me."

Sitting beside him, feeling awkward, Blair lay back, arms stretched over his head. "It's more than that. It's been, oh, geez, a couple of years since I did anything."

"We don't have to do much." Sasha turned and leaned over him, one hand on the bed beside Blair's head. "We can do as much as you want."

Blair reached up and pulled him down close. Their lips met in an eager first kiss. It was warm and wet and steamy and Blair groaned just for the happiness of it. They were kissing and Sasha was petting him, one big hand beneath Blair's turtleneck, a finger stroking a nipple, and Blair was moving sinuously under him, bringing their groins into contact and just rocking, not humping, not wanting to take things too fast.

"Feels good," Sasha purred into his ear, breaking away from the kiss to lick Blair's jaw. "I didn't think you'd feel this good."

"Mmm, yeah..." Sighing, arching up, Blair felt his cock harden with excitement -- this time it knew it was going to get more than a hand job -- and it did feel good, it felt so good..."I missed this." He panted, Sasha gnawing on his neck where the tendons stood out, thick fingers pinching a nipple to hardness. "I didn't know I missed it so much!"

As soon as the words left his mouth Blair knew it was a mistake. Tears welled in his eyes and his chest tightened.

"Shit."

He tore himself away from the younger man, hiding his face in the bedspread, curled in on himself.

He hadn't cried when he'd left them. Not that cold afternoon in the doctor's office listening to the diagnosis he'd known was coming; not that night when he'd called Phillip because his ex-lover needed to know. Not even that night, alone in a flea-trap hotel somewhere in Oklahoma, his cellphone clenched in his hand, refusing to call the family. And now, now that he was feeling better and stronger, he was with someone nice, he was ready for a little pleasure -- goddammit, now the dam burst --

Sobs ripped through him, hurting his lungs, his chest so tight he couldn't breathe. He was aware that Sasha had gathered him in his arms and was holding him tight, offering strength and comfort in silence. So much for their fun little evening.

Eventually the tears slowed and Blair found that he could breathe again; now he thought he would die of humiliation. He muttered thickly, "I'm really -- sorry, man. Didn't want to lay that on you, this is so embarrassing..."

"It's not the reaction I usually get, but I understand." Shifting to hold Blair more comfortably, Sasha
stroked held his face with rough hands, forcing Blair to meet his eyes. "It just hits you. You're doing something and it's great, whatever it is, and then you start to wonder if this will be the last time you ever get to do it."

"I was going to be strong." Blair whispered. "Not going to whine and cry or curse fate. Fate didn't do this to me, I did."

"The virus did this to you," Sasha corrected. "We're scientists; we look for order in the universe, cause and effect. We don't handle chaos very well."

"You are being strong. You're doing your job and living your life, and that takes all the strength we have. If something new upsets that balance you're entitled to a little catharsis."

"You minored in psychology, right?" Blair managed to chuckle, tears still leaking slowly.

Sasha smiled. "Don't we all?"

Blair began undressing him gently. His hands still shook, his erection was gone, but he wanted to make that connection with another human being, someone who cared about him enough to hold him while he cried.

"Hey." Catching his hands, Sasha pulled them away. "We don't have to do anything."

"But you're still here, and I still want you." Blair said, feeling the weight of his years as he gazed into this man-boy's eyes. "I know I sorta killed the mood, but I can get it back."

Putting one hand on Blair's back and winding the other into his hair, Sasha smiled and tipped him back again, nuzzling his throat. "Let me do that for you, Doctor Sandburg."

"Ooo -- yeah -- why don't you, that's really nice..."

The tears came and went but Blair paid them little attention. Sasha worked long and hard at getting him back to go and Blair rewarded him by scooting to the end of the bed and getting his knees up in the air. While Sasha was inside him the pain welled again, so deeply Blair thought his very heart might burst, and then orgasm took him and he came violently, sobbing and coming and moaning. Afterwards the tears dried up and later they did it again; this time Sasha offered himself to Blair, his starkly white ass in the air and the older man on his knees behind him, reveling in the pleasure and pressure.

It was a good night, a good way to say goodbye to that part of his life, once and for all. Because by the time he left Blair knew he could never do that again. The rest of his life -- however long it was -- would be celibate.

Sasha was right. He was strong. He could do this. Someday Jim would have to know. Becca wouldn't tell him, but Jessi had already figured out something was wrong and would put the pieces together soon enough. They would help him protect Jim. When it was time Blair would tell him. But not before. Driving home as a magical sunrise began in the sky, he realized that this was also the last time he could spend time with Jim before the Sentinel would finally ferret out his secret. The thought brought more tears but now he let them fall freely and silently all the way back to the condo.

Blair let himself in and fell into bed, his breath still hitching now and then.

Not two minutes later his door opened. "Blair?" Jessi sounded timid. "Are you crying?"
"I was, m’cushla, but I'm done now."

She climbed on the bed, angelic in her white nightgown with the little pink flowers. He held up the covers and cuddled his other Sentinel close to him, realizing that this unthinking intimacy they'd shared from her babyhood would have to stop too; puberty waited in the wings.
Chapter 8

The shower he and Sasha had shared should have removed any incriminating scents, but her nose wrinkled and she frowned anyhow. "You don't smell like you."

"I was on a date. Sometimes, when you're on a date, you get close to the person you're with and their scent rubs off on you."

"Is that why you were crying?" she asked. She frowned. "Was he mean to you?"

"He was very nice, Jess," Blair hastily assured the girl, tamping down a nightmare image of Jessi stalking across the island following her nose to Sasha and avenging an insult to her Guide. "I'm just tired and feeling down. I'll be better in the morning."

"It is morning," she pointed out with a smile.

"Then I'll be all right when I wake up." He smiled back and closed his eyes. Soon her breathing evened out into sleep beside him.

He could sleep, too, knowing how much he would miss her and the others, but thankful that he had this much of them. Every moment was to be lived. It was a promise he had made to himself, and Blair was going to keep that promise.

*****

(2012)

Jim came home early one day, not long after Blair had dropped JJ back at the house after their tour of European art palaces and had taken off again like a whirlwind. He found Becca sitting on the sofa alone, going through a photo album and crying quietly.

"What's this?" he sat beside her, took her in his arms, wiping the tears away with the hem of his shirt.

"I don't know," she said. Her heart was beating fast, but he couldn't tell if it was because she was upset or if she wasn't being totally honest. "I just miss him so much sometimes."

"I know. I miss him too," he said, holding her close and kissing away her tears.

She stopped crying and the pain turned to passion, but he still felt like there was something he was missing.

****

Blair didn't come to visit again. He had to make up for all the time he'd spent in one place, he said, and teased that he was once again The Wandering Jew.

Blair was always on the go, in Borneo, Egypt, Africa, chasing stories, winning grants, his papers published in distinguished journals. They got email, snail mail, occasional phone calls, all filled with his love for them, his happiness with his life, the joy of new discoveries. They all received gifts and letters on birthdays and Hanukkah, even Valentines, often handmade with whatever materials Blair had on hand wherever he was that February. Everything he sent was an adventure.

But he didn't come to visit.
Instead, they came to visit him. The family expenses now included a "Blair Fund" that paid for special trips for the kids to wherever he'd taken himself.

JJ had returned from his European arthouse tour speaking a little French and German, and painting in an impressionistic style that was damned good for a nine-year-old. To few people's surprise, it had been Naomi who'd discovered and nurtured the boy's love of art first. "Go outside and play catch with the girls, Jim," the woman had said firmly, and Blair had laughed at Jim's mock-pained expression, when JJ declined the offer of a game to stay in and make the Thanksgiving decorations for the table one year. The Carrs had scowled, but JJ was so happy making turkeys out of construction paper and yarn he didn't notice what a threat he was to traditional values.

*****

(2013)

Deep in the mountainous regions of Peru a path made its steady way through lush jungle growth up to a cleft in the mountain, the only access for anyone with business in the region. The path was clear and precise, a spot approximately a hand's span wide that marked the way through the creepers, trees and undergrowth.

Blair didn't need a Sentinel's ears to hear the labored breathing slogging behind him, the grunted curses and the stumbling feet. "Almost there, hon!" he called back callously.

"You are so dead!" gasped his follower. Thirteen-year-old Jessica Ellison huffed through clinging vines, yanking her way along the path, and finally caught up to her teacher. She had shot up since he'd seen her last, taller than Blair now and almost her father's height.

"Is that any way to thank me for this nice trip?"

Jessi swiped a forearm over her forehead, her face almost as red as her hair even without the acne.

"Nice? Jay gets...the Louvre, the Prado, the Kunsthalle Bern. I get...fucking mosquitoes and ruined shoes!"

"Comes with the senses, kid. Yours is a high and lonely destiny."

"Bullshit," the tall girl wheezed. "You just want someone new to torture now that you don't have Dad to kick around any more." She sniffed and made a face. "Ew, you smell like a meatball."

"That's my bug spray. Would you rather smell toxins? Garlic is completely organic."

"Yeah, well right now it smells *great* along with everything else in this stinkin' jungle. Whatcha gonna do for Little B, the Bataan Death March?"

"Damn. You can see right through me."

The girl held up her thumb and squinted past it at Blair. "Almost. You get any thinner, Big B, you're going to be transparent."

"I'm fine, never felt better."

Jessi glared at Blair. "Now you're really transparent."

Blair shrugged, comfortable with the state of affairs. Jessi was so mad at him right now that she had no room for pity.
It had been a bittersweet reunion at Lima Airport, Blair blinking in stunned joy at the Jim-tall redhead that had unerringly picked him out in the crowd, homed in on him like a cruise missile and flung herself into his arms. The enthusiastic launch had staggered him backwards a bit; the hug had hurt. Before Blair could say anything Jessi had pulled back, staring at him. She'd felt the change in his flesh and bone, had heard the hitch in breath, perhaps even heard the very culprits twisting through his bloodstream.

No one knew better than Blair Sandburg that you couldn't lie to a Sentinel. He met her beautiful moist eyes and said, "I'm feeling good, really."

"Good enough to go through with this?"

Blair snorted and thumped her forehead with the heel of his hand. "You're not getting out of it that easily, Ellison. I once had to make my way to Ceylon from a jungle camp when I was shaking with malaria. I feel a lot better now than I did then."

She gave a watery laugh as she hoisted her bag. "And then you caught a fish this big, but it got away just before the UFO abducted you. There's a reason your initials are B.S."

"You got it, toots." Blair led the way to his rental car, making no effort to help Jessi with her big carry-on.

"You're still too thin, Papa B. I bet you miss Dad's cooking. He taught me everything I know in the kitchen."

"Did he give you that godawful apron of his?"

"Naw, he wants to be buried in it."

"Figures. So, any good dreams lately?"

"I had one where I'm tap-dancing on my desk in Math and Mr. Bauer's staring at me and so are the other kids and then I notice I'm naked. Then Mr. Bauer turns into --"

"You're right, that is good. But I'm talking shop right now."

"Oh. Dreams. Go out by myself for a couple of days and live on water and power bar dreams?"

"Uh huh. Sentinel dreams. Message dreams." Blair looked over the top of the tiny vehicle.

"Maybe if you tap-danced naked in Math and then Mr. Bauer told you the meaning and purpose of life, that would count."

Jessi made a face as they got in. "Blair, that is so gross. I don't want Mr. Bauer to be my spirit guide!"

"You don't get to pick your guide out of a pet shop, chicklet. It's dream language. Your guide could be a big Fiji hissing cockroach, or Godzilla, or Mr. Bauer."

"Like I could tell them apart."

Blair snorted. He'd had a few Mr. Bauers when he was in school. "So, in this dream, does Mr. Bauer say anything to you about being a Sentinel?"
"Nope, he just turns into Eleanor Roosevelt and grins at me with those awful teeth and then I start laughing and wake up."

"Better luck next time."

So it went, all the way to the hotel as Blair got caught up on the Clan Ellison. B was still wandering all over the house at night and turning up asleep somewhere different every morning; JJ tuned out everybody when he was painting, till someone had to go to his room and drag him out for dinner, smelling like turpentine; Tara still bragged about her birthday fishing trip with Dad and Mayor Banks; oh yeah, Dad and Mom were good, sent their love.

"And we get a lot more visits from Mom's parents," Jessi added sourly, "now that you're out of the picture. They keep trying to pull that loving-grandparent crap on us. I tore up their birthday check last year, and I sent it back with a letter telling them why." The girl radiated righteous teenage anger at hypocrisy. "Mom and Dad chewed me out so bad for that one -- grounded and all -- but I don't give a shit."

Blair sighed. "M’cushla. You're going to have to forgive them someday."

"Forgive those dried-up old bastards!" Guide-protection had to be as inborn as the Sentinel gift; Jessi looked as fierce as Jim ever did. "I never forgot that Christmas they ruined. Never! I heard the stuff they said about you when they thought we were out of earshot. And when Ben died. And now they're coming over so sweet and loving, just expecting us to hop in their laps and adore them now that 'that awful little man' is out of the way!" Jessi so perfectly mimicked Donna Carr's voice and purse-mouthed expression that Blair exploded into a snort of shocked laughter. "Dammit, it's not funny!"

"No, no, I know it's not--" Blair swerved to avoid a driver who used his horn instead of his brakes, stuck his head out the window and shouted aspersions about the man's parents in Quechua. When the road was a little safer he returned his attention to his indignant passenger. "Hon. You know the work I used to do, right?"

"Profiler, right? Like that old TV show." Jessi's adrenaline had flown out with the frightening swerve and now she clung to her seat with both hands.

"Part of my job was to try to look through someone else's eyes to understand them. Not to love them, or to like them -- most of them were monsters -- but simply to comprehend their actions in a way that made some kind of sense, at least in their minds.

"You know, it might help if you did that with the Carrs -- looked through their eyes for a moment, and saw what they saw. You see a ruined Christmas and mean old people. But they didn't act out of malice. They acted out of ignorance, and misguided protection of you kids."

Jessi sneered. "Yeah, like those dorks who want to burn half the books I've read, to 'protect' me."

"Still. Some day, give it a try, just for your own sake. Hate eats you alive, and it doesn't bother the people you hate."

Jessi glared out the window.

"Okay, visual exercise. Close your eyes, breathe, you know the drill. Don't give me that look. That's good. Now. Picture a peaceful, trickling mountain stream surrounded by trees and birdsong. The water is rushing, gurgling by. It sounds so lovely you don't hear anything from Grandma Carr whose head you're holding under the water, bubbles flying from her mouth --"
Now it was Jessi's turn to explode into laughter. Blair grinned. Was he good at his job, or what?

It worked. Jessi finally returned to the rest of the family catch-up.

"...oh, and we all about freaked when the September '12 *Geographic* came, and we saw the 'B. Sandburg' under the article about Borneo! We bought a ton of those for our friends and stuff. Where did you get those shorts?"

Blair laughed. "The fuschia tie-dyed ones I wore in the shot of everybody in the camp from '91? Would you believe Goodwill?"

"Major believe it. Man, those things almost put my eyes out they were so bright. It's a wonder you didn't burn down any trees walking past."

"I never got lost. They could always see me."

"It's a wonder they couldn't hear those things."

The hotel for unpacking. Out again for papas rellenas and rice cooked with cardamom and milk at a nearby restaurant specializing in Peruvian cuisine (Jessi made a face at the Inka Cola and drank water the rest of the meal).

Jessi was just winding down as they got back to the hotel. "So, Papa B, when do we start our big adventure?"

Blair grinned at the girl. "We check out at 5 tomorrow morning and head for the hills."

"You're kidding." Jessi's dismay was not faked. "No effin' way. What about my jet lag?"

"You catch up on your sleep along the way, whenever you can grab it," Blair said coolly. "This isn't a vacation we're on, this is a business trip."

"Just because you never sleep," Jessi snarled. "If you think this is bad, wait till you become an intern after med school. You'll be lucky to catch a full night's sleep every 3 days. Think of this as practice."

"Oh, fuck, everything's practice. Why can't any of this be easy?"

"Because entropy is easy, Jessi. You just cheat on tests, sleep through the alarm, accept the bribes, eat while others are starving, download the bootleg term paper, look the other way when people cry for help, and wind down until you die. The extraordinary people fight entropy."

Jessi looked at Blair, up and down, at his frame that was still thin from his latest battle with the entropy in his blood. She sighed loudly. "Why the fuck do you always have to be such a good example?"

***

So here they were, a Cessna flight away from Lima and a day and a half later, slogging through green growth that was even wetter and hotter than Blair remembered.

The only thing complaining more loudly than his muscles was Jessi. Jim would have snapped at her about two minutes into the self-pitying monologue, telling her to act her age. Blair had been raised by Naomi, and following her lead he serenely ignored the girl's diatribe; Jessi was acting her age. But during a lull in her harangue he said casually, "If you think this is bad, just imagine what
Darryl Banks went through. He was about your age. He had to make his way through this stuff alone, after watching his helicopter explode, being shot at, held prisoner by drug smugglers, and leaving his dad in enemy hands."

"No effin' way."

"Effin' way. I was there, I got recaptured along with him and a whole village. Your dad came in like Rambo and got us all out."

There was a long silence behind him. "Cool."

"Scary," Blair corrected her. "Trust me, I'm having a much better time this time around."

"If you say so. This still sucks big time as a substitute for Europe, by the way." But Jessi bitched a lot less and a lot more quietly after that.

The jungle growth was still thick in this part of Peru -- the developers and oilmen hadn't cropped the entire range yet. The Chopec themselves were gone from the area, gone deeper into the jungle and further from the approach of settlers and wildcatters. There were now more jaguars in zoos than in Peru. But this was still the place where the gift came to its full strength, and where spiritual power most easily found its recipient.

Sometime during the hike Jessi said, "I thought I had to do this Sentinel retreat by myself -- go off alone and stuff."

"Back home you retreat by yourself. No effin' way are your parents going to let a thirteen-year-old Sentinel wander around a Peruvian jungle without her Guide.""

"Dad did it." The tone implied a charge of gender inequity.

"Jim was 30 years old, he'd been on his own since he was 18 -- and he had Incacha's help when he was here. Incacha passed the torch to me, and here I am."

"And here we are. So where are we?"

"Almost there. It'll be just past the top of the cleft there; we should reach it in two more days. When you hear a stream, let me know and we'll make camp, start a fire and get some water boiling."

"What if it isn't safe to drink?"

"That's your job, Ellison. You're the sentinel, you tell *me.*"

"Great. You get to tell Dad you poisoned me."

"Bitch, bitch, bitch."

***

"Ow. Ow. Ow."

Blair shot up in his sleeping bag, his heart going like a hummingbird's at Jessi's groans of pain beside him. Idiotically, his first thought was the water. But that had been last evening, the stream had passed Jessi's taste test with flying colors, and it was early morning, not yet dawn. He didn't have to see through the pre-dawn light; he could feel Jessi curled up in her bag beside him in the little tent, twisting and groaning.
"Cushla, what is it?"

"Ow! Ow, everything! My stomach, my crotch --" Jessi arched back, covering her eyes, thumbs digging into her ears. "Light! The stink! My heart hurts my ears!" She curled in a ball again, her arms around her head, wailing softly in pain.

"Oh, sweetheart, sweetheart, here, let me --" Blair reached over.

His hands were struck away by a flying arm. "Don't touch me!" Jessi screamed. "Don't touch me, everything hurts! Oh, God, I'm dying!"

Blair sat on his haunches, helpless, watching the girl thrash and moan. Jim's migraines weren't like this, and he'd never complained about a hurt belly or --

Oh. Oh God. Blair's head dropped as he realized what was going on. Welcome to the world of female Sentinel study, Dr. Sandburg.

"Ow! Don't n-n-know, ow!" That last was nearly a scream. "Haven't, haven't yet --"

"Your first one?" Oh god, it just got better and better. "Maybe it's your first one? Check your panties!"

"Get the fuck away from me!"

Blair ducked the next swing and scuttled to the first-aid kit. From the cry of disgust mixed with pain behind him, Jessi's exploration of her underwear proved his theory right.

No pads or tampons in the kit. Good job, Blair, you knew she was turning into a teenager...well, the thick gauze pressure bandages would work, that's how the disposables were invented in WWII after all -- and grab that, too. He came back with the supplies, talking in his lowest Guide voice.

"Jessi, Jessi, I've got something for the pain, and that'll help you hang on to your senses better, but you've got to get out of the bag--" Her squall of pain interrupted him. Undaunted, Blair broke and shook a hot-pad. "Put this on your belly, right over the pain. It'll help." Jessi had the same problems with medications that Jim did; she couldn't take anything that would alter her senses, and pain relievers didn't work very well either.

Through a chorus of "ows," Jessi snaked out one hand and grabbed the pad, almost dropping it with a yelp at the heat. She had little control over any of her senses right now. But she slapped it on her stomach with a pitiful whimper and curled around the center of pain, shaking.

"Build the wall, Jessi." It was a visualization that had worked when the eight-year-old Jessi had been up all night after having two teeth extracted, the prescribed codeine worse than useless to a Sentinel; Blair had stayed up all night, fighting the pain with her. "Make a wall between you and the pain, shut out the pain from your body --"

"Shut up, the pain is my body," Jessi whined, writhing. "Go away."

"As if." It took a hell of a lot more than a pissed-off and hurting Ellison to scare away Blair Sandburg. "Then talk to me, think about something else, anything."

"Huuurrrts...Snake bit me..."

Blair's heart nearly stopped. "A snake bit you? Where?" He pawed through the first-aid box for the snakebite kit.
"Dream. Dreamed it bit me. Hurt so bad, I woke up. Still hurt!"

Blair's heart slowed to its regular rapid beat. He sat down beside her head.

"Tell me about it. Tell me the dream." It would give her something else to focus on.

"Owwww, don't wanna..."

"Don't give me that crap, Ellison, tell me the dream!" Anger also was very good at distracting Sentinels in pain -- there were times you just had to whack the panther's nose with a rolled-up newspaper.

"I hate you..." Jessi moaned.

"I don't want you to love me, dammit, I want you to obey me! Am I your Guide or not? Tell me the dream!" {Look, Mom, I'm wearing jackboots.} Blair hardened his heart.

"I--I-- I'm in a jungle, I'm -- ow -- walking. I see a temple, ruined temple. But -- ohh -- Indian, not Incan -- in India."

"India?"

"Uh huh. Creepers all over broken statues and stuff. I walk up to the doorway and there's a cobra there, a big one. Big, big cobra, yellow and greeny-black. With a big hood." Jessi's free hand showed how big; the other stayed clamped over the hot-pad on her belly. "Ow, it -- it was so big it looked me right in the eyes, oh God, swaying, hissing, the forked tongue. So scared..." She wrapped both hands around her belly again, whimpering, her eyes squeezed tight.

Blair waited and thought.

"Ow. Oh. I l-looked right at her, right in the eyes. Then I had to, to kiss her, like those Hindu priestesses do. Right on the head. I just knew I had to. I was so scared...I leaned forward to kiss her. But I was scared, so I went slow, I shook. Then she lunged at me and bit me between the legs -- oww...and I woke up. Dammit..." Jessi arched her back and curled again. "It hurts so bad, right where she bit me."

Blair nodded. "Might just be your subconscious translating your menstrual cramps into language it could understand. And snakes shed their skins, so they symbolize the menstrual cycle that way. But cobras...it was a she?"

"Yeah. Female. Nagaina, staring right at me. So scared."

"How scared were you? Did you think you would die? Or another kind of scared?"

That made Jessi stop thrashing for a moment. "Scared, really scared. But...but it wasn't fear of dying! I didn't want to get bitten. I knew something bad would happen, something frightening. But not death."

"Change. The deaths we live through -- change! She bit you, and you started your first period. She killed your childhood. That means when you dream about her next time..." Blair started to get excited. "Cushla, you know what this means?"

"A poisonous snake is my spirit guide?" Jessi whined. "Oh God, that is so gross."

"You should be honored. In India cobras are revered as bringers of rain, that's why the priestesses
kiss them, it's a physical prayer. It's Western people who make snakes the bad guy in fables."

"Yeah, I feel real honored right now," Jessi snarled, hunched over her hot-pad and wincing. "I don't wanna go up the mountain any more, I wanna go back!"

"We can't. Not right now. We've got another four days before the pilot comes to the pickup point." Blair stuck his head out of the tent flap. "On the other hand, we have water, food, and a reason to stay put. So we'll stay here till it's time to leave."

"You mean that?" Jessi groaned, glaring at him with the first glimmer of relief on her face. She seemed to be getting on top of the pain -- or just happy at the thought of not having to pack up and move. "What about the cleft?"

"It's the getting there that's important, not the ending place. You've had your first spirit-vision dream right here. We don't need to get to the mountain's top. We're in the right place right now. You can spend the next four days right here, bleeding and dreaming."

"Gross." But Jessi did look relieved.

Blair made tea and Jessi drank it; that, combined with the heat of the pad, gave her enough relief from her body's haywire reactions to let her rest. She resisted Blair's request to hand over her stained underpants, until he reminded the embarrassed girl that he'd had to wash blood out of his own clothing before.

***

The second day of Jessi's period, it was warm and muggy out, and began to rain around noon. It was a good day for doing nothing. Jessi dozed and rested, reading a little, trying not to jostle her body from its plateaus of relief from the pain and heightened senses she couldn't control. Blair read, took notes and wrote letters.

Jess groaned and stirred in her sleeping bag. She groaned louder, stirred harder. Blair set down his book as the girl began to moan and thrash in earnest. "More tea?"

"No."

"Heat pad?"

"No..." The voice was almost a moan. Jessi rolled onto her belly in the sleeping bag, her face contorted. She stretched out her arms and legs and doubled up again before straightening out and clutching her pillow. Her back arched.

"Is the pain bad, hon?"

"Hot! Hot! It's like a hot snake inside me, moving around..." Growling, Jessi began rubbing hard against the ground beneath the sleeping bag. "That's better," she gasped, still rubbing. "More..."

Of course. It was supposed to be a good distraction from the cramps. And he knew from their e-mails that she'd been doing this activity for over a year now. Blair stood up smoothly -- he wasn't about to start blushing this late in life -- and fumbled through the laundry bag, tossing Jessi one of her T-shirts. "Here, hon. Wad that up and put it to good use. I'll be outside if you need me."

"Thanks," Jessi grunted, too relieved to feel embarrassed, and managed to nod in his direction as Blair ducked out into the warm rain to give the girl some privacy. A sharp twinge of almost fatherly pride stung his eyes. Jessi was having her first period, and she was masturbating. His little
girl was growing up.

He scouted the area around the campsite for his own amusement, used the portable latrine (always the worst part of these expeditions and definitely a cross to bear with Jessi's current condition), filled the water jugs, and was just considered a quick hike within earshot of the tent when a wailing cry sent him crashing and skidding back to its source.

Blair flung open the tent flap to find Jessi rolling and squalling on her sleeping bag, fully clothed, both hands gripping her crotch. Her face was screwed up with what looked like agony. "Oh, baby, did you hurt yourself?"

"Noooo!" she howled. "Not enough! Not enough!" She humped harder.

Blair recognized the squalling cry just as Jessi's eyes opened. Humans didn't make that cry, but female cats did.

Jessi sat up, gasping hard, and stared at Blair. There was nothing in her eyes but hunger, need. Blair recognized that expression from the mirror. It was the way he looked at Jim.

Some women experienced brutally painful cramps during their menstrual period. Some women got acne, or bouts of ferocious hunger, or rage, or weeping. And some women were swamped by lust. Compound that with a Sentinel's sense of touch, and --

Oh no. Oh no, not --

Blair stepped back as the girl reached for him. "Jessi, no, you don't want to do --"

"Blair, please," she moaned. "It hurts. Just stop it from hurting!" Her voice raised into a scream of agony and frustration.

He backed out of the tent and Jessi followed him, heedless of the rain, the single-minded gleam of a predator in her eyes -- or the glittering eyes of an addict who sees the needle before him. Or that look of mindless lust on Jim's face in the coatroom, when his senses had been swamped by pheromones... "Jessi. Jessi, I won't do this, I just won't --"

Jessi lunged and Blair sidestepped. A hideous vision of a chase through the jungle loomed before him; he was barely recovered from his last bout and she was in the prime of health and desperate. There would be no contest, and it would end in horror on so many levels. The one thing Jim Ellison would never forgive was betrayal of a trust.

He kept talking -- words had always been his best defense. "Jess, forget that I'm gay, that I'm positive, that Jim would murder me for this, that I held you before your dad did the day you were born. You are thirteen. It's statutory rape and you will put me in jail!"

Jessi yelled in fury and grabbed at him again, and again Blair jumped out of reach. He knew six ways to put her down from this position. But that would mean hitting her. He would push, he would yell, he would bully, but striking his Sentinels was a line he had never crossed. He could keep talking to her, as if that was doing any good. He could climb a tree and watch her climb up after him or chop it down in her desperation, mad with lust, her sense of touch off the map and blindly ruling every --

Zone-out. It was a zone-out! She was so tightly focused on her hypersensitized sex organs, nothing else got through.

Sentinel is zoning on touch -- solution?
Override!

Blair feinted, lunged past Jessi's grasp and tore back into the tent, pawing through his camping gear. The yell behind him was a hunter cornering her prey. Swiss Army knife, string, compass, pills -- there!

Just as Jessi flung open the tentflaps, Blair turned and spritzed her full in the face with his insect repellent. The garlic extract worked on the rampaging Sentinel as if she was a vampire. Jessi dropped like a stone, clawing at her eyes and nose and yelling in pain. Blair collapsed, taking deep breaths and trying to damp down his coughing. First, you get their attention.

He had time to sit and think while Jessi whimpered and sobbed beside him. Her wet stringy hair had spilled over her face, hiding it in a hood the color of dark blood. Poor little cobra. It was still raining out. Priestesses kissed the temple cobras to bring rain. Jessi's dream had worked on several levels.

Blair busied himself with practical matters. When Jessi was able to sit up and blink her reddened eyes open, the madness in them was gone, replaced by pain. Blair met her reproachful glare with a neutral gaze and a cup of peppermint tea. "'Sgonna taste like garlic," she sniffled, but accepted it anyway. "This totally sucks."

"How is it now?" he asked matter-of-factly.

Jessi sniffed again. "It aches like someone kicked me in the crotch. I'm still horny." She kept her eyes down. "But I'm not gonna try and rape you again."

"That's good. The last thing I need is your dad coming after me with a rusty machete."

Jessi snorted a painful little laugh, but it was a laugh, and Blair finally dared to give her a hug. "Crap. Now I don't dare whack off. I'm gonna go fuckin' nuts."

"Then we'll have to work on the other four senses and try to numb you from the waist down." At Jessi's glare, Blair held up both hands. "I promise I'll only use the bug spray if it's absolutely necessary."

***

Under Blair's tutelage, Jessi tried a bit of everything; hypnosis, guided imagery, meditation, yoga, primal scream (outside, where she scared the parrots out of the trees), a light hike through the jungle for exercise, iron supplements. Not one of them was 100% effective at stopping the cramps or deadening sensation, but all of them together helped; she slowly regained control of her senses and by the end of the third day was able to sleep soundly through the night again. To Blair's relief, Jessi insisted on taking over laundry duty for the t-shirts pressed into service as a reusable pad; "Right back to square one technology," she said sourly.

Blair wrote in his journal. Jessi wrote a letter to her parents. As usual, Blair omitted nothing from his journal entries, but both of them agreed that what Jim didn't know wouldn't hurt Blair; Jessi's letter was edited for family viewing.

***

Blair woke up slowly, savoring the peace of the morning. Jessi was still asleep. Yesterday she'd only felt a steady, ignorable ache. The crisis was past, and just in time; Miguel was scheduled to show up at the landing site the following day at noon. Time to pack up and head down the mountainside to meet him.
He had oatmeal and coffee going by the time Jessi stumbled out of the tent, rubbing her eyes and looking like any other frowsy teen who'd slept in.

"Eat up, chicklet, we break camp after breakfast."

"That's nice," she said, pouring a cup and taking a slurp.

Blair cocked an eyebrow as he dug into his own food. "What, no 'no effin ways' this morning? You sick?"

She yawned and kept eating. "Thinking." They were both almost finished when she added, "The cobra came back."

"You dreamed about her last night?" Blair said casually. He set down his bowl, rubbed his hands on his jeans and picked up his journal.

"Uh huh. Big and green and yellow like before. Same temple and stuff, with it right in the doorway. And I had to kiss it, three times. I was so scared I'd make the pain start all over again... So I was careful. I sort of moved with it, back and forth, like it was charming me. I kissed it. It hissed and opened its mouth, but I did it again, and then right on the nose. It nodded and disappeared, and then it wasn't a temple any more, it was a big marble building with stairs, like a museum. I went in, and it was a hospital room with an old woman on a bed. I could hear her bad heart faltering and I walked into the room toward her. Then I woke up."

Blair finished writing. "It sounds like your spirit guide just gave her blessing to your career. Cobras are the healers in Indian mythology, they represent rain and life. And Greek mythology sees snakes as healers too, that's where the caduceus comes from, the snakes wrapped around the doctor's staff. You overcame your childhood and your fear of the pain of change by confronting the snake, and the door was opened to your life as a Sentinel doctor." Snakes were also an obvious phallic symbol, but as Jessi still seemed embarrassed at her attempt to get at his cobra Blair declined to bring it up.

"The old woman?"

"Maybe she was the cobra in disguise. But sometimes an old woman is just an old woman."

"Grandma Carr has a bad heart," Jessi said, glowering.

"And you walked toward her anyway, trying to help her," Blair said.

Jessi threw up her hands. "All right, all right. I'll write a letter to the old bat. Are you happy now, teach?"

"Delirious."

They finished breakfast in silence. When they were done Jessi got up and helped Blair to his feet.

"Now, more hiking through hell, and this time I've got a t-shirt jammed in my crotch. At least it's going to be downhill all the way."

Blair put their few dishes in a big pot. "I'll wash up, you take down the tent."

Years later Jessica Ellison would complete the climb up that mountain to the very top, accompanied by her father, to scatter Blair's ashes to the wind and sing them on their way. But for now she packed her gear, and the pain she carried deep inside was only physical.
In the next years the most the family saw of Blair was the occasional picture he dropped into a letter. One day Jim realized that it had been years since he'd even sent that.

While dumping old files late one night Jim happened across an e-mail exchange between Jessie and Blair that she'd saved to the wrong file. The content stunned him. His fifteen-year-old daughter, who was as close-mouthed with her parents as any teen, was asking his oldest friend some blunt questions -- and Blair was answering them. He felt guilty reading it, but did it anyhow, and was soon relieved to see that Blair was telling her the same things he and Becca did, but with a bit more detail than Jim was comfortable with. If she would listen to him, it was a good thing, he decided ruefully. He was just grateful she was still talking to an adult and heeding the advice she got. He saved the document to the proper file, never read the private letters again, and never mentioned it to his daughter or his friend.

In the letter Jessie had called Blair her best friend. He knew from experience how invaluable that best friend was.

(2015)

Jim rose from his bed with a groan. He heard the TV mumbling quietly in the family room and, wrapping a robe around himself and belting it firmly, he went in and turned it off.

Little B was fast asleep on the recliner, the teddy Blair had sent him for his first birthday -- called Sam, for no known reason -- clutched to his chest.

Jim sighed. He'd given up carrying the child back to bed. Instead he just picked up the quilt that was kept folded on the shelf beneath the coffee table and covered him with it, leaning to brush his hair back from his high forehead and kiss him tenderly.

Maybe someday the child would sleep the night through. The energy that drove him during the day seemed to prevent him from sleeping at night. In that he really reminded Jim of Blair.

Jim sat on the couch in the dark. He knew that was the real reason he'd awakened. There was a feeling growing within him, the certainty that Blair was in danger. They hadn't heard from him in several weeks. At last check he'd been working his way through Africa, collecting children's stories from various tribes while doing discreet Sentinel research. It wasn't a dangerous or risky trip -- he'd made many that were much more dangerous.

But when the phone rang the next day Jim knew that he was right.

"I need to reach Assistant Director Jim Ellison. Is this who I'm speaking to?" The voice was young but comfortable with authority.

"This is Ellison." He saw Rebecca step through the doorway and mouthed 'Blair' at her. He saw her face pale as she realized that he didn't mean he was talking to Blair. "Go ahead."

"Um..." now there was hesitation in the voice. "I've been asked to call you by a patient, Mr. Ellison. A Blair Sandburg?"

"Where are you calling from?" Jim held himself very still.

"Bethesda, sir. Dr. Sandburg has been a patient here for the last two weeks. He was flown in from Bojswalla, that's a province in Northern Africa, with an undiagnosed virus. He was moved to ICU
this morning and finally agreed to let us call you. You're the only person listed on his contact sheet."

Jim felt his knees go weak. "I'll be there as fast as I can." He hung up, cutting the man off before he could say anything else.

Rebecca got him out of the house in under ten minutes.
The doctor introduced himself as Anderson. "Dr. Sandburg told me to make full disclosure to you. He says that you have been unaware of his illness."

"What illness?" Jim knew he sounded angry and didn't care. Worse, he was angry, but at Blair for letting himself get into this condition. And a vast, terrifying, looming rage at himself for not seeing what was coming, for not wanting to see what was coming, gathered on the horizon like the clouds that form a tornado.

"He has AIDS, Mr. Ellison. He's controlled it with medication for the past six years, but he's contracted a rare virus, something his body couldn't fight off. If you ask me, he had no business being in an undeveloped country, being exposed to things we can't even cure in a healthy person."

Jim didn't really hear anything past the first few words. He felt the blood drain from his face. No wonder Blair hadn't come home to visit. He'd been hiding this from him, protecting Jim from this terrible knowledge.

"Oh God."

Rebecca's face was crumpled with grief. But not shock. Jim's rage swelled. She had knew. How long had she known?

"Can I see him?"

"Actually, we were hoping you would arrange hospice care for him. It's generally hospital policy to see that the terminally ill are placed in a more dignified setting."

Hospice. "To die." It was a wonder he could speak past the boulder in his throat. It was a wonder his brain could still function.

"Yes."

Jim finally looked up and saw that the young man's face was sympathetic, his eyes were compassionate. "I know this is a shock for you. But he needs you now, Mr. Ellison. He fought against us calling you. He said he didn't want you hurt."

"Oh God," Jim repeated, quieter now.

"Would you like a few minutes alone to think about things?"

Jim stood, surprised to find that his body worked, one thought clear in his mind. All the emotional stuff was locked down tight. He had to act now. "No. I'm fine. Can you see about making arrangements for private nursing care? My wife and I need to talk about this --"

"No, we don't," Becca said. Tears lined her cheeks but her eyes were clear, and met Jim's unapologetically. "Bring him home."

"Are you sure that's what you want to do?" the doctor asked one last time as they went down the hall.

Jim just looked at him.

***
Blair lay on the bed, the upper half raised to help his labored breathing. Even covered with several hospital blankets Jim could tell that he was far too thin and very weak. He sat beside the bed, his head bowed into his hands.

"Blair...why didn't you tell me?"

There was no answer...just the soft hum of the air conditioner.

But he had. He had told Jim. What else could you call a coughing fit from a long-vanished cold, in that ratty Florida diner? Ribs showing after a bout of "malaria"? No pictures in the last three years' worth of correspondence? It would have been more than enough evidence for a medic, a decorated detective, an FBI agent, a close friend, or a Sentinel to draw the only logical conclusion.

The Sentinel's eyes had been stone blind.

Jim's head dropped even lower. A black wall loomed before him.

Messalina. The wife of Emperor Claudius. She'd slept with every male in Rome except the circus lions, her promiscuity was the joke of the Empire...and lovestruck, deluded Claudius was the only one who believed his wife faithful and chaste.

The closest one is always the last to know.

The doctor had told him the crisis was past and Blair would live, this time.

Jim took his hand, held it gently, and waited for his friend to wake up.

That night, after talking to a semi-delirious Blair for about twenty minutes, Jim went home and told his wife what he wanted to do. She didn't argue, didn't object, and he knew that she had been expecting this all along. Had been planning for it in her mind. The speed with which she made the arrangements, shuffled the bedrooms and her knowledge of which nursing service was best, what services were covered under the insurance Blair still maintained within the federal system, all of these things proved to him that she had known, and she had expected him to bring Blair home when the time came.

He wanted to be angry, he wanted to be furious that she'd kept this from him...and yet, he was grateful that one of them, at least, could still function with a degree of rationality. He watched her make up the bed in the bedroom chosen for Blair's sickroom, and his love for her threatened to choke him.

At her side, Little B looked up at him, his young Sentinel ears catching the sound even before his father's.

The ambulance was coming. Bringing Blair home.

***

As he slowly recovered from the life-threatening battle with the virus and became aware of himself and his surroundings again, it became clear that Blair was essentially damaged. There would be no rapid recuperation, no remission, no relief. This was the final battle. No one knew how long it would last, but most of the doctors told the Ellisons that it depended mostly on Blair's will to live. As long as he fought he had a chance. Jim remembered a dentist chair, a room hung with ghastly mementoes of a twisted killer, and a thread of life pulsed through him again. Blair always fought, and he fought hard.
After a month Blair was sitting up in bed on his own. After two he could feed himself again. After three Becca dismissed the nurses and began dividing his care between family members.

Although they all had their chores -- Jessi did Blair's laundry with her own, Tara cleaned his room and changed his bed, JJ fetched library books for him -- there were moments of awkwardness. Because he was still unsteady on his feet, it was too dangerous for Blair to bathe by himself. Becca's presence was comforting to him, but he didn't want to impose on her all the time, and he refused to let Jim do the chore -- he couldn't bear to see what the sight of his riddled body did to Jim. When the girls volunteered to take turns both parents agreed this was the best solution. Occasionally JJ took a turn as well. Blair joked that it was okay for them to help, that it was payback for all their diapers he'd changed.

Naomi came, touched and grateful for the care they gave her son; it eased her pain and anger at what had happened to know that the family loved Blair nearly as much as she did. Mostly at Blair's insistence, Naomi continued her wanderings after her first prolonged visit, but now for the first time in her life she carried a cellphone and maintained a voicemail account, and did not stray from Washington.

Jim's own anger at the nebulous unstoppable threat was focused more directly at Blair -- and at himself, an anger edged with guilt.

At four months they had a routine. Needing more time at home but not wanting to quit work entirely, Becca requested a transfer from first grade to preschool and began teaching a morning class that left her free after one o'clock, giving her time to tend to Blair and errands before the children began getting out of school at three.

Soon it felt like Blair had always been there, and, his mind back in complete working order even if his body wasn't, he began to enjoy his life again, as changed as it was.

He'd returned home, to the only family that had ever mattered to him.

***

"Uh...oh, yeah, sine theta." Jessi did not look up from her work on Blair's back.

"Good," Blair said, and turned the page. "And that's it for the bonus questions."

Tara peeked her head into Blair's room. "Almost done in there, Messie?"

"Up yours, Terror."

"Fuck you, bitch," Tara cheerily responded as she let herself in.

"I see you two are as loving and sisterly as ever," Blair said, looking up from the physics textbook spread open before him; he'd been quizzing Jessi for her finals while she practiced her after-school acupressure lessons on him. It was a win-win situation; Jessi's grades had gone up and her sentinel-sensitive touch gave Blair pain-free bliss in the wake of her work. An hour of her hands and he could sleep without his meds.

"You got it, clan-brother," Tara responded as the fifteen-year-old plopped down on Jessi's stack of books piled on the chair near Blair's head; her faded-white jeans and Blair's old black leather jacket contrasted sharply with Jessi's own emerald sweater and wool skirt combo. "It's time for your appointment with your stylist." Tara still retained her fondness for working with hair, even though she herself bore a buzz-cut that would have made Jim's old drill sergeant proud.
Allowed to grow while he was bedridden, Blair's hair was past his shoulders now. Mostly gray, it was still thick and framed his gaunt face, making him look healthier. Jim said it made him look like him, so Blair hadn't cut it.

"Ah, when are you going to admit you have a hair fetish?" Jessi said.

"When you admit you've got a crush on Papa Bear. Hate to break it to you, sister ugly, but he's *gay*."

"Ooh, John Dyke-stra, I am like so shocked. Now I have to go slit my wrists. O happy dagger!"

"Sounds like somebody didn't have her n-a-p today."

Blair relaxed in the ebb and flow of the warm undertone beneath the bizarre conversation; the only unnatural-sounding term of affection from the girls' lips was "dear sister." Jessi and Tara had weathered the usual homicidal sibling impulses and jealousies and were gradually becoming each others' best friends again, despite having to share a bedroom once again.

"Okay, that should hold you for a while." Jessi bent down to kiss Blair's cheek, left the bed and elbowed her sister off her books. '"Scuse me, I've got a computer to hog. Some of us have transcripts to send out."

"Thanks, hon," Blair said.

"Right, go play games -- I mean, study," Tara said to the closed door. "So, dahling, what look are we going for today?" she said, turning back to Blair and taking up the brush.

"Shave it? Paint my scalp orange?"

"That is so last-year. I'm thinking braids."

"Pippi Longstocking?"

"More like Nez Perce -- something comfy to sleep on."

Blair turned his head away from Tara. "I'm all yours." He closed his eyes as the brush began its soothing, hypnotic stroking. "So what's new and exciting with you, mtoto?"

"Well, I just got voted treasurer of the Two-Twenty Club at school. Great place to hang without getting crap from the other kids. You should have heard us knock down the christos at the council meeting last year when they tried to disband us!" Her voice developed a babydoll Southern lilt. 
"'We gawta stawp them homaseckshals fum recruitin' ah pore sweet childrun!'" She snorted. "Who are they talking about? I've never been sweet in my life."

"That's not true," Blair replied. "There were a couple of months after you were born when you were sweet." He looked over his shoulder at the short-nailed hand wielding the soft brush to the stocky girl with the blonde buzz-cut in jeans and his old leather jacket, a single gold stud adorning one nostril. "Did you wear that to the meeting?"

"Naw, I was in disguise -- dress, makeup, pantyhose, earrings, the whole nine yards. And my hair was a little longer, with kind of a bob to it. Looked very femmy. Mom's idea."

"Mom's idea?" Blair blinked lazily.

"So here I am mingling with these Stepfordettes before the meeting, right?" Tara continued, not
missing a stroke with the brush. "They're all saying how sweet 'n' pretty I am, how proud my parents should be, how I'm going to make some lucky boy happy, how brave I am to show up around Those Lesbians, blah blah blah. Then we take our seats, they start in on us -- and just as they get to the good lies about Two-Twenty sponsors teaching us to rape nuns, I turn to Susie and we do what we do best." Tara flashed Becca's own wicked grin. "Suddenly you could hear a pin drop in that room -- everyone's watching this 'sweet, pretty' Aryan chicklet suck-face with this big butch Japanese leather-dyke. I think some of the Stepfordettes fainted."

Blair laughed so hard and so helplessly that Tara had to stop talking for a few moments. He couldn't help it -- it was just so Tara.

"That's when I grab the mike and say, 'Is this what you're afraid of? Why aren't you as upset about kids killing themselves as you are about kids kissing each other?' They start that 'unhealthy lifestyle' bullshit again, so Aaron Blackstone gets up and holds up his wrists so everyone can see his scars. And he talks about the high school he transferred from."

Blair nodded; both knew Tara didn't have to elaborate. He'd been a gay kid in one of those fortresses of conformity, briefly, in the days before gay and lesbian student clubs; even now kids probably still used "fag" to describe any boy who liked to read. When Naomi had talked to the principal about the unpunished bullying her son underwent every day, the only result was Blair bringing home a black eye and kicked ribs from the principal's son and his friends. The Sandburgs had left the district that very week; Blair's schooling for the next two years, before he applied for classes at Ranier, consisted of him devouring public libraries wherever they went. If Naomi had shared the principal's attitude ("Mrs. Sandburg, it's not as if he was being beaten for being a Jew -- he can't help being a Jew"), Blair might very well have seen a razor blade as a less painful alternative to four years of adult-sanctioned torture.

"Mom and some other PFLAG parents got up to talk, too. That's what really did it for the Stepfordettes. They lost the vote and went out wailing about us going to Hell."

"So the Suzy Homemaker outfit was 'Mom's idea,' was it?" Blair said dreamily, as lost in the hairbrushing as he'd been in Jessi's pressure-points. "How did your parents take the news?"

"What news?" Tara said disgustedly. "And by the way, Blair-o, thanks a lot for ruining my big moment!"

"What big moment?"

"I had this big coming-out speech I'd been working on for a year or so, right? Getting ready for that moment when I'd face them and tell them. Figure I'll work up to it. So one night at dinner I tell them I'm dating someone -- and Dad says 'So when do we meet her?' and keeps eating. The others don't even blink. I gape like a goldfish, and they start laughing!"

Blair laughed. "Oh no. All your sweat and effort!"

"Right," Tara snarled, tugging his hair just a little in mock punishment. "Dad finally tells me that you told him and Mom not to be surprised if I came out as a lesbian. You told them when I was seven!"

"Well, takes one to know one."

"I told Dad he'd ruined my big coming-out-of-the-closet speech. And that brat Jess says 'Tara, you've never been in a closet.'"
Blair was helpless with laughter again, closely echoed by Tara. "She's right. You haven't."

"Mom and Dad took me aside after dinner and asked if Susie and me were doing it." At the look on Blair's face, "Not in those exact words. I told them we're doing going-steady stuff. You know, kissing, some petting and stuff, but nothing heavy. Going to movies, the mall. Council meetings." She grinned.

"But you carry a dental dam in your wallet to impress the other girls, right?" Blair teased. "Ow."

"Serves you right, smartass. Anyway, they told me I still had to follow The Rules – no hanky-panky on school nights, get home no later than 11, if this interferes with your schoolwork young woman..." Tara rolled her eyes in the universal teenager response. "I have to wait till I'm seventeen before Susie and I can go to a midnight showing of Rocky Horror. That sucks."

"Smart people, your parents." Blair was pleased at the information. Tara's sexuality was not a forbidden fruit for her to sneak behind her parents' backs; conversely, she was therefore able simply to be a teen with a steady girlfriend and leave sexual activity out of the equation for now.

"I dunno, sometimes I think if they'd disowned me it would be more fun to kick against it. But then I look at Aaron. We had a Two-Twenty party at the house last year, and he started crying when Mom hugged him. Poor guy."

"Poor guy," Blair agreed. He and Tara were the lucky exceptions; their parents didn't factor in their sexual identities before offering their love. But how often did Aaron's mother preach at him to renounce his sexuality instead of hugging him? Did she tell him she'd love him only if he stopped being a homosexual? Did she emphasize that he'd go to Hell, that he was lower than a murderer, that God hated him? Did she then blame the "gay lifestyle" for his suicide attempt, with the full approval of her church?

"Aaron's a lot better now, though. He and Ben are going steady, they went to the junior prom. I went with Susie. Some kids called us names, but most didn't even notice." Tara made a face. "Except some of the Asian queers giving Susie a bad time for dating a white girl."

"I hear that, chicklet."

Tara stroked Blair's head with her hand. "Oh, yeah, Phillip," she said gently. "I never even thought about the crap you'd get from that angle. I just remember him being so big and tall, how much fun he was, and how happy you looked when you were with him. And we never saw him after Benny died. I thought he was afraid he'd die if he stayed with you. I was only five at the time."

Blair nodded. That still hurt; it had been a bad time for everyone in this family. "No, that was me. I made a choice. Phillip loved and wanted me -- but your dad and sister needed me."

Tara resumed brushing Blair's hair. "And there was someone else, wasn't there." It was not a question. "Someone more important to you than Phillip. Someone who couldn't return your love."

Blair was silent.

"It takes one to know one, clan-brother."

"He loves your mother more than life, chicklet."

"I know. It sucks, doesn't it?"

"Oh yes." And he knew she didn't mean about Jim loving Becca.
"The absolute worst thing about coming out was Kim Shoji. She still goes to school here. When I started saying 'yeah' when the boys said, 'What are ya, a dyke or somethin'?' she cornered me with her little gang of girly-girls. I could have handled it if they'd tried to beat me up -- I'd have flattened those cows. But Kimmy just yelled at me. I bet the whole school could hear. She made sure everyone knew she wasn't a dirty lesbian, just because she'd been stupid enough to be friends with one. Nice and public, so we couldn't be friends any more." Tara exhaled hard. "I never, ever thought I could want to hit Kimmy. She was --" Her voice caught.

Blair reached up and held her hand. For all her brassiness, Tara was as sensitive as her tough-looking father. She and Kim had been friends all their lives. "It sucks," he said.

"Yeah," she whispered. Still holding Blair's hand, she continued to stroke his hair with the brush. "I'm so glad you're home, clan-brother. I see kids like Aaron and I know how lucky I am -- but it's good to have another member of the 'tribe' here."

"It's never easy. Never." Blair yawned.

"Oy, I'm wearing you out. Take a nap, we'll wake you for dinner."

Tara was right -- Blair had been worn ragged by first Jessi's, then Tara's demands on his time, when he'd only just started to regain ground from his latest bout of illness.

With Tara still brushing his hair, Blair closed his eyes and sank toward sleep. What a sweet, peaceful exhaustion it was, too.

They still needed him.

***

The rest of the day passed nearly without incident. But as he gingerly made his way to the dinner table, walking still an adventure, Blair collapsed. Jim leaped forward from the kitchen, his heart in his mouth.

But Tara was beside Blair, caught and held him; she was shorter and stockier than her leggy sister, and her strength promised to be formidably unfeminine in adulthood. "Whoa! Hey, Jess, c'mere, he's trying to escape again!"

"As if," Blair responded in a huffy whisper. He was shaking uncontrollably.

Jessi was on the other side of Blair where she'd leaped from her books on the couch. Both girls formed a chair with their hands for Blair to sit upon.

"Blair, you can't go out clubbing tonight!" the older girl scolded, stooping a little to make up for the difference in height as they hoisted him in a sitting position. "Your leather stuff won't fit you any more."

"Tara's got my jacket anyway," Blair responded in the same vein as the two teens carried him the rest of the way to his chair, padded to ease the pressure on his bony backside.

Jim was frozen in his tracks, watching his two strong girls carry the invalid Blair between them. A memory flashed across his mind, a time not so long ago, a grinning healthy Blair with two squealing little girls in his arms, promising them a book before dinner. Some detached portion of his mind wondered if this pain would finally be enough to kill him.
Sneaking in quietly, Jim didn't want to wake Blair if he was asleep. The pain kept him awake most of the time, even the medication he didn't want to take anyway didn't seem to help much anymore.

His CD player hummed softly with the lingering notes of a single flute and harp. That meant he was awake.

When Jim got to the bed -- a real double bed, Blair had refused a hospital bed -- he saw that Blair wasn't alone. Little B was curled carefully against his side, breathing deep and even, Blair's arm around him, IV tube trailing over the sleeping child; raggedy old Sam was clutched tight in a sleeper's deathgrip. Blair was watching the boy.

Jim smiled. Blair had been with them for almost two years. Though it was infinitely sad to see his once exhuberant friend grow weaker and fragile, he knew that Blair was happy here. The children gave him companionship and the kind of love every man needs.

B didn't wake in the night and creep around the house in the dark anymore, settling to sleep in odd places the way he used to. Now when he got up at night he headed straight for Blair's bed.

Jim sat on the edge of the bed, watching for any sign of discomfort.

"Hey," Blair whispered.

"Hey, Chief." Jim touched his hand, gently. His skin was fever-hot, papery. "Have a good day?"

"JJ did a sketch for me." Blair nodded toward the smudged charcoal of Blair's hands on the nightstand, every vein and bone turned into a beautiful sculpture. "Tara brushed my hair for a while. Jessi brought her date in to meet me -- I think she scared the poor guy half to death -- and B told me a story."

"Sounds like they kept you busy."

"It's not like I have anything better to do." Blair smiled, and then tensed suddenly as the sleeping child shifted against him, Blair hissing in pain.

"Do you want me to move him?" Jim tried not to hover, but it was hard.

"Leave him," Blair gasped. "I like having him here...don't care if it hurts."

"You need to rest," Jim said, as he did every night.

"I'll rest soon enough," Blair answered as he did every time Jim said that.

"Can I get you something? Some tea, or something to eat?"

"Maybe later." Blair knew it was more for Jim's benefit, this anxious nesting behavior. It was the way he could show his love. He knew better than to refuse him now, after what had happened before.

When Blair had first come from the hospital Jim had made a concerted effort to feed him, thinking that he might get better if he were stronger. Then one night Blair had gently asked him not to push so hard.

"Jim. Partner. I'm going to die. The sooner you accept that, the easier it will be for me."
It had been like watching an oak tree topple, seeing that angry man suddenly double up on himself, gasping and shaking. Making sounds of pain, like something breaking. Then, finally, the tears, shaken hard out of the man.

"It's just not fair, Chief," Jim finally whispered when he could control the pain in his voice. "What will we do without you? How will my children find their way without a Guide to show them? You're still so damn young..."

He was sitting on the edge of Blair's bed. Blair had just gotten back from the hospital after a bout of pneumonia. They were keeping the kids away so he could rest a bit.

"I thought we'd lost you this time," Jim sobbed openly, all of his guilt and fear coming to the fore.

"Hey, hey." Blair wrapped his free arm around him -- the other was immobilized so he wouldn't disturb the cut-down intravenous catheter inserted below the collarbone -- and pulled Jim to the bed beside him. "Jim...it's okay."

Jim lay next to him and cried until the tears were gone. He knew that Becca was keeping the kids outside playing, hoped that Jessi and B hadn't heard him.

When he finished he just lay there, feeling the heat of Blair's body. After a while he smelled something else, and it surprised him.

*Pheremones*.

He leaned upon an elbow, looked at his friend's face.

"Blair?"

Blair kept his eyes closed, but a faint blush stained his too-pale cheeks.

Jim glanced down at the light sheet that covered him, seeing the faint proof of his arousal.

"I'm sorry, Jim. It's just been a really long time...I guess my body hasn't forgotten."

Jim didn't move away, only brushed Blair's hair away from his face.

"It's okay, Chief. I kind of knew."

"Becca told you?" Blair opened his eyes and Jim felt a stab of sadness so deep that he almost cried again. They were so tired, the glimmer fading even as he watched.

"No, Blair. I've known for years. It didn't take a rocket scientist."

"You don't mind?"

"You know I've always loved you. The only way I could."

"Ahhh." The smaller man closed his eyes again and sighed as Jim began to rub Blair's skull with strong fingers. "I know."

"You can say it, if you want to," Jim said softly. "I won't mind."

Blair's eyes flickered open.

"Not yet." his smile was heartbreaking. "It's not time yet."
He relaxed as Jim shifted to rub his head, and eventually he slept, safe in Jim's strong arms.

Tonight, as he often did, Jim stayed by Blair's side for several hours that should have been spent in sleep, just talking. Telling him about cases he was working on, the drag of office politics, his plans for the future.

They never again talked about Blair's death, but Jim knew it was coming. It was in his scent, in the brittle softness of his voice, the tiny, frequent wince of pain.

Rebecca came in, as she did every night. Blair's smile was grateful. He knew that she was giving Jim as much time as possible to be with him.

"Hey, momma."

She sat on the other side of the bed and he sighed when she brushed his hair back from his head.

"Naomi called this afternoon. You were out after the meds."

Blair grimaced. He hated the IV medicines that kept him functioning, resented the long hours they took from what was left of his life.

"She said to tell you that she loves you and she'll come as soon as you want her to."

"She always says that."

"Blair, this -" she gestured at the room, obviously a sickroom despite the cheerful furnishings and children's things scattered around. Early on Blair had declared it a no-neatness zone. "- this is hurting her. But your refusal to let her be here for you is killing her."

"I can't." Blair shook his head, tears in his eyes. "It's bad enough, seeing how much I'm hurting you guys...I can't stand to see that in her."

"Naomi is strong, Blair." Jim took his hand, held it between both of his, feeling the fragile coolness. "But you have to give her the chance to deal with this. The two of you have to have closure."

"I'll think about it. There's still time," he said with certainty, then sighed.

"You need to get some sleep."

"Jessi's not home yet."

"I'll be awake when she comes in." Blair smiled an infinitely sad smile. "I think that's the thing I regret the most...besides..." he cut himself off.

Rebecca stood and leaned to kiss him on the forehead. He closed his eyes to enjoy it.

Jim waited until she was gone and tightened his grip on Blair's hand. "Blair. Chief. I'm not blind, you know. Or stupid."

Blair looked at the ceiling.

"I know what you were going to say."

Blair still wouldn't look at him.
Jim leaned over him, brushing back his hair, still thick and shiny, the only part of him that seemed fully alive, whispered in his ear.

"I always meant to thank you."

"For what?" Blair looked at him, startled.

"For loving me enough to let me live my own life. For finding a way to stay a part of it. I want you to know...I would have, Chief. If I'd only known how."

"You loved me back." Blair sighed, the tears starting to roll down his face. "I always knew you loved me. I remember...there's not much to do here some days, except lie here and remember...that time in the warehouse. We were after that Dahmer wannabe, Pulasko. You shoved me out of the way and took that shot for me. That wasn't just a partner thing."

"You did the same for me, more than once." Jim had been frankly astonished at how good an agent Blair became. He knew he'd be a good profiler, but he hadn't expected him to become a crack shot and vicious hand-to-hand fighter.

"I had to learn, to protect you."

"You did a great job." Jim paused. "I just wish you'd protected yourself as zealously as you'd protected me."

Blair managed a tiny shrug, quickly followed by a wince. "I was young, I was stupid, I did some stupid stuff. What can I say?"

"Sometimes I feel like it's my fault. If I had been able to give you what you wanted, you wouldn't have acted the way you did. When we were partners, you must have gone through a man a night."

"No, no..." Blair began crying silently. He brought his other hand up and twined all four of theirs together. "I was trying to forget, that's true. But you didn't choose how I did that. There were wonderful men that asked me to stay a part of their lives. I could have and lived a good life with them, even if it wasn't what I wanted with you. But I decided that if I couldn't have you I didn't want that. It was my decision, Jim. You had nothing to do with it. I liked being a free agent... the rush of attraction...it wasn't because of you." Blair shrugged again, and Jim freed a hand to wipe the tears from his face. "I tried to be careful...but sometimes I got carried away."

"You always lived life to the fullest," Jim agreed.

They both heard the door slam.

Jessica, who now had her father's height and her mother's heart, breezed into the room like spring.

"Daddy!" She was happy to see them talking. She lay on the bed and cuddled next to Blair, and Jim grinned as Blair put an arm around her and pulled her close, giving him a child on either side.

"How are you, sweetheart?" She grinned at Blair, continuing the flirtation they had begun when she was fourteen and realized he was the perfect person to practice her feminine wiles on – once they'd both recovered from her Neanderthal rush at him at thirteen. Blair of course was absolutely safe and a terrible flirt.

"Better now that you're here, sugar." He gave her a brush-kiss on the forehead. "How was the date?"

"He has potential. On the way to the movies he was telling me about some work he did for a
hospice last summer." Blair was her barometer of men. If she liked their reaction to him they got a second date. Some reacted with shock at first, and Jessie always gave them time to recover -- but the handsome guy who'd railed against "that gross dude" was handed his walking papers before the evening was over.

"Senses settled down?" They had been working on her Sentinel abilities earlier in the day. Every month they went out of whack for the required five days and it drove her nuts.

"Not too bad. One more day." She rolled her eyes. "Dad, you and B will never know how easy you got it."

Jim watched the interplay with loving amusement. Jessica had elected to go to school locally so she could be close to Blair, turning down scholarships from several prestigious schools and living at home. A freshman, she was determined to get into medical school. Jim knew she prayed that Blair held on long enough for a cure to be discovered. He also knew that being with them gave Blair the courage for that on the days it was so bad he just wanted to give up.

"Go to bed, Jess." Blair gave her another quick kiss and she left, still filled with the energy of youth. Blair watched her go with tired eyes.

"You should have had children." Jim spoke suddenly.

"I always wanted to...but I have yours and that's enough." Blair sighed and closed his eyes. "I think I can sleep now. You have to work tomorrow."

Jim leaned and brushed his lips across Blair's cheek, feeling it when his face creased into a smile, tasting the salt and sweat and tears and the drugs that seeped from his pores now. "I love you," he whispered, wishing he could do more, understanding that this was enough.

"I know."

Jim waited for minute, not hearing the words he had come to fear.

He left, hearing Blair's troubled breathing even out enough for him to sleep, B's soft snores beside him.

***

They were wrapped together in bed, warm and fuzzy, Jim's mind floating as he stroked her body aimlessly. A thought worked its way into his brain...strange, daring, even weird. But once it was there he couldn't make it go away.

"Becca?" he whispered in her ear. She sighed and snuggled closer. "How would you feel about having another baby?"

That woke her. She pulled away a little, moving to stare into his eyes, able to see him in the faint light from the bathroom. "Jim?" She seemed surprised, but not adverse to the idea. "We said that four was plenty... why now? Is this about Blair?"

"More than you think." he said. "We have to talk about this in the light." He sat up, pulled away and turned on the bedside lamp, leaned back against the headboard and looked deep into her eyes, trying to convey how strongly he felt about what he was going to ask.

"What?" She was so calm...did she have any idea what he was going to suggest?
"I know we have four children. Four beautiful, brilliant, maddening children." He paused. "But Blair doesn't have any."

Her quick intake of breath proved that she understood.

"No, don't say anything. Just think about it. We -- you -- can give Blair the immortality every man craves. He's such a wonderful person...it's a crime to waste all that he is because of this disease."

Becca stared at Jim as if he were insane; hell, he probably was. "AIDs is passed through semen. I won't have another baby die in my arms."

"They can test for that. Choose sperm that don't have it." Jim was certain. Now he understood what he had to do, what he could give to his friend.

And she was thinking about it, considering it, he could tell. "Would he want that, knowing that he won't be around to see it grow up?"

"Think of what a gift it would be to Naomi," he countered.

"Are we too old to do this again? And how would it affect our kids?"

"There are things we'd have to talk about," he agreed. "I just wanted to say it -- to see how you felt."

"Stunned," she answered simply. "But, yes. It's a wonderful idea."

"I always knew you love him as much as I do."

"Oh, no," she said sadly as he pulled her into his arms and they lay back, thinking. "No one could love him as much as you do."

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"I can't let you do that." Blair looked from Becca to Jim and back again. "It's too much."

They had waited for Saturday afternoon, when the younger children were all off doing their thing and Jessi was still in bed, sleeping as only a teenager could.

"It's something I want to do." Rebecca projected her love for him, her desire to do this for him.

"It will..." Jim trailed off.

"It will give us something wonderful to remember you by," Becca said forthrightly.

"That's too big a burden for a child. That's bad karma -- living only as a memorial to a dead man."

"No. Not just a 'memorial,'" Becca said firmly. "Any more than B was born only as a 'replacement' for Benedict. Any child of yours will be loved for itself, Blair, as well as being special because it's yours."

"Jim...?"

Jim sat on the bed beside him and took his hand. Becca went to sit on the other side and stroked his hair.

"It wouldn't feel right." Blair muttered, overwhelmed. But he didn't sound as convinced.
"She wants to do this, Blair. And I want her to. I want to see the joy I felt when my children were born in your eyes." Jim gave a wobbly smile. "Besides...maybe we need to make sure the Guide genes get passed on, as well as the Sentinel ones."

Blair was silent. They knew he was thinking about it.

After a week of deliberation he agreed. "It's not fair. You offer me one of my greatest dream on a silver platter...how am I supposed to say no to that?" he grumbled.

"You're not," Jim scolded. "We want to do this for you. The world needs another Blair Sandburg."

"There are so many questions...problems..." He was back-pedaling.

"The biggest question is answered," Rebecca said. "You want this. We want to do this. The rest is just details."

"But what details."

***

They told the children over dinner the next night. Jim had helped Blair to the table -- he was still refusing to use the wheelchair any more than he absolutely had to -- and the kids all reacted with various levels of shock and there were questions to be answered.

All three adults noticed Jessi's lack of comment.

***

"Blair."

He woke, disoriented, feeling something he'd hadn't felt in years.

Little B wasn't beside him -- but that wasn't what woke him. A soft hand was gently stroking his stomach. It was dark, but he recognized her by scent, just as Jim would have. He grabbed the hand, pulled it away, struggling to keep his voice quiet.

"Jess. What are you doing?"

She sat up, wearing only a long t-shirt that did nothing to hide her gentle beauty. "I'm trying to tell you something." She shrugged and her long auburn hair flowed around her shoulders.

"Jess -- this -- this is crazy. Stupid crazy." He released her hand and pushed himself painfully away from her. "Your dad is going to kill me."

"He's still asleep. I can hear him." She smiled. "I'm not trying to seduce you. I'm not suicidal, you know."

"Good." He grinned at the relief in his own voice. "I don't have my bug spray with me now. And, quite frankly, I'm not up to it."

"Pun intended?" Her low laugh was beautiful in the dark.

"Brat. So why are you here, petting me?"

"Don't you like it?" she asked, quieter now, her hand returning to lie, warm and heavy, on his chest.
He covered it with one of his own. "Of course I like it." He sighed. "It's been a long time since anyone touched me -- that way."

"You know, I used to daydream that you would be my first lover."

"I kinda thought you might." For the millionth time in his life -- or more -- he wished he could see in the dark. It gave Sentinels an unfair advantage.

"I'm still a virgin."

"I know." He knew she would have told him if she'd had sex. They would have talked about it. They had talked about it last year when she'd considered it.

"It wouldn't be the same, but you could be my first lover...if I had your baby."

"I don't see a new star shining over this house," he quipped, trying to avoid the depth of the conversation.

"And you're not a shower of golden coins," she retorted. "I just thought...if Mom can do it, why not me?"

"Because you're too young. You have your whole life ahead of you." He sighed. "It's hard enough accepting this gift from them...I couldn't let you do it, Jess. I held you in my arms when you were born. I saw you born. It would feel very wrong."

"Yeah." She sighed and lay down beside him. He made room for her under the covers and she slipped in, cuddling to his side, his arm around her, her head on his chest.

Her hand continued to play with his chest hair. "I think it was when I was eight -- the first time I saw you kiss a man. I saw you walking Phillip to his car, that big van he had. You had your arms around each other. When you got to the car he turned and kissed you...he was so much taller than you, I thought he was going to hurt his back...then you both laughed and raced back inside."

"Philip." Blair sighed.

"You were happy with him. You looked happy. You smelled happy."

"He asked me to move in with him." he sighed. "He wanted to marry me."

Now she was quiet. "Well, I know you weren't waiting for me to grow up. It's Daddy, isn't it."

"I don't want to talk to you about it, sweetheart." He hugged her, softly because the movement hurt, and sighed into her hair. "I've never said that to you before and I hope you'll respect it now. I just want you to know that your dad loves your mother."

"The same way you love him."

"Go to sleep, Jess," he said in the this-discussion-is-closed voice; he used it so often that he was always obeyed when he did resort to it.


He chuckled. Tara preferred Jessi's big double bed to her own daybed. They'd always shared a room and the younger sister had been looking forward to having it to herself when Jess left for college...but she had stayed, and Tara had never complained. Yet another sacrifice this family had made for him. The boys had once had separate rooms, but now they shared as well, so Blair could
have the fourth one.

"I'd like you to stay," he admitted. "I miss holding someone in my arms at night."

"B just isn't the same?" she teased.

"You are a gift to the world, Jess. But don't push it."

He felt her laughter as she drifted to sleep in his arms.
"Okay, Chief. What are your intentions toward my daughter?"

"I intend to send her to her room to work on that English paper." Blair answered, straight-faced.

"Uh, Daddy." Jessi was blushing. "I came in to talk to Blair..."

"Geez, Jess. I was kidding." Jim grinned to prove it and Jess felt foolish. Grabbing a pillow, she threw it at him, surprising him. It hit him square in the face.

"You little brat!" Jim shouted as she dashed from the bed for the safety of her room, Jim barreling after. Blair listened to her laughter as she beat him and slammed the door, making a loud raspberry noise. "Oooo, you are so grounded!" Jim mock-threatened.

The pain in Blair's body flared and he fought for breath, trying to calm it with breathing techniques...he wasn't ready yet.

Instantly Jim was at his side, helping him sit, holding him against the spasms that shook his thin form. Blair clung to him with all his strength, not even able to summon tears.

"Oh, Chief. Blair....Hang on....hang on....." Jim whispered, hearing Jessi calling for an ambulance. "Just a few more minutes...you gotta breathe, Chief...."

Blair's face was dead white and nothing was going into his lungs. Carefully Jim laid him back and began giving him air, feeding it into his lungs, their mouths pressed closed together.

"Ten minutes, Daddy," Jesse said, standing at the doorway. Becca appeared and sent her to watch the others.

After three minutes -- thirty breaths -- the spasms slowed, and then stopped. Blair gasped, sputtered, and then breathed on his own. His eyes opened and saw Jim's worried face smiling down at him.

"Back with us?" Jim whispered, tenderly brushing sweaty hair from his face.

Blair nodded. He brought his free hand up to touch his lips in wonder, staring at Jim.

"I was...helping you breathe." Jim looked bashful. "Okay?"

Blair nodded, fingers still pressed to his lips. "Okay," he whispered from behind them.

Jim looked up and exchanged a glance with Becca. She smiled gently, and left the room. He turned back to Blair. "No, Chief. I'm sorry. It's not okay.'

Leaning over him, so aware of the fragility of the man beneath him, Jim felt a poignant tenderness as he took those fingers in his hand and moved them away.

Blair's eyes never left his.

"Not okay." Jim whispered even softer. He tilted his head and kissed Blair, closing his eyes, feeling the scratchy coolness of his lips... Blair gasped and kissed him back, his mouth closed, soft against the firm warmth of Jim's.
The ambulance arrived with a blast of sirens and Jim leaned away, giving Blair a loving smile.

"You're gonna be okay, Chief." he said, though he could clearly hear the trouble he was still having breathing.

Blair gave his head a tiny 'yes' shake, and allowed himself to be strapped in and taken away again.

***

"The doctor says the baby would have a better chance if we used a donated egg." Becca was sad. "I'm too old now to rule out the possibility of age-related genetic defects, and we're not going to get more than one shot at this."

"It's okay," Blair was trying to soothe her. "We don't have to continue." After his latest illness he was beginning to have more serious doubts.

"I want to do this," she insisted. "I just wanted...I wanted it to be part of me."

Jim was silent, worried and upset. Just as Blair wondered if he wished he'd never started this mess, Jim said, "I want to do this, Chief. Nothing's changed."

"We'll use a donated egg," Becca said. "I'll love it like my own no matter what."

"I know you will. Both of you." He gingerly made a suggestion. "What about Jessi...?"

Jim shook his head, once. "Out of the question, Chief."

"I don't know...I never knew who my father was...I'm not sure I would want my child to feel like I did."

"Naomi wasn't exactly mother-of-the-year," Jim said wryly. "I think we can make it up to him -- or her."

Blair met his eyes with rueful agreement, and the decision was made.

*****

(2017)

Jay laid down a swipe of vermilion like a streak of untainted blood, spattered it with black and long streaks of midnight blue, swept ivory fangs over it. He squeezed his eyes and shook his head, and swirled the brush in the jar of muddy-colored cleaner.

What the hell good was any of it? Someday this might hang in some museum -- or more likely gather dust in a cheap motel. Or burn with the violence of oil-painted dry canvas. Burn to ashes like flesh, bone, tainted blood...

"May I come in? I'm alone."

He'd have kept the door locked against anyone else tonight. They'd probably sent her down here for just that reason.

Restraining himself from raking his fingers across the wet canvas in rage, Jay got up from the bench and made his way across the basement. He nodded curtly at Naomi and turned back to his easel without another word. He heard and saw her settle in on his bed at the periphery of his senses. Of course Dad or Jessi or B-for-Brat would give a full fucking report on her movements from the same data, like he cared.
Pausing only to tilt the canvas away from the bed, he kept painting. He didn't like other people looking at what he was painting, not even Naomi; it was too personal.

The old woman made herself comfortable on the bed without saying a word, and continued to not say a word for a long, long time while Jay lashed out at the canvas so fiercely that the brush thumped like a drum with every contact.

"You missed the firefight," Jay finally said, breathing hard.

"And you've taken refuge in your bunker," Naomi said.

"I wanted to go see a movie with my friends tonight. Dad told me I'd have to stay here and watch B 'cause he and Mom were going to that open-house for Tara, then over to see Blair. It went from there." Especially when Jay had shouted that he wished he had AIDS so he'd get some special attention. Dad had gone white, then grey -- and then the tornado had struck.

"You know your father's afraid."

"Everyone's afraid every time Blair goes in the hospital again," Jay snapped, brush setting up a stiff row of purple spikes before taking up the crimson. "Does he have to take it out on me? Goddamn it!"

"I'm not talking about Blair, sweetie."

The brush stopped. Jay stared at the violent tangle of blood colors that gnashed its teeth before him, a mirror for the rage inside him. Everything was about fucking Blair, wasn't it? He didn't say anything. Naomi had probably come to the house straight from visiting her son, into the mute fury of aftermath.

"He loves you. You know that."

Jay sniffed loudly and glared at the turmoil before him, trying to keep the tears out of his eyes again. "I...I said..."

"You got angry and you said stupid things," Naomi said dryly. "You're fourteen. I'm not exactly shocked. Sweetie, hasn't it occurred to you by now that your dad doesn't know how to fight?"

Jay snorted. He'd seen the medals and heard the stories -- the ones Dad could tell, anyway. If Jim Sr. didn't know how to fight he was fooling a hell of a lot of people.

"Oh, he can fight physically, it's what he does very well. But young men challenge their fathers to find their own identities as men, it's the way of things. A buck grows his antlers and fights his sire for the herd; it's natural. Jim didn't do that with his father -- he ran away and joined the Army. He just found another father to order him around, so to speak. That's the only model he has when you square off with him."

"Yeah, so I either get hands off or 'straighten up, soldier,' " Jay sneered. "I think you're talking to the wrong one."

"Such an ego," Naomi chided. "What makes you think I talked to you first?"

Jay rolled his eyes. Naomi could be such an interfering... "What's next, Dr. Kissinger, we go back up and reopen the talks?"

"You sound just like him. No wonder you're at each other's throats. He's probably terrified you'll
"Run away? Join the Army or the police? I don't think they're looking for artists."

"They wouldn't care who you were. They're trained to crush the personality out of you so they can mold a little toy soldier to follow their orders. You might have inherited your artistic gift from your father; we'll never know what lies broken and stunted within him." Some ex-Hippies had sold out and become corporate millionaires or yuppie Republicans; Naomi Sandburg was one of those who'd gotten even more radical and outspoken with age.

"Why should he care if I run off anyway?" Jay said venomously, and splashed paint again. "It's not like I'm important or anything! I paint pictures, I'm not going to be a doctor or a cop, and I can't tell you what's in the paints by licking them!"

"You feel like you're the ordinary one."

"Yeah, well that's 'cause I am. Marilyn Munster. Everyone else knows what they're gonna be when they grow up!"

"But you already know what you are, and what you're going to do. You're an artist; you're going to create, no matter what else you do with your life. You'll paint, draw, sculpt perhaps. I suppose you'll have to figure out a way to earn a living, too; it's the curse of artists in this Philistine technocracy. Perhaps trade school --"

"Try telling that to them," Jay growled, jerking his head upward. "'JJ, you can't sit down there and paint your whole life, you have to face the real world one of these days.' Geez, I've been to Europe already!"

"You know what they mean. For what it's worth, I think you face the real world very well. Part of the time."

"What the hell's that mean?" Jay muttered to the canvas, still between him and Naomi's face.

"Part of facing the real world is recognizing when you have a duty to your community that goes beyond your own wants and needs."

"Babysitting the brat." And he was going to have to do more of it when Mom gave birth again next year. A baby for Blair, not like he was going to live long enough to see it.

"It's what you can do. It's your contribution."

Not like it was going to help. Not like it would give Blair another month of life. It sounded so noble, taking care of a dying friend. It wasn't. You got angry, you yelled at each other, you resented the dying person, you said things --

"Look, dear." Naomi had gotten off the bed and approached Jay's work area. Without looking at the canvas in progress, she reached over the glass of dirty gray turpentine he rinsed his brushes in and let go of a penny. The coin plopped into the murky fluid and left only the shivers on the surface. "Ripples. Every action has effects in all directions. These fights with your parents are just one of the effects of taking care of Blair."

"But it's non-stop. I get yelled at for not taking care of B, and when I do I can't see Blair in the hospital. B sleeps with him when he's here, Jessi and Dad are with him all the time. Mom shows up so Blair can feel how big she's getting," Jay's hands miming his mother's round heavy belly. "Tara's getting ready for college this year. All I can do is watch B and do my homework. Maybe if I was
special I could do something important."

"Babysitting is important. What you mean is you want to do something heroic," Naomi said sharply. "Well, young man, ask your mother how 'heroic' she feels throwing up first thing in the morning, or carrying an extra 30 pounds all day on swollen ankles, or going to the toilet 20 times a day. Ask me how it feels to die a little bit every time I see my son lose another inch of ground. And those are birth and death -- the big, important, heroic jobs."

Jay took exquisite care in laying down a spiny brown border around the tangle of rage. He was hot with anger mixed with shame, unable to look Naomi in the face. It was so damn unfair.

But he could not escape from her voice. "Jay, self-pity is a normal, natural part of teen life. The plain fact is that no one can afford to indulge you now. Something else is at center stage, and the sooner you accept it and lend a hand to your family the better. It's not fair, but I'm the last person to look to for fairness in this situation."

The canvas clouded, and suddenly cleared as his eyes overflowed. He blinked, and more tears ran.

"And take it from an old hippie, dear -- running away is not the answer."

Naomi returned to Jay's bed and gathered herself into a lotus, as gracefully as in her youth. She took a deep breath as if to start meditating. Instead, she began to talk, in the tone of a storyteller.

"When I was just a little older than you, I left my home and went out to San Francisco. I followed that pull of freedom, peace and brotherhood the way prospectors followed the call from the gold fields. Parts of that life were wonderful. But most of it wasn't.

"I slept on the streets and begged for change. I marched and got arrested. I got high. I slept with one man after another; I got some bad cases of gonorrhea and crabs. Some of the men treated me badly. Friends of mine died of overdoses, or were beaten by cops -- I got beaten up a couple of times myself.

"When I was pregnant with Blair, I was so poor and alone that I began to save up money for an abortion; I couldn't bear the thought of bringing him into the world only to starve in the streets. It was illegal, but there were places you could go to have it done, if you had the money and didn't ask questions. I even thought about spending the money on sleeping pills and taking care of us both at once."

Jay drew in a breath and gripped his brush in a fist till he thought it would snap. Now, finally, he looked directly at Naomi.

Her eyes were as wide and piercing blue as before, her tawny red-going-silver hair the same. But her mouth was a firm line, and a light burned in those eyes that spoke of pain conquered. "My friend Abby found me," she said calmly, "and took me in at the Marin house. Mother Juniper and the others took care of me for the rest of my pregnancy. Blair was conceived because I was careless; and because I reached a place of safety, he was carried and born with love. So were all of you. So is the one your mother carries."

Jay heard her words, but his stunned mind tumbled with the revelations. Now he understood why Naomi felt such a strong tie to all of them, why she believed in consequences.

Ripples. He was a ripple, a direct result of that frightened girl's decision. If Naomi hadn't gotten help -- no Blair. No Blair meant his dad would have wound up in an asylum or dead, without the ability to control or understand his senses. Dad wouldn't have married Mom. And none of them
"I'm not telling you this to diminish how you feel right now, Jay," Naomi continued, serenely overriding his mental turmoil. "You know there is always someone worse off than you, no matter who you are, and you're entitled to feel what you feel. But trust me, sweetie, and look at your father's life as well. Running is not a good solution."

Jay nodded. The tight hurting thing inside him unknotted a little. When he got angry with his parents these days, it was as if he ran into a brick wall that refused to listen to his words. When he talked to Naomi, it was as if he faced a two-way mirror that let in how he felt and reflected it back.

"Jay, I can't begin to tell you how grateful I am that you and your family are taking care of Blair in this terrible time. It's a time of pain for everyone, as you said; we're all hurting because of this. But you all made the decision not to let Blair handle this pain alone. You're all giving something up for him."

The fair part of Jay's angry mind remembered the tears Jessi had hidden from her parents and Blair, when she chose to attend the community college instead of George Washington U in New York so she could help take care of Blair and be less of a financial burden to the family. Tara had given up choir -- it was either that or soccer -- to be available on Saturday mornings, as well as postponing her dream of having her own room. And B? Maybe the Brat preferred spending time with Mom instead of with a pissed-off older brother, and had to face tough luck too.

"Thanks to all of you, Blair is now closing his circle in love, the way he began it. You don't want to know how many of my friends died alone, blind, demented, abandoned by their families for being gay and by their lovers for being sick. What you're doing hurts, and is difficult for everyone. And it is a blessing, a source of comfort for both of us."

"There's an old song of ours about the wheel of change, Jay: 'You can slow it down or help it around, but you can't make it stop even when you die.' What's happening can't be stopped."

And it was his decision. He could yell and scream about the unfairness of this, and make more work for everybody -- or he could cry about it quietly the way Jessi did, and still help out.

And that had nothing to do with being a Sentinel or not.

Jay stared into the murky turpentine; his own wavery reflection stared back. Ripples. He looked at his angry canvas. With a sigh of weariness, he plunked his brush into the cleaner and swirled it around to get the paint out.

"Tell them I'll be right up. And I'm sorry."

Naomi was already on her feet. "I'll do the first part. But you'll do your own apologizing to them, James. You must keep that line of communication open between you and your father, no matter how angry you both get -- it'll be good for both of you."


"I'm afraid so, sweetie."

"Naomi, when does character-building start to feel good?"

"It doesn't. You start to feel something better than 'good.'" Naomi hugged him -- she always knew when it was all right to approach him physically. "You feel proud."
The whole family was there when they came home from the hospital. Jessi's boyfriend -- the one who had spent a summer working for hospice and now volunteered at the Boys & Girls club after school -- was there. He'd become a regular part of their lives.

Jessi had confided in Blair only a month ago that they'd started making love. And she was glad she had waited.

Naomi was there, at Blair's request. Jim and Rebecca had assured her that she was welcome...for as long as they had.

Blair was in his bed. He was too weak now to get around at all without a wheelchair, and his sight was failing, falling victim to a rare form of infectious glaucoma.

They all knew, even B, that he was only hanging on to see his child. Maybe that would give him the strength to stay and spend some time with it.

Jim carried the blanket-wrapped bundle tenderly. Rebecca sat on the side of the bed, her eyes filled with tears.

"Blair. Chief." Jim gently shook him awake. Blair's dozes were becoming more and more a comatose state.

"Jim." His smile was unfaded, still brilliant in his wasted face. "You're here." He gave Rebecca a loving glance and then his eyes fell on the bundle. "Oh. God. She's finally here."

"Yes. She's here. Your daughter."

Reverently Jim laid the infant in Blair's shaking arms. When his thin fingers fumbled, Jim undid the fold of blanket that covered her head and laid her bare to his sight.

Blair was crying as he stared at her. His hand cupped her downy head.

"At least you'll never get after her to have a haircut." His words brought laughter to faces wet with tears.

"We'll let you spend some time with her." Becca got up and ushered everyone out of the room except Jim.

He simply sat and watched Blair watching the baby.

Blair looked up at last, his face radiant.

"This makes all of it -" he gestured around the room. "- worthwhile."

"She's going to be just like you." Jim said softly.

"I hope not." Blair's face stilled. "You know that's going to be her name. Because she's the future."

"Hope. Yes, I know." Blair had told them before she was born, because he was afraid he wouldn't be able to hang on. "Hope Rebecca Sandburg."

"Some day she'll ask about me, Jim. Tell her anything you want...but tell her I love her."

"Of course." Jim saw that Blair was crying again.
"Do you -- would you mind -- leaving us alone for a while?" Blair sighed. "We'll be okay, I promise."

Jim stood and smiled down at the two of them.

"I love you, Chief."

Blair smiled.

"I know."

*****

(2019)

"Becca."

Blair's soft call came over the intercom weakly.

Rebecca put down the knife she was chopping vegetables with. Jim and Jessi both stared at her, anxious.

They wanted to follow her into his room, but he'd been asking them to only come in one at a time lately. More than that made him too tired.

"Come take Hope, please." There was a catch in his voice and Jessi stood abruptly, leaving her schoolbooks forgotten as she went outside into the evening.

Jim glanced from wife to daughter, unsure which one to follow.

"I'll take care of Blair," Becca said softly. He nodded and went after his daughter, to hold her as she cried.

"He sounds like he's already gone, Daddy," she sobbed in his arms. "He sounds like he's already gone."

"He's stayed as long as he can," he whispered, too low for normal hearing, stroking her hair. "Far longer than we expected."

"It hurts so much...it hurts you and Mom and everybody...why is this happening?"

Jim knew she had always believed that a cure would be found in time to save Blair, but he had never felt that. There was an inevitable pattern to this end; in Naomi's words, he could feel a circle closing. "We have to let him go, honey. We can't keep him here for ourselves. He's in so much pain. He's ready to go."

She pushed herself away from him and he was struck by the wisdom in her young eyes, so like his own. She wiped her face on his shirtsleeve and smiled shakily. "You're right. I'm being selfish."

"He loves all of us so much, Jess. But it's just too hard now. I see him try to breathe and it hurts me."

"I know, Daddy. It's like you want to breathe for him, or hurt instead of him." She took a deep breath. "But for the rest of my life I'll be living it for him, too."

"You can do everything he didn't have a chance to."
That got a shaky grin. "He's done just about everything, Dad."

"Then just be happy. That's all he wants for any of us. And love Hope like she's your real sister."

"But she is, daddy. She is."

Jessi went inside to take the fussing baby from her mother. At seven months Hope looked so much like Blair that sometimes it hurt to look at her, so healthy while he wasted away. She had his soft brown curls, the radiant smile, the startling blue eyes. And his energy, his intelligence. She was everything they had hoped she would be.

That night Jessi went in to cuddle up to Blair, and came out of the room an hour later, tears drying on her face even as she smiled. "I don't think it will be much longer."

Becca spent the next day home with him. Blair insisted that Jim go to work. "I'll be here when you get back." The simple statement was a promise.

***

Rebecca was in bed when he got home, late because of a case.

"How is he?" Jim asked as he stepped into the room, leaning to kiss her and the baby sleeping beside her.

She just shook her head, the sadness too deep for words.

"I'll just take her in to say goodnight, okay?" He scooped the child into his arms, and turned away before she had the chance to say anything.

Jim heard his breathing, raspy and so slow, before he entered the sickroom.

Naomi was sitting beside the bed. "Jim." It was a wonder the woman could still smile. Her sadness was deeper than his could ever be. "He's been asleep for a while."

"Did you...?" {Did you say everything you needed to say?}

"He's ready," she said simply. "I'm not, but how could I ever be?"

"I know exactly how you feel." He hugged her, the baby between them. "Have I ever thanked you?"

"For what?" She was genuinely startled.

"For having him. For giving him to me."

"He was the best thing that ever happened to me, Jim. And I didn't give him to you -- Blair gave you that gift himself." She kissed him on the cheek and he smelled her tears. "And he couldn't have made a finer choice." She left before he could say anything else.

Jim laid the baby in the crook of Blair's arm and then lay down on his other side, holding him. Blair was a feather in his arms, his body riddled with disease, ravaged by fever.

He felt Blair wake, always aware of his presence. "You're home," he murmured dreamily.

"I'm home," Jim agreed. He dropped a kiss to the top of his head. Blair's hair had finally lost its vitality and now seemed to be dying with the rest of him. But it was clean and Tara had spent an
hour brushing it that afternoon, as she did every day. It was the way she expressed her love, caught in that awkward sixteen-going-on-seventeen stage where death just seems so out of place. Blair had always enjoyed attention to his hair.

Blair sighed, barely a movement in Jim's arms.

"How do you feel?" Jim asked quietly.

"It's not so bad." Blair sounded surprised. "I was afraid for a while... and then it seemed okay. It doesn't hurt so much now."

Jim gently tightened his arms around him. "Don't be afraid, Chief. I'm here with you. I'll never leave you again."

"I know." Blair tried to hug him back, but had no strength for it. "That gives me the courage to face it."

"You don't need it. I've spent my life with soldiers and cops and agents -- and you're the bravest person I know," Jim whispered, struggling not to cry. There would be time for that later. "You lived your life on your own terms. You were exactly who you wanted to be. Not many people can say that."

"And I found the best people to love."

Jim almost stopped breathing. He had to will his heart to beat.

"I love you." The whisper, suddenly harsh, had to be forced from Jim's lips.

Blair turned over with agonizing slowness, careful of the sleeping baby, shifting her to his chest between them. He didn't open his eyes; his sight was basically gone. The fingers of one hand traced Jim's face.

"Jim, I've loved you since the day I met you." He paused. "I will always love you."

"I know." Jim answered.

He knew what he had to do. It was the only thing he could do.

He kissed Blair.

A gentle pressure of his lips on Blair's and then Blair's ragged sigh.

"My one true love." Blair gasped as a new pain hit. When it passed he felt dizzy. "Jim...I'm gonna sleep for a little bit now."

"Yes, love. Go ahead." Jim heard his own heart breaking.

Blair put one hand on Hope's back and the other on Jim's chest, just above his heart. His breathing slowed as he slipped into unconsciousness.

Jim held both of them until Hope began fussing around dawn. Rebecca came and got her. Her face was ravaged from a night spent crying, but he shook his head when she asked if he wanted her to take over.

He held Blair through the day, feeling the life slip from him, praying for one more moment of consciousness, one last chance to hear his voice, see his smile.
Naomi and the children came in to pay their last respects. Simon and Darryl, called the night before by Rebecca, made their way down from Cascade to say sad goodbyes.

They called everyone who loved him. Anyone that could come, did. Dozens of people came into the bedroom, filled with flowers and love that shadowed the sadness.

Over the next two days Jim only left Blair to take care of necessary functions. He didn't eat, barely drank, and refused to sleep.

It was midnight on the third day.

Jim sat against the headboard, Blair pulled close to him. They'd disconnected the tubes and wires. There was no reason for them now.

He felt a shudder, and looked down.

Blair opened his eyes. "I'm still here." His whisper was a breath.

"Yes." Jim leaned to kiss him, the third time the last. He didn't look away even as Jessi and Naomi came into the room; Jessie had heard that faint whisper. Naomi stroked her son's hair and kissed his temple; Jessie took up her position at the foot of the bed, her face set and alert. Hope gurgled and kicked in the crib beside the bed, a living defiance to the death angel waiting to collect its due.

Blair turned his head, hearing Hope; Naomi moved aside to give him that last look. "I wanted you to see her again," Jim said simply.

"I love you, Jim." Blair fought for a breath, managed to draw it in.

"I love you, Blair."

Jessi mouthed the words as well, her eyes open and tearless. Her hands covered Blair's feet through the blanket.

Jim watched as Blair's eyes closed for the last time. He closed his eyes with Blair's, holding him as close as he could get him.

He extended every sense as far as they would go, focusing intently, heedless of the danger.

He heard the last breath that left the damaged lungs.

He felt the last beat of the exhausted heart.

Jessie's eyes were open. She saw the moment the ember faded; when the eyes clouded and gravity took over; when the figure in the bed ceased to be Blair, and became only a body. She saw nothing else in the room. Her nose told her when entropy began its work.

It was Hope's squeal that jolted father and daughter back to the world of living people. They blinked and looked at each other, and their faces were the faces of those who have undergone a long journey. The Sentinels had accompanied their Guide as far as it was permitted for the living to accompany the dead.

"Go back, baby," Naomi whispered, weeping silently. "Go back to the Wheel."

Outside, Tara held her little brother as ten-year-old B wept, his hearing also attuned to the last
feeble sounds from the sickroom. "Papa Bear," the boy murmured.

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(2041)

"Dearly beloved. We are gathered here to witness the joining of this man and this woman..."

Jim held Rebecca's hand. Beside him Naomi beamed. At 86, she was still as full of life as ever, an ongoing reminder of Blair's vitality.

Behind him he heard Tara quietly fussing at her son, BJ. Blair James Ellison-Tanaka. When she and her wife Susie had decided to have a child almost eight years ago, Tara had made it clear that there was no other name she would consider for her offspring, boy or girl. "James for a girl's middle name?" Susie had said drolly, holding her wife's hand during the insemination procedure; "Jamie, schmuck," Tara had replied to her former high school sweetheart. Boys were the more common result of artificial insemination, and James it was. The whole family was there; the Tanakas were behind the Ellisons, and BJ was flanked by both parents, Lieutenant Ellison looking trim and sharp in her dress uniform.

Beside Tara's family JJ sat with his four-year-old son, James Joseph the third -- called King James by most of the family -- in his lap, twelve-year-old daughter Naomi Peace beside him. In the two years since his wife's death from ovarian cancer he had managed to pull his family together.

When Naomi had announced last year that she was ready to settle down, everyone but Jim had been surprised when JJ had offered her a home with them. His oldest son had always been close to Blair's mother, especially after Blair died. They shared an artistic nature, though JJ's was expressed in the surreal portraiture he was just beginning to be noticed for. Naomi provided loving care for King James and a woman's presence for the younger Naomi.

There were other holes in Jim's life. His brother Stephen had died in a plane crash almost ten years ago, that loss almost as hard to take as Blair's. But they had recovered, and carried on.

The service continued.

There had always been a powerful tie between the girl and her favorite babysitter; she quieted faster when B rocked her or changed her, she had fewer tantrums under his care, and was content to sit and color in B's room while he did his homework. This proved fortuitous; the first time B had zoned out the three-year-old girl playing in a corner of the room had walked over and hit him in the back of the head with one of her Barbies, freeing him from his daze. "Bee was sleeping," Hope had explained to Pop-pop, meticulously dressing the doll. "I waked him up."

It had been a long, uphill battle for these two when Hope reached adolescence. It was then that B's love for his virtual sister changed. He had fallen in love with Hope early on, and as he grew older that love had become too strong to deny. But the ten-year age difference and their childhood spent as brother-and-sister had worked against them. Even Becca had objected in the beginning, insisting that they wait until Hope finished college and spent some time away from B, dated other people.

But they had always come back together, as Jim had known they would. He had tried to explain it to Becca...it was why Blair had stayed beside him for all those years, why Jessie refused to seek another Guide, though Blair had left her relatively early. Once that bond was forged, it couldn't be broken.

Hope was following in her father's footsteps, studying for her master's now, and had already
written several insightful papers concerning that relationship. Thanks to Blair's groundbreaking work, Sentinels were no longer an obscure, ridiculed branch of research. Her first published paper had explored the ramifications of a Sentinel/Guide team who did not mate, and how that could leave a Guide free to bond with more than one Sentinel; it was all based on the triangle between Jim and Blair and Jessi.

Hope and B belonged together, the way Jim still sometimes wished he had been able to be with Blair.

***

"Do you, Blair Simon Ellison, take this woman, Hope Rebecca Sandburg, to be your partner for life..."

Hope looked radiant; her glossy dark hair had been meticulously brushed and braided by Tara, and in her ears glinted her father's gold hoops, carefully saved all these years by Pop for just such a time. B, splendid in his tux, dwarfed her; the last of the Ellison children had managed to top their father's height, and he had the basketball trophies to prove it.

They were so young, so beautiful, so happy. Sentinel and Guide, bound together for life. As it should be.

Jim worried sometimes about Jessi, but she continued to insist that Blair had played that role in her life and she didn't need another. She had flown in from Africa, where she and her husband Ron were part of a traveling team that took modern medicine into third-world countries, specializing in those ravaged by the virus that had killed Blair. In places where medical tools and supplies were scarce or non-existent, Jessi's ability to diagnose with her senses was a priceless resource. She laughed when she told them that the locals called the tall white red-haired woman who cured their children with a touch "the good witch" -- and she'd had to explain to the half-frightened kids that of course she didn't ride a hyena because only bad witches rode hyenas!

It was a good legacy every one of them was leaving.

When B and Hope kissed, Jim looked out an open window into the sun.

He saw Blair lit there.

He looked as he had when Jim had first met him -- young, enthusiastic, full of energy, healthy, glowing with the inner light he had always possessed. Love shone from his eyes. He mouthed something and Jim heard the words in his heart.

*In the next life, Jim. I'll be waiting for you, in a life where we can truly be together. In all ways, for all time.*

Jim sighed, and Rebecca squeezed his hand as Hope and Little B turned to smile at them all.

*****

(2043)

17 NOVEMBER 2043 16:05:23

From: The Bomb Squad

To: James & Rebecca Ellison
Greetings from blistering Sri Lanka!

This past month B-man and I have been combing minefields around old poppy farms. This one's a civilian job, easier for B to find everything, but it's more haphazard. More for me to do, yanking him out of the B-Zone. Harder work -- B's napping right now, spends most of his time here zonked when he isn't looking for mines. I'm a bit wiped myself, but at least I can send a quickie by hiptop before crashing.

Only drawback is the usual plumbing standards (Jess, thanks a *million* for the tampons and the case of Handi-Wipes -- takes a fellow-traveler to know what a woman really wants). I had a touch of malaria last week, but we only lost two days of work. Thank God that knot-headed bomb-sniffer has finally learned not to go out in the fields without his bodyguard.

The people here are wonderful to us. The women do our washing, make up our sleeping places, and do everything but kill the fatted calf for dinner every night; we're all touched. They work so hard and have so much to do already. But it's the only way they can thank us for keeping their children safe from the mines, and it's important for them to be able to pay us back. The kids sit and watch us work for hours, in fields where so many of them have lost arms or legs; they treat us like Superman and His Old Lady. We talk to each other and trade stories; I'm collecting them to add to the book I'm writing about our work. In the evenings I read aloud in our tent, and it's standing room only, parents and kids.

The only danger we face these days is the mines, and between the two of us we've got that one licked. We're nowhere near the fighting going on in Colombo, Pop, so you can stop clucking. Not like you have any hair to lose worrying about us...

Gram, the brownies arrived safe and they're wonderful. They also make very effective rewards for the kids to finish their reading lessons -- chocolate is a rare treat for them.

We're both looking forward to Cascade for Christmas.

All our love,

Hope

-- THE END --

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