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## 'To Be or Not to Be' - A Guide's Dilemma

by **Katef**

**Summary**

In a world where sentinels and guides are known and revered, some individuals still reject their so-called 'genetic advantages'. Can two such otherwise physically compatible individuals learn to overcome their distrust and resentment to form a true bond?

**Notes**

This AU is set some years on from canon, and Jim and Blair are somewhat younger. There is a reference to the BAU of 'Criminal Minds' fame, but blink and you'll miss it, so not actually a crossover.

**Introduction:**

**Institute of Sentinel and Guide Studies, Rainier University Campus, Cascade, WA:**

“No! No way! You can’t be serious! My karma just can’t be that bad!” The young man paced frantically around the small outer office, running his hands through his long locks in overt frustration, his profound distress evident in tone and demeanour.

The only other occupant in the room, a lab-coated senior technician, looked on in long-suffering resignation, his arms folded across his chest as he waited more or less patiently to get a word in
edgeways. How many times had he witnessed this very same reaction? When he bothered to analyse it, it happened 95% of the time the test results were revealed to the reluctant ‘testees’, but for the life of him, he couldn’t understand why so many young people were so vehemently opposed to finding out that they had the ‘guide gene’. In his humble opinion, he believed that it should be an honour to learn that they had the potential to be the companion to a watchman, or ‘Sentinel’, as they were more commonly called. But apparently he, like so many other mundane, had no concept of the impact such revelations could have on an individual’s life. After all, if Sandburg had tested positively as a child, he would be reconciled to his fate; brought up to live up to society’s expectations. How he, like so many others who ended up at this facility, had managed to avoid such early routine testing the technician neither knew nor cared, but better late than never as far as he was concerned. The fact remained that the results were in, and were undeniable proof that this young man possessed a much sought-after gift, and would henceforward be considered a valuable commodity in a society which revered its sentinel and guide partnerships.

“Now, now, Mr Sandburg – Blair,” the technician said firmly, needing to break into the young man’s aggrieved monologue. “There’s no need to take on so, son. Look, you need to see Dr Clemence to discuss your results, so if you’ll come with me?” and he threw an arm out to indicate the connecting door, his patience at an end.

Stopping abruptly and in mid-rant, the young man swung around to face the technician, who, despite his years in the lab, found that he wasn’t quite as inured to the depths of pain in the large blue eyes that met his that he thought he was. But be that as it may, there was no help for it, so he hardened his heart and indicated the door again, relieved when the young man seemed to deflate like a burst balloon, turning to do as requested with hanging head and a deep sigh of resignation.

In the adjoining office, Dr Samuel Clemence looked up from his paperwork at the knock on his door, knowing already who was requesting entrance to his inner sanctum. At his invitation, the door opened to admit a pale-faced young man accompanied by his senior technician. Leaning his elbows on his desk, Clemence rested his chin on his linked fingers as he studied his visitors, his sharp-eyed gaze shrewd and intelligent.

“Thank you, David,” he murmured, with a quick glance at his subordinate. “That will be all for now,” and with a nod and a smile of relief, the technician quietly left the room, glad to be able to get back to his lab and away from the unsettling presence of the unhappy, newly-identified guide.

“Please take a seat, Mr Sandburg,” Clemence offered, not unkindly. “We have quite a lot to discuss, so we might as well be comfortable, son.”

Blair shuffled slowly towards the seat indicated, his slumped shoulders and slow gait in vivid contrast to his usual bounce, while his face was a mask of despondency. As he approached, Clemence couldn’t help but feel a pang of pity – even a touch of remorse – for his part in bringing about this dramatic change, so he concentrated instead on studying the boy objectively, appreciating the view despite his current gloomy demeanour.

Having seen Sandburg in a hospital gown while he awaited testing, Clemence knew that beneath the shabby, thrift-shop chic clothing there was a trim, compact body. Not particularly tall, at around 5’6” – 5’7”, yet the young man was in perfect proportion, slender and fit without being overly muscled. However, it was his face and hair which really drew the attention, and Clemence knew that some sentinel somewhere was going to fully appreciate this guide’s attractiveness, even beauty. Blair’s hair was worn long, his dark auburn curls hanging down to his shoulders in a shining mass, which was
presently partially hiding the young man’s troubled countenance. However, when he looked up to meet Clemence’s steady gaze, his sad blue eyes reflected a glint of obstinacy as well as hurt. The strong jaw and full-lipped mouth were tight with unaccustomed anger, while the wide forehead was marred by a deep frown line between his brows; the overall picture accentuated by his well-defined, high cheekbones. However, much as he admired the character displayed in the attractive features before him, Clemence knew that this was no time to be side-tracked, and without further ado, he got down to business.

Pulling a slim file towards him, he offered his visitor a small smile as he said, “Well now, Mr Sandburg, it would seem that your results indicate a particularly high rating on the current Guide Ability Scale. Judging by your reactions, I’m guessing that that fact won’t mollify you all that much, but I have to say that for us here at the Institute, it represents quite a find. Having said that, I am not so insensitive as to consider your feelings to be unimportant; it’s simply that guides of your quality haven’t been discovered before now. Can you explain to me how you managed it?”

Blair’s frown darkened at the Doctor’s words, and for a moment he looked almost mulish, but moments later his stubborn anger seemed to dissipate, and he sighed deeply in resignation again. There was no denying that he’d been well and truly caught this time, so there was little point in further obfuscation, and he might as well come clean. And then try and do something about extricating himself from this mess.

“Yeah, well, you see, as a kid I travelled around a lot with my mom Naomi. She’s something of a free spirit; never stays in one place for long; so we were always moving on. And she doesn’t believe in any sort of restrictions, either physical or bureaucratic; particularly ones involving tying oneself to another for life; so every time the testers came to whatever school I happened to be attending at the time, she would make sure we’d be on our way before they could get to me. And to be honest, I never thought about it one way or the other. It was just something I accepted as our chosen lifestyle, man.

“However, when I decided at around age fifteen that I wanted to settle in Cascade so I could study at Rainier, she wasn’t happy at first, because she was afraid I might get found out. Apparently she was pretty sure I had the gene because it runs in her family, which is why she was so fixated on avoiding the mandated school tests. But then she found a sympathetic doctor friend who could – ah – get me through the requisite physical safely,” and here he had the grace to blush at the admission.

Frowning in indignation, Clemence queried angrily, “Do you mean to tell me that a licensed physician lied about your results, Blair? That’s completely unethical!”

“Er, no. Not exactly,” Blair replied quickly. “He simply omitted that particular test, is all. So what we didn’t know, we couldn’t lie about, see? Nobody ever picked up on it, so it would have been fine if I hadn’t’ve been stupid enough to volunteer for that student blood drive, man!” he continued, his anger and disgust self-directed now. “It never occurred to me that the routine blood samples would be automatically screened for the guide gene tests also. I can’t believe I was so dumb!” He looked away then, unable to meet Clemence’s speculative gaze for a moment while he got himself back under control, but after a while he scrubbed his face with his hands and locked eyes with the doctor again, running his fingers through his long hair in unconscious agitation.

“So, what now?” he said, psyching himself up for the difficult discussion he knew was to come. “After all, there’s no law that can force me to tie myself to a sentinel, is there? What’s to stop me just walking out of here and getting on with my life as before? You can’t keep me here at the Institute indefinitely against my will.”
Clemence sat back, a steely glint in his eyes as he marshalled his arguments. He had gone through this many times before with older, newly-recognised guides, but usually they caved in fairly easily once he had fully explained the situation to them. But this time he knew he had a fight on his hands; one which he was determined to win, because there was no way he wanted to lose a guide of Sandburg’s calibre to a mundane life. It might be true that Sandburg couldn’t legally be forced into a partnership with a sentinel against his express wishes, but if he persisted in refusing to submit to reasonable persuasion, there were ways and means to make any other decision untenable, even if it amounted to moral blackmail.

And if that didn’t work, then pressure could be applied in other, more questionable respects too, even though Clemence hoped it wouldn’t come to that.

“You’re right, my boy, insofar as we can’t legally bind you to a sentinel, but why do you find the concept so hard to accept? Children who test out at an early age are quite content to embrace their destiny. Are usually extremely proud to do so, in fact. I simply can’t understand why you, and others like you who attempt to remain under the radar for years, should view their gift as a kind of punishment or burden. I know you are well aware of the fact that society welcomes the great advantages and contributions an established sentinel and guide pair can provide, so I should have thought that such appreciation would be a source of personal pride and accomplishment! After all, I believe I am correct in saying that your recently completed Master’s thesis was on the subject of tribal sentinels, was it not? So you must hold them in some sort of esteem, surely?”

Blair stared at him for a long moment, his myriad thoughts and emotions chasing one another across his mobile features. Finally he answered, determined to do his best to convince the man of the strength of his beliefs.

“Look, Dr Clemence, I admit that I’m fascinated by the subject of sentinels, and have been for many years, hence my Master’s thesis. I even have plans to do a follow-up for my doctorate if my dissertation committee is agreeable. But that’s as far as it goes. My interest is purely academic, and I believe my contribution to society lies in continuing to study and in teaching students about the whole sentinel phenomenon. I think I’m a good teacher, and that’s what I was meant to do. To share my knowledge and my enthusiasm for the subject, and the subject of anthropology as a whole with others so that they can appreciate it also. As a bonded guide, I would be tied to one person for life, and that would be anathema to me. By their very nature, sentinels are high maintenance, and I don’t want that commitment – that level of restriction - and I don’t think it’s fair to try and guilt me into accepting it.”

Clemence regarded him appraisingly for long enough to make him squirm uncomfortably, and when the other man finally spoke, it wasn’t what he wanted to hear.

“I’m sorry, Blair. I’m certain that you truly believe that your chosen path is the right one for you, but you’re forgetting that there is undoubtedly a sentinel out there who needs you and your particular talents in order to function to his or her best capacity. Guides of your strength are precious, Blair, and cannot be wasted. We at the Institute would be falling down on our duty if we were to simply let you go without trying to persuade you otherwise.”

“What about your duty to me?” Blair snapped. “Don’t you have a duty to safeguard my welfare also? Or do the needs of a sentinel override my needs? I’m sorry, man, but it appears to me that a guide’s wishes are still considered secondary to those of a sentinel, and I thought that such out-dated beliefs had been outlawed years ago. And if that’s the case, then I’m out of here, and you can’t stop me!”

With a final glare at Clemence, Blair pushed himself to his feet, and stalked out of the door, fully
intending to get out of the building and back to his life despite what he had been told. His worst fears might have been realised at last, but he didn’t need that sort of guilt trip, and he sure as hell wasn’t going to back down.

However, had he but known it, Dr Clemence was of the same opinion. There was too much at stake for him to back down either, and he had no intention of doing so. Picking up the phone on his desk, he quickly dialled the Institute Director’s number, speaking urgently when the man’s super-efficient PA answered.

“Stella, this is Sam Clemence. Blair Sandburg has just left the building. He’s not going to cooperate, sad to say, so I need you to circulate his details to any compatible sentinels immediately. They need to be told that he’s definitely a flight risk….”

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Part 1: A-hunting we will go:

Jim: MCU bullpen, Cascade PD:

“Well, shit, fuck and what the HELL was all that about?!” Sentinel Detective Jim Ellison was not having a good day, something which was becoming more and more frequent recently. Storming across the bullpen towards his desk, he was trailed by his current partner, Captain Joel Taggart, whose broad, genial features were uncharacteristically set and disapproving. Not that he blamed Jim in particular. He was more than sympathetic when it came to distressed sentinels, having a cousin who suffered in the same way, but this couldn’t go on. Jim was getting more and more unstable, and it was impacting both on the detective himself and the department as a whole. Shaking his head in dismay, the big man noted the way the other occupants of the bullpen either ducked down over their work, trying to keep out of the firing line, or watched covertly in spiteful glee as the tall, buff cop fumed and ranted, his ice blue eyes flashing fire and his handsome, patrician features twisted in fury and indignation. And pain also, it had to be said. Because yet again Jim was suffering the headache from hell, and his wayward senses adamantly refused to level out at his command.

No, it couldn’t go on, but Joel knew, as did their Captain, Simon Banks, that the only true ‘cure’ was for Jim to find a compatible guide. The trouble was that, not only were such guides thin on the ground, but the irascible sentinel still maintained that he didn’t want one. But the day of reckoning was surely approaching, and Jim was either going to have to accept the inevitable, or check himself in to a Sentinel Hospice, because the situation was reaching a critical level.

Bracing himself for a possibly aggressive response, Joel reached out and wrapped a strong hand around Jim’s bicep.

“Calm down, Jim. Come on, man,” he murmured soothingly. “Try to dial it down, Detective. I know I’m a poor substitute for the real thing, but hear my voice, and make an effort before you hurt someone!”

As expected, the other man’s initial reaction was to growl deep in his chest, swinging around with the lithe, predatory grace of the black jaguar, his animal spirit. However, after a fraught moment, he took a deep breath and a step back, the light of battle slowly dying from his eyes and the primal sentinel within retreating reluctantly as he sighed deeply.

“OK, Joel. Sorry, my friend. I’m back, OK? Just need to settle myself for a moment.”

Smiling in sympathy, Joel nodded approvingly. “That’s OK, Jim. I understand. Do you want to go to the break room for a few? Take a little time out alone to work on your dials?”
Before Jim could respond one way or the other, however, Simon’s angry face appeared around the
doors to his office, and the customary command barked out. “Ellison, my office, now! You too, Joel,
if you please,” this last in a decidedly more congenial tone.

Exchanging a rueful grimace, the pair changed direction and headed over to the office as they were
bid, Jim wondering just how much trouble he was in this time. Judging by Banks’ expression, he
was most likely in the proverbial up to his neck.

As the pair entered Simon’s office, Jim stiffened in barely-concealed irritation, as he spotted Megan
Connor already seated within. He silently cursed the fact that he had his senses dialled down as far as
he dared, otherwise he would have registered her presence already. And would have had a few extra
seconds to prepare himself for what the outspoken Aussie exchange officer would undoubtedly have
to say.

Joel had no such problem with her, however, and nodded amicably at the attractive brunette. “You
OK, Megan? I trust you didn’t have any more trouble with Fisher after we left the scene?”

“They had no bother. He was way too rattled by Jim’s tantrum to try anything else. Good job too, for
his sake, mate. My word, I was ready to kick his arse myself, no worries!”

As Jim tried unsuccessfully to look nonchalant, Simon regarded his people with a scowl of
displeasure. It was all very well Joel and Megan exchanging determinedly cheerful comments
intended to disguise a very real undertone of mutual relief, but things could have turned out very
differently this morning, and it was time he took stronger measures with his recalcitrant Sentinel.

“Sit down, Jim. You too Joel, if you please. This debrief isn’t going to be much fun for any of us, but
it needs to be done! Now, who’s going to begin explaining just why the Fisher bust nearly went
belly-up? The plan was straightforward enough – a simple, interdepartmental sting set-up - so what
happened to almost cause Megan to catch a bullet and Fisher to escape? Care to start, Jim?” and he
glowered censoriously at the big detective, almost as if daring him to fly off the handle again and
give him the excuse he needed to come down on the man like a ton of bricks. Ellison was that close
to being relegated to desk duty or maybe even put on medical leave, but he was still a friend as well
as a good cop when the senses were cooperating, and Simon genuinely didn’t want to have to resort
to such extreme measures.

For his part, Jim would have loved to tell his captain just what he thought of the situation and his
thinly-veiled threats, but the honourable man within wouldn’t allow it. Simon was just doing his job,
looking out for his people. All of them. Jim knew he was in the wrong, and it wasn’t in him to try
duck responsibility. Time to ‘fess up.

Slumping in his seat, he rubbed his face with both hands for a moment, fighting to subdue the
persistent throbbing behind his eyes, then looked up, meeting Simon’s questioning glare with a
somewhat sheepish grimace.

“I’m sorry, Simon. And Megan too. Yes, you’re right. It was my fault that Fisher almost got away
again. Everything was going down as planned. Collins and Webster from Vice had already sprung
the trap when we went in as agreed to back them up, but Fisher panicked when he knew he’d been
made, and his little weasel of a chemist threw the suitcase full of product at us. It burst open against
the wall. There wasn’t much of a spill, but it was enough for me to get a noseful, and everything
got haywire. I couldn’t breathe, and my senses spiked out of control. I must have zoned for a
moment too, and because of that, Fisher almost got the drop on Megan. If it hadn’t been for Joel and
Collins knocking him down and pretty much sitting on him, he might well have been able to shoot
his way out. I’m sorry.” And everyone present had no doubt that his shame was genuine, as was his
apology.
However, the good-hearted Megan couldn’t help but try and lighten the atmosphere a little as she reached over and punched his arm gently. “Yeah, but Jimbo, once you came out of your little trip to la-la land, you looked like you were ready to pull the bugger’s head from his shoulders! Daft drongo nearly wet his drawers in panic! I think he was only too bloody glad to let me take him into custody after that. The chemist too. And the blokes from Vice were happy enough with the outcome.”

Jim sent her a grateful, if wry half-grin, but before he could respond, Simon spoke up again.

“That’s as may be, Connor, but the fact remains that Jim’s senses almost cost you all the bust, and maybe even endangered your life, so don’t try to make light of it. Something has to be done, and that’s what I want to discuss with Jim now in private, so if you two will excuse us?” and he jerked his chin towards the door, indicating that they should leave immediately.

Exchanging a speaking look, the two rose to their feet and made for the door, but not without sending sympathetic glances to their morose and sulking colleague. They guessed that Jim was about to get his arse kicked big-time, as Megan might say, and even though it might be past due, they couldn’t help but feel sorry for him.

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As the door closed behind the pair, Simon turned his full attention back to Jim. He wasn’t looking forward to this, but it had to be done, for everyone’s sake. Sitting forward in his chair, he met and held Jim’s gaze, taking a moment to really study the handsome face before him. Lines of stress and pain were much more noticeable today, and Simon winced inwardly in sympathy at the distress barely concealed in Jim’s cool blue eyes. No doubt about it, the sentinel’s control was slipping more every day, and the strain was leaving its mark both physically and mentally.

“Look, Jim, I’m sure you think you know where we’re going with this talk, but I want to assure you that I honestly don’t want to see you out of a job if I can possibly avoid it. You’re a great cop, with or without the senses, and a good friend also, and it’ll be the department’s loss if you’re forced to leave. But it’s obvious to all of us that you’re having an increasingly hard time trying to control your senses, and it can’t go on, for all our sakes.

“Now, as a mere mundane, I know there’s a lot I don’t understand about the nature of sentinels, and I freely admit that I never particularly wanted to know about all that voodoo shit in detail. After all, up until recently you’ve been able to manage your senses more than adequately, so there’s never been much of a problem. I realise that as an unbonded sentinel you couldn’t use your gift to its maximum potential, but it was good enough to earn you that ‘Cop of the Year’ award anyway, so I wasn’t complaining.

“But now everything seems to be going pear-shaped, and I want to know what you intend to do about it in the short term. And to find out what we can all do to help you in the future!”

Jim easily read the genuine concern in Simon’s expression and tone, and was grateful for it, but that didn’t mean to say that he was in any way comfortable with discussing his problem. He was an intensely private person, who had never deliberately sought confidences; and in fact, had never been encouraged to confide in others in case they let him down or betrayed him somehow. He knew that the habit stemmed from his childhood, but knowing it and discussing it even with his friend and captain was something he really didn’t want to do. It smacked too much of the therapist’s couch, and he had never had much time for shrinks. But then again, he loved being a cop, and unless he found a remedy – and soon – he was going to be out of a job whatever Simon said.

There wasn’t anything for it, but to bite the bullet, and bare his soul as much as he could stand it, trusting in his friend’s integrity. But gods, he really didn’t want this. And where should he start? No
way would Simon want to hear about his early years, any more than Jim wanted to talk about them, even though they undoubtedly influenced the man – and the sentinel – he was now. But while Simon waited patiently for him to decide where to begin, he couldn’t help but flash back for a moment to memories of his dysfunctional family and loveless upbringing.

22 years previously:

10 year old Jimmy Ellison stood at attention in front of the huge, antique desk in his father’s den, his expression as impassive as he could make it, and refusing to let fall the tears of frustration he would have liked to shed. He knew that he had disappointed his father yet again, and expected to be punished for his failure. It simply remained to be seen just what form this latest punishment would take. If he was lucky, it would simply be a cold command to go to his room and stay there until his father deigned to forgive him. He’d probably miss dinner, which would be a pain, because not only would he lose out on Sally’s great cooking, but on her genial company too. Ever since his Mom had left them without warning some years ago, the devoted housekeeper was the nearest thing to a loving parent-figure he and his little brother Stevie had.

Then again, it could take the form of one of his father’s lessons in favouritism. Left alone to bring up two young sons virtually single-handed, his hard-working – and hard-headed – businessman of a father had taken it upon himself to toughen up his sons in order to prepare them for an unforgiving world where the only thing that mattered was business acumen and financial success without the burden of finer feelings. To that end, he had begun to pit the boys against each other, rewarding whichever one came out on top.

The trouble was that Jimmy already knew who the real favourite son was, and it wasn’t him. Sure, if his school report was better, or his sporting prowess outdid Stevie’s, his father would grant him some sort of reward, but the boy knew that it was done grudgingly. After all, William Ellison made no bones about his belief that Jimmy’s potential as a sentinel was anything but a hindrance, whatever most of modern society thought. In his mind it made Jimmy some sort of embarrassing genetic freak, and he didn’t have the time or inclination to pander to his gifted son’s needs. He therefore constantly impressed on the child the importance of repressing his ability, so much so that it had already become second nature.

The boy straightened up even more as his father’s cold gaze met his. “Right then Jimmy. What do you have to say for yourself this time…?”

Although he couldn’t foresee it then, this forced repression would remain in place for virtually the whole of Jimmy’s adolescence and young adulthood. His senses only resurfaced unexpectedly when the then Captain Ellison of the army Rangers found himself alone and abandoned in the jungles of Peru after a botched mission left him the lone survivor of the team sent to guard the Chopec Pass from drug smugglers. Found by Chopec warriors, he was taken back to their village, and nursed back to health. And with the help and guidance of their wise and gentle shaman, Incacha, for the first time in his life Jim learned to accept his gift and use his senses as they were meant to be used, for the good of his adopted tribe.

However, when he was eventually traced and repatriated to the US, he managed to suppress them again; so disillusioned by his treatment by the military that he resigned his commission and joined Cascade PD instead. He might well be a potential alpha sentinel – that was, one of the rare and highly valued individuals with all five senses enhanced – but he still couldn’t bring himself to think of it as anything less than a burden, to be used only when necessary.
Yep, William Ellison had a whole lot to answer for….

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Coming back to himself, he offered Simon a wry grin.

“Sorry, sir. Just getting my thoughts in order. You know words aren’t my thing, so this isn’t going to be easy for me. But anyway, in answer to your first question, right now I honestly can’t say that I have a real working plan for dealing with these crazy senses. All my previous tried and tested methods just don’t cut it anymore. Having said that, just what do you want to know about my so-called ‘gift’? It would be nice to think that bringing everything out into the open would help me come up with a new and effective means of controlling them.

“Or better still, a way of turning them off for good, although that’s highly unlikely,” he added gloomily, lips twisting in a sour grimace.

“Well, for a start, Jim, what do you think triggered this sudden lack of control? Can you pinpoint a particular incident?” Simon’s question was delivered in a non-confrontational tone, designed to soothe rather than provoke.

Jim looked thoughtful for a moment, then slowly offered, “You know, Simon, it could have been after I did that solo stakeout during the ‘Switchman’ case. I didn’t think about it at the time, but Incacha told me once that would-be tribal sentinels spend time alone in the jungle, hoping to bring their senses on-line so to speak. Maybe that’s what happened to me. But whereas before when they’ve tried to come to the fore, I’ve always managed to push them back down again to manageable levels, this time it’s no good. Whatever I try doesn’t work for more than a few minutes at a time. It can’t go on, sir. I know that.”

“There is one thing you’ve failed to mention, Jim, whether intentionally or not,” Simon responded quietly, already knowing that his subordinate was going to hate his suggestion.

“I think we both know that you could get instant relief if you were to find yourself a proper guide.

“Now, don’t go off at half-cock at the thought, Jim. You can deny it all you want, but even I know it’s the only real ‘cure’, especially if you want to continue to use your gift to the full. What I don’t understand is why you’re so dead set against even considering it. I mean, how bad can it be? Most of the bonded sentinels I’ve ever come across say that it’s the best thing that ever happened to them. The guides too, for that matter. The improvement in their individual performances is undeniable, and as a team the best ones can be phenomenal.”

Rather than the furious eruption and vehement denial Simon had half expected in response to his honest query, this time Jim simply looked away and stared unseeingly out of the window for long moments. He remained that way long enough for Simon to fear that he had zoned for some reason, but just before he attempted to do something to bring his detective out of it, Jim shook himself slightly and turned back to face his boss, the weariness and anguish on his face terrible to see.

“Because I’m such a fucking loser when it comes to relationships, Simon, that’s why. You know very well that I prefer to work alone when I can get away with it, and just how long did my pathetic effort at marriage last? Barely a year, Simon, but it started breaking down almost immediately. I wasn’t what Carolyn wanted or expected, and she couldn’t wait to get away. We get on better now as work colleagues than we ever did as man and wife. I just don’t have what it takes to share my space with anyone, let alone someone who will be dependent on me for their sanity for life. As I would be dependent on them for control. A certain level of intimacy between a sentinel and guide is inevitable if the partnership’s to function properly, and I just don’t want it. End of story.”
Simon regarded him sympathetically for a moment, then said, “I get that, Jim. I really do. But there comes a time when you have to either reconsider or go slowly mad. Surely any relationship with a compatible guide would be better than a future of being medicated to the gills or confined to a hospice?”

“You’re forgetting one very important thing, Simon. The quality of guide I would need to help me control my senses only occurs rarely, and pretty much all of them get snatched up as soon as they test out. Even as small kids, they’re encouraged to seek out and mix with potential sentinel partners of their own age so it’s a million-to-one chance that there’s one still unbonded out there who would be compatible. Sure, if I’m forced to, I can just about get by with the backing of a lower grade temporary guide at the moment, but not for much longer. The zones are getting more frequent, and lasting longer too. And judging by today’s fiasco, it won’t be long until I get one of my colleagues killed – or an innocent bystander – and I could never live with that.”

Simon sat back in his seat, his face a mask of frowning concern and sympathy. He realised that he had actually known and understood even less about Jim’s ‘condition’ than he thought, and couldn’t help but feel a pang of guilt on his friend’s behalf. If he had made more of an effort to read up on the sentinel phenomenon rather than just take Jim’s gifts for granted, perhaps he could have used his powers of persuasion to convince Jim to seek out a guide long before he got to this stage.

But it was what it was, and there was no point in beating himself up about it now. What he needed to do was to support his friend as best he could from now on, hoping that the situation wasn’t yet beyond redemption.

Just then, his desk phone rang, and with an apologetic glance at Jim, he picked up the handset. His cool, blonde and very efficient secretary, Rhonda was on the line, informing him that there was a call for him from the Sentinel and Guide Institute, and did he want her to put it through?

Perking up, he responded in the affirmative, and then listened in growing amazement to the information divulged by the Director’s Personal Assistant. By the time the call terminated, Simon was ready to believe in miracles.

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Blair:

Blair stormed out of the Institute with a face like thunder, his normally cheerful expression replaced by one of anger, confusion and no little trepidation. He needed to get back to his tiny office space in Hargrove Hall’s Anthropology Department to try and get his head around what had just happened, but decided abruptly that he needed good caffeine first, so he changed direction slightly to head for the nearest student coffee bar. As he walked, his thoughts tumbled around in his head, his conflicting emotions fighting for predominance. A part of him acknowledged that at least he knew now for sure what he had suspected for many years; that he was, in fact a bone fide potential guide. Thing was, he had had no inkling about just how strong of a guide he could be once bonded. And that was the other really terrifying thought. He didn’t want to find out for sure, because he didn’t want to be bonded. Ever. And it was both worrying and annoying how much he already felt pressured into doing what society expected rather than what he wanted to do, thanks to Clemence’s uncompromising attitude.

It really wasn’t fair. He had achieved so much already, and had so much more he wanted to do. As a too young, too smart teen he had had to struggle to be accepted on campus, despite his ability to delight his teachers with his precocious talent and output. Nevertheless, he had persisted doggedly, such that he had already received his Master’s even though he was not yet 21 years of age. He had also fought for and won a coveted Teaching Fellowship which enabled him to sign up for the
doctoral programme, and he fully intended to get those three much-desired letters after his name in as short a time as possible.

And after that, he had thought that his future looked bright. OK, there were a few individuals amongst Rainier U’s Powers That Be who didn’t care for him for one reason or another, like Chancellor Edwards for instance, but generally speaking he got on with most people, such that he hoped that perhaps once he had achieved his PhD he might get offered a professorship with the possibility of tenure down the line.

But now his plans and his dreams might well have been thrown into disarray, and all because of what he considered to be a genetic defect. No, it really wasn’t fair at all.

Arriving at the coffee lounge, Blair treated himself to a Grande mocha latte and settled himself down in a comfy old armchair in one corner. Sipping appreciatively at the nectar of the gods, his stress levels eased a little as the warmth hit his stomach, and he sighed in contentment. Not that he was any less concerned about his future, but for a few minutes he was happy to put his worries on hold.

However, his fragile peace was interrupted again as two of his fellow TAs approached his quiet refuge, and sat down opposite him, worried expressions on both their faces.

“Hey, Blair, man, you OK?” Tim Matheson blurted out the second he sat down. “Me and Beth just heard the news, man. So, you’re a guide after all, huh? What’re you going to do about it, man? Is there anything we can do to help?”

His companion nodded determinedly in agreement, adding her concerns. “Oh, Blair! I’m so sorry, hon. I know you never wanted this – never wanted to find out for sure. I feel so guilty now for asking you to donate at the blood drive. This is all my fault!”

Although the last thing Blair wanted at the moment was to engage in conversation, sympathetic or not, his kind nature wouldn’t allow him to either snub their well-meaning concern, or assign any blame to his friend. Beth was a caring soul who was constantly on the lookout for good causes to get involved in – rather like Blair himself – so he could hardly berate her for her latest campaign.

Smiling somewhat ruefully, he set down his coffee and regarded them both fondly.

“Hey, guys, it’s OK. I mean, I’m surprised you’ve heard about me already, but then again, the campus grapevine is probably one of the fastest on the planet! And really this just confirms what I suspected anyway when I got the summons to attend the Institute. Not that I expected to get the results I did, though. And don’t take on, Beth,” he continued, grinning at the pretty redhead. “They would have got me some way or another eventually. I was naïve to think that I could stay under the radar forever. But now it’s out in the open, I have to decide how to deal with it.

“I mean, there’s no way I want to rush off and bond with some sentinel. I’ve worked too hard for that.”

Tim regarded him thoughtfully for a moment before responding, then he said, “You know, babe, you were always a ‘people person’, so I guess I’m not really surprised at the result either. Strong guides are supposed to be empathic, after all. But how do you intend to avoid the bonding issue? I mean, I’m totally in support of you not wanting to bond, man. From what I’ve always understood, guides are supposed to pretty much give up their own lives to support their sentinel. It would be the Anthro Department’s loss if you were to leave.”

Smiling gratefully, Blair’s reply was heart-felt. “Thanks, Tim. That’s good of you to say. It’s nice to know that not everyone I know’s going to try and guilt me into giving up my freedom. And in
answer to your question, for the moment I’m just going to play it by ear. I refuse to be pushed around, and talking to you two has given me the boost I needed to try and put this behind me. Thanks, guys.”

Smiling more happily now, Beth leaned over and patted his knee. “You’re welcome, Blair, and thank you for not blaming me even if I still blame myself. You’ve got friends on campus, hon, and if we can help you, we will.”

“Then I’ll be fine,” Blair assured her with a grin. “I feel ready to get back to work now, so see you around, guys!” and he stood up, picking up his half-finished coffee as he prepared to leave. Good coffee and good friends had restored much of his peace of mind and his determination to carry on as before, and damn the consequences.

It was a shame that his bubble was about to be burst again, and this time much more comprehensively.

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Reaching Hargrove Hall, Blair waved cheerfully in the general direction of the Anthropology Department’s suite of administrative offices and the secretaries within, and made his way down to the basement and what he fondly identified as his ‘Office’. Genuine office space in the building was at a premium, and didn’t allow for lowly teaching assistants to enjoy their own space, so that, rather than share some cramped closet, ‘hot-desking’ with another TA, Blair had searched for somewhere he could call his own. And had come up with a solution in the form of one of the basement storerooms. Artefact Storage Room 3 was the least crowded of the rooms designated for that purpose, so he had gradually moved himself and his books and belongings in. When no one complained, he made himself at home, furnishing it with cast-off equipment, fixtures and fittings, and had been there ever since, his presence proclaimed by a hand-written notice on the door. Thanks to a good friend in the IT department, he even had a phone and internet connection, so he was more than satisfied with his adopted, if unofficial home-from-home.

However, Blair’s outgoing personality, academic reputation and sheer energy ensured that he was no shrinking violet to be conveniently overlooked when it might be more expedient, so he shouldn’t have been surprised when the phone rang within minutes of his arrival. Recognising that it was an internal call by the single ring tone, Blair was suddenly struck by a shiver of trepidation. He instinctively knew that it wasn’t a call he wanted to take, and he frowned as he reached for the handset with a reluctant and slightly shaking hand.

He wasn’t wrong. The caller was none other than Chancellor Edwards’ secretary, delivering a summons for Blair to attend her boss’s office at his earliest convenience, meaning, of course, right away.

Shit! I’m screwed! I just knew it, he thought as soon as he put the phone down. There’s no way Edwards would want to see me unless it was for something bad. She hates me that much.

Running his hands through his hair in agitation, he looked around him, automatically taking in the details of his tiny kingdom. If the outcome of the meeting turned out as he feared, he might be about to lose his precious space along with his job. But there was nothing else to do but to find out for sure, so with a deep sigh, he tucked his backpack out of sight under his desk and exited the room again, locking it carefully behind him.

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Shortly afterwards, in Chancellor Edwards’ office:
Seated in the Chancellor’s impressive office, Blair gazed across the wide, highly-polished antique desk at the immaculately dressed, sharp-featured figure of his nemesis. Marie Edwards was attempting to smile benignly, but it didn’t reach her eyes, which were hard and gloating as she delivered her ultimatum. Blair was well aware that her decision was final, and couldn’t disguise the expression of wounded, wide-eyed shock that he knew had to be plastered all over his face even though inside he was ranting and railing against the unfairness of it all.

As soon as he had entered Edwards’ territory, it was obvious that he was about to hear some very bad news, and he wasn’t wrong. He knew that Edwards had always considered Blair to be a thorn in her side, even though the young man had never set out to deliberately annoy her. It was just that he was a chip off the old block when it came to anything he perceived was wrong or unfair, and eagerly embraced the enthusiasm and dedication of his activist mom Naomi whenever he deemed it appropriate. Apparently his excellent academic record and popularity with the students he taught meant little or nothing to the Chancellor, who was plainly only too glad of the opportunity to rid herself of the irritating grad student once and for all.

Barely waiting until Blair was seated; Edwards had leant forward and addressed him, her cool politeness completely unable to mask her inner glee as she dealt her verbal body blow.

“Well, Mr Sandburg, it would appear that congratulations are in order. I have just been informed by Director Vance at the Sentinel and Guide Institute that you have passed their tests with flying colours. You must be so proud to learn that you are one of the highest rated guides they have ever discovered. Apparently Dr Clemence is positively enthused at the results and what they portend.

“Of course we shall miss you here at Rainier. Your academic achievements have been of enormous benefit to the University’s reputation, and I’m sure your colleagues and students in the Anthropology Department will be sorry to see you go. But no one here would dream of trying to hold you back from what must surely be an even greater ambition – to partner an alpha sentinel!”

Blair finally found his voice, but to no avail. His protestations fell on deaf ears, and the implacable woman showed him the door, with a final, vicious parting shot; her toothy smile as reassuring as a shark’s.

“I shall expect your office to be cleared by Friday, Mr Sandburg. Your classes have already been covered, so you are free to leave as soon as you like. Your future sentinel is out there. Don’t keep him – or her – waiting any longer than necessary.”

And that was that – the end of his dreams, and an ungrateful and callous dismissal from the place which he had made his home, and to which he had given so much of himself for the past five or six years. He truly believed that he had never felt quite so ill-used and hurt ever before, even in such an unconventional and uncertain childhood as his, and he was hard put not to break down in tears of pain and frustration as he stumbled out of the building, intending to go straight home to lick his wounds in private.

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Jim:

To describe Jim’s emotional state as ‘conflicted’ would be an understatement, as he was ruefully aware. As he drove purposefully towards Rainier University, he couldn’t help but mull over the events of the past couple of hours, and try to come to terms with what they might mean to him.

When Simon had received that phone call from the Institute, Jim couldn’t have been more astounded than if his boss had sprouted another head in front of his eyes. To hear that there was a newly-
discovered, unbonded and highly-rated guide out there was beyond belief. Indeed, if Jim actually believed in destiny, that in itself would surely be proof that his luck was changing for the better. Yet deep down he still didn’t want a guide. Still didn’t want someone else in his space, however attractive.

Because the guide was certainly that. As he and Simon waited impatiently for further information to be faxed through from the Institute, he had tried – and failed – to offer plausible excuses to not follow up on this potential life-changing meeting. Simon was having none of it. As far as he was concerned, this was indeed a minor miracle, and no way was his subordinate and friend going to pass up on it. He made it very clear that this was Jim’s last chance to secure his future in the MCU, so he’d better do his utmost to win over this guide. And then Rhonda had arrived with the fax, and Jim was forced to reconsider. Although the guide’s head shot was a black and white copy and somewhat grainy, there was no mistaking the beautiful, expressive features. The wide smile and laughing eyes hit Jim right in the libido, and he reached out unthinkingly to pull the thin sheaf of papers towards him. He tried to imagine what colour the wide, sparkling eyes were, and decided that they were probably blue. And that hair. Long, shining curls hung to the young man’s shoulders, and Jim knew that he was going to love running his fingers through the silky locks…and then pulled himself up short. Too fast. He was getting ahead of himself. This was ridiculous! Such a primal, physical reaction at first sight of a poorly-printed photograph!

But it was what it was, and he was forced to recognise the instinctive pull he felt towards this as yet unknown person.

Well, shit! What happened to freedom of choice? Gone without trace, apparently.

So, here he was, pulling into the campus, and driving around to the parking lot nearest to Hargrove Hall, where he hoped his prey – no, guide he scolded himself sharply – awaited his arrival. And what he would do if the guide – Blair Sandburg – turned him down flat, he simply didn’t know.

As he pulled up in the first available slot, he glanced at his watch. It was just after 5.30 pm, so he supposed that the teaching assistant would still be here. Not that he knew or cared that much about academic schedules or responsibilities. If he was still officially on duty, then Sandburg must be also.

Climbing down from his beloved classic F150, he locked the vehicle and strode towards the imposing Hall, suddenly realising that his senses seemed for once to be cooperating. And they were leading him directly to someone – or some place – that called to him on a visceral level. A tantalising scent that he knew he would recognise and follow anywhere from now on. Needing no directions, he entered the Hall and crossed the lobby, going straight to the staircase that led down to the basement. Once on that level, he marched down a dimly-lit corridor until he reached a door bearing the sign ‘Artefact Storage Room 3’, and taped below, a hand-written card saying simply ‘Blair Sandburg, M.A’. Huh? This was the guy’s office? The delicious scent was strong here, but Jim already knew that it was unoccupied.

_Dammit, where the hell is he?_ Growling deep in his chest in frustration, he turned to re-trace his steps, intending to track down his elusive target. If he wasn’t teaching somewhere, he might have already gone home. Just as well then that Jim knew his home address. And didn’t approve of it at all. But that discussion could wait until he had the guide in his territory, and that couldn’t happen soon enough.

So intent was he on returning to the Anthropology Department’s administration offices to find out as much as he could about Sandburg’s likely whereabouts, he almost didn’t see the young woman in his path until she stepped aside hurriedly to avoid getting knocked over.

That refocused him immediately, and he offered a quick but genuine apology before going on his
way again. And then turned back. This young woman might have the information he sought, so he dredged up his best smile and addressed her politely, turning on the charm.

“I’m sorry to trouble you, miss, but I don’t suppose you know Blair Sandburg do you? I’m trying to find him, and he isn’t in his office? My name’s Detective Ellison, Cascade PD – but he’s not in trouble, I promise you! I just need to speak to him on a personal matter,” and he reached into his inside pocket to produce his ID.

And he was totally taken aback when the pretty redhead’s eyes teared up instantly, and her hand went to her mouth as if to contain the sob that rose in her throat.

Now feeling distinctly uncomfortable, Jim muttered insincerely, “Um, are you OK, miss? Can I help you?” And he was further discomfited at her angry response.

“Beth! My name’s Beth, and no, he’s not here! That bitch just sacked him. Just like that! Just because he’s a guide!”

Now both puzzled and irritated on his own account, Jim bit down on the furious epithet he so wanted to utter, and instead gently took her arm, controlling himself with admirable restraint.

“I’m so sorry, Beth. But I really need to speak to Mr Sandburg. It’s very important. I’d be very grateful if you could fill me in on what’s been happening. Why he’s no longer here?”

The young woman regarded him speculatively for a moment, then, plainly somewhat mollified with what she read in his expression, nodded slightly uneasily.

“OK. I think I can trust you. I hope so, anyway. Come with me and we’ll go to the students’ common room on the first floor. It’ll be quiet by now, and we can talk in private.”

Turning around, she led him without further ado up a level, striding out briskly until they reached a shabby, but homely room furnished with well-used overstuffed sofas and armchairs, and mismatched occasional tables liberally decorated with the ringed stains from innumerable coffee cups. Cork boards on all four walls advertised everything from second-hand text books to guest lectures and concerts, and an elderly but functional coffee machine graced one corner. Although the room was presently unoccupied, Beth made her way over to the corner furthest away from the door and plopped down in an armchair, unselfconsciously tucking her jean-clad legs up under her body as she shrank down against the worn cushions.

Following her lead, Jim sat down in the chair opposite, and leant forward, his expression inviting.

“So, Beth. What can you tell me about Mr Sandburg? Blair?”

Beth swallowed hard, hesitating for a moment longer, and then began. Haltingly at first, then growing more eloquent as her anger on her friend’s behalf visibly grew, she told Jim about how Blair had been discovered by way of routine blood tests taken during the blood drive she herself had organised. Frustrated tears leaking from the corners of her eyes to run unheeded down her cheeks, she explained how Blair had been summoned to attend further testing at the Institute, and his shock when he had been informed that he was a high-level guide. And worse still, she had just learned that when Blair had been called to Chancellor Edwards’ office just few short hours ago, he had been told that his services were no longer required.

“That bitch!” Beth hissed. “As far as she’s concerned, Blair’s far more valuable to Rainier’s social standing as a ‘home-produced uber-guide’ than as a brilliant academic asset! The woman’s a stupid, vindictive money-grubber! All she cares about is the U’s reputation and financial position, and
couldn’t give a damn about what the students, or her teaching staff, really want or need! Everyone loves Blair, Detective. Everyone! Except her, dammit! And now he’s been told to clear his office by Friday!

“Goddess damn the sentinel who intends to steal him from us,” she added in a tormented undertone. “He deserves so much better….” And she turned her face away, unable to meet Jim’s penetrating gaze any longer, and thus missing the pained grimace that briefly flashed across the patrician features.

Definitely disquieted now in the face of Beth’s distress, Jim decided it would be in his best interest to make himself scarce. Much as it went against his better nature, now wasn’t the time to give into the guilty feelings that fought to make themselves noticed, so he politely thanked Beth for her information, telling her that he would seek out Sandburg at home. And felt lower than pond scum when the pretty young woman offered him a tremulous smile and thanked him in return for listening so sympathetically to her rant on behalf of her friend. Jim knew she was going to hate herself once she found out what his intentions were towards the missing guide, but he had no time to worry about that now. Once he had secured the guide, he would have time for finer feelings. Because now he knew to the depths of his being that the primal bond was calling to him, and wasn’t about to be denied.

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Shortly afterwards, outside Blair’s warehouse home:

As he pulled up next to the dilapidated warehouse named in Sandburg’s file as his home address, Jim was frowning darkly, and almost growling deep in his chest. For sure, if he was in his animal spirit form, he would undoubtedly have been hissing and spitting in irritation at his prospective mate’s foolishness in choosing such an area in which to lay his head. Goddam stupid kid! the irate sentinel muttered to himself. Could he have chosen anywhere worse? This whole area is rife with gangland activity and homeless winos and druggies. How he hasn’t been mugged already beats me!

After cautiously checking out the immediate vicinity for signs of criminal presence, Jim climbed down from his truck and locked the vehicle carefully before approaching the flimsy, badly-fitting door to the property, head cocked as he sent out his hearing to try and locate his target. He was gratified to find that his senses were still behaving themselves, proof positive as far as his inner primal sentinel was concerned that Sandburg really was his intended guide and mate whether the kid liked it or not. The guide’s scent was strong here, and Jim had no problem hearing the soft susurrations of breathing within that suggested that Sandburg was catching a nap. He was also dismayed to catch a whiff of saline, by which he surmised that the kid had recently been crying. That wouldn’t do. Wouldn’t do at all! They might not have met in person yet, but the sentinel’s Blessed Protector instinct went immediately on high alert. No one was allowed to upset His. No one!

He deliberately ignored the fact that he himself was undoubtedly about to upset the unsuspecting Sandburg far more by confronting him, but that couldn’t be helped. The sentinel was on the hunt, and wouldn’t be side-tracked from his purpose.

Suddenly he was distracted by sounds from deeper within the echoing building. The rapid tattoo of tiny rodent hearts and the pattering of sharp claws spoke of a sizeable rat population, and Jim’s frown of disgust deepened. No way was his guide staying here for one more night, even if Jim had to remove him kicking and screaming from the cold and vermin-infested hovel. Mind made up, he carefully shoved at the rickety door, unsurprised when the lock gave way with little effort, and he pushed his way in. Not the politest or most law-abiding way of gaining entry and introducing himself to be sure, but he salved his conscience by telling himself that he didn’t want to give the guide an opportunity to escape - for his own good, of course.
Using all of his considerable stealth, he quietly climbed the short metal staircase that led up to Sandburg’s ‘living quarters’, shocked by the sight that met his eyes even though he had thought himself prepared for something bad.

In all fairness, Sandburg had made a valiant effort at making the chilly and inhospitable building a little more homely by dividing up his floor space into separate ‘rooms’ by utilising stacked pallets. A small kitchen area was sparsely fitted out with an ancient table-top fridge and a small stove. Packing cases acted as a make-shift ‘pantry’, and although the area was as clean as its owner could make it, Jim couldn’t help but turn his nose up at the thought of actually preparing food there.

He didn’t bother with checking out the ‘bathroom’, turning his attention instead to the main living area, which was furnished with shabby, mismatched, thrift store items in far worse condition than those in the students’ common room back in Hargrove Hall.

But what really captured Jim’s gaze was the sleeping form curled up under a mountain of blankets on an ancient sofa-bed. It looked as if Sandburg was wearing gloves and a scarf in bed, as well as a woolly hat pulled down over his ears – testament to the bitter chill in the air. *Hell, it's not even winter yet!* Jim thought. *How on god’s green earth could the kid survive in this dump of an ice-box?*

That settled it. Sandburg was coming home with Jim, no arguments. If he wasn’t ready to share Jim’s bed, he could have the small room under the stairs. It wasn’t much, but it was clean, warm and rat-free – ample reward for Sandburg’s help and guidance in Jim’s humble opinion. It simply never occurred to Jim that he was being unforgivably self-centred. As far as he was concerned, he would be doing the guide a great favour in ‘adopting’ and bonding with him, and the sooner they got on with it the better. It wasn’t as if the kid had anywhere else to go, or even a job anymore if his TA friend was to be believed.

Decision made, he was about to reach over to shake his guide-to-be awake when he picked up other, more worrying sounds from the other end of the warehouse. Several people had arrived, and they were arguing heatedly. And the content of their dispute was particularly troubling, especially when sentinel senses also discerned the distinctive smells of drugs, gun oil and explosives….

Without a second thought, Jim threw himself towards the sleeping guide just as a huge explosion rent the air, and a fireball burst through the flimsy partition of Sandburg’s living space. He grabbed the lax body, rolling them both onto the floor in front of the sofa, which tipped over in the force of the blast and landed fortuitously on top of the two men, incidentally sheltering them from the worst of the flash fire.

However, once Jim had managed to extricate himself, shaking his head in a vain effort to ease his temporary deafness, he was horrified to see the trickle of blood running freely down Sandburg’s pale forehead as the young man remained frighteningly still.

*Shit, hell and damnation! Something – some flying debris - had plainly struck the kid despite Jim’s efforts, and the gods only knew how badly he was hurt!*

There was no time to lose, however, so Jim had no choice but to scoop up the unconscious body in his arms and exit the now fiercely burning building as fast as possible. All he cared about was getting his guide to safety. The fate of the building, Sandburg’s belongings, and the other occupants was unimportant compared to that.

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**Part 2: Guide at Bay:**
Several hours later, Cascade General Hospital:

Blair rose slowly and reluctantly to vague awareness through what seemed to be layers of soft, grey cotton candy. His eyelids were far too heavy to raise, so he didn’t even bother to try, concentrating instead – although not very hard - on his physical comfort, or lack thereof. He was warm and snug, for sure, which meant that he wasn’t in the warehouse on his lumpy sofa bed. However, his head hurt, and there was a queasiness in his belly that would probably manifest itself in actual sickness if he tried to move, so he lay still, content to float for a while longer in his insulating fog. After a moment, his wandering thoughts sensed that there was some sort of ‘presence’ nearby, but he instinctively felt that the ‘presence’ radiated protection rather than threat, so he discounted it in favour of lethargically attempting to imagine himself pushing aside the pain in his head and drifting back to healing sleep.

After a moment, his wandering thoughts sensed that there was some sort of ‘presence’ nearby, but he instinctively felt that the ‘presence’ radiated protection rather than threat, so he discounted it in favour of lethargically attempting to imagine himself pushing aside the pain in his head and drifting back to healing sleep.

Even as his breathing slowed again, a masculine voice – the ‘presence’? – murmured, “He’s waking up….” to be answered by a lighter, feminine voice. “I’ll call the doctor….”

But Blair was already gone, sinking back down under the protective cotton candy with a soft sigh of relief.

The next time Blair woke, he was feeling both better and worse. The disconcerting fog had begun to clear and he felt more alert, but the pain was decidedly worse. Various areas of his body checked in with different levels of discomfort, as if he had taken a beating, but far worse was the ache in his head which had now resolved itself from an overall steady throb to a sharp stabbing pain between and behind his eyes. Moaning involuntarily, he struggled to raise his hand to explore the area, only to have the weakly trembling appendage secured firmly but carefully in someone else’s larger, warm one.

“Easy, Chief,” a soft but commanding voice counselled him. “You’ve got a bandage on your forehead, kiddo. Don’t go disturbing it. A couple stitches too.”

Blair allowed his hand to be replaced on the bed beside him, breathing through the extra pain the small movement had caused him. Whoever this was made sense and he wasn’t in any condition to argue anyway. Concentrating on visualising the pain flowing out of him like a cool mountain stream, eventually Blair felt able to crack open an eye and at least find out for sure where he was.

As he suspected, he was tucked up in a hospital bed in a private room, by the looks of it, so he must have had an accident. But he couldn’t for the life of him remember anything happening to account for this amount of pain, and he sure as hell couldn’t afford this level of treatment. That thought was enough to send his heart racing and his anxiety into overdrive. His eyes flew open, and he gasped in incipient panic knowing that there was no way his meagre health insurance would cover him, even if he still had any since as far as he recalled, he no longer had a job.

“Oh, man!” he moaned piteously then mumbled, “How’d I get here? And how soon can I get out? I gotta go home. Now!”

He startled when a voice answered him, having momentarily forgotten the ‘presence’ beside his bed.

“Stop panicking, Chief. Calm down. You’ll make yourself sick at this rate. Just take some deep breaths, and I’ll explain everything, OK? But before that, do you need something for the pain?”

Carefully turning his head, mindful of the disconcerting way even that small movement seemed to make the whole room swoop and sway, Blair peered myopically up into the handsomest face he’d seen in many a day. Goddess! I’m in the presence of a Greek god! Did I get lucky and can’t even remember it? That sucks!
Swallowing painfully, Blair croaked out, “Hmmm…who’re you? Where’m I? Hurts!”

“I’m sure it does, kiddo,” replied the Greek god with a wry half-grin. “I’ll ring for the nurse and ask her for some happy juice, OK?” and he leant over and pushed the button on the nightstand.

“Once you’re comfortable again, Chief, we can talk. We have a lot to discuss, but most of it can wait until you’re feeling better. And in the meantime, stop worrying about health insurance, kiddo. I’ve got it covered, OK?”

Blair regarded him for a long moment, his brow wrinkled in confusion, but before he could come up with any coherent questions, the door opened to admit a pretty, but business-like nurse.

“Mr Sandburg, so good to see you properly awake. I’m guessing you need something for the pain, though?”

When Blair nodded as enthusiastically as he could, she smiled understandingly. “Thought so, hon. I can’t give you anything until the doctor’s checked you over, but I’ve called her, and she should be here very soon, all right? Meanwhile, I’ll just take your vitals. I’ll be as quick as I can and we’ll soon have you comfortable again."

She was as good as her word, and as she bustled around efficiently, the Greek god ‘presence’ made himself scarce to give her room to work. As she finished tucking him in, Blair murmured, “Um, nurse? Do you know who that is? The guy who’s been sitting by me?”

Smiling down at him, she replied, “I believe he’s a cop, Mr Sandburg. A Detective Ellison from Cascade Central PD. He brought you in a few hours ago, and he’s been here ever since. But that’s all I know, hon,” and she patted his shoulder sympathetically when his already pale face drained of even more colour.

“Don’t worry, hon. The doctor’ll be here soon, and I’m sure everything will get explained soon. Just try and relax, OK?”

_Easy for you to say!_ Blair thought irritably. _Why would I have a cop keeping me company unless I’ve been involved in something serious? This is just getting worse and worse._

However, all further thoughts along those lines were temporarily banished by the arrival of a diminutive, grey-haired whirlwind whose name tag identified her as Dr Wilma Bright, and for the next few minutes all Blair could do was give himself over to her care and attention.

After a quick but thorough examination, Dr Bright declared herself satisfied with his progress, and proceeded to fill him in with what he could expect. Apparently he had been caught in an explosion at his warehouse, and although he had otherwise escaped with minor lumps and bumps, he had been hit on the forehead with a piece of flying debris hard enough to give him a concussion, and serious enough for him to be kept in overnight for observation. The resulting cut on his brow had required four stitches, and a glance in a hand-held mirror revealed some spectacular bruising around it, but Dr Bright assured him that it should heal well with little or no scarring.

As if Blair could care less about that. Always lacking in self-esteem, he had no illusions about his physical appearance, so a scar or two didn’t concern him. Certainly he was relieved to learn that all being well he would be released the following day, but he couldn’t get his head around the fact that his home was gone. Blown up by persons unknown while he had been trying to catch a nap. What was he supposed to do now? Where could he go? Did he have anything left, other than what he had in his office at Rainier? An office which he had been told to vacate by Friday, which was only a couple of days away.
It was hardly surprising then that by the time the good doctor left him, he was in a state of shock, which even the promised dose of ‘happy juice’ couldn’t completely dispel.

And then the Greek god – Detective Ellison – returned, and the situation became even more bizarre.

As Jim approached the bed, he was struck by several impressions at once. First, the kid looked much more alert, which was a good thing. However, the expression in the stunning, huge blue eyes was one of suspicion tempered with pain and real fear, and Jim was hard put not to reach out and take the smaller man into his arms. Sentinel recall reminded him sharply of how the guide’s body had felt as he had cradled the hapless and helpless Sandburg against his chest; and even the harsh smell of charring and burning hadn’t quite managed to mask the young man’s addictive personal scent. Added to that, with Blessed Protector mode still engaged, Jim-the-detective was having quite a time trying to keep his inner primal sentinel in check, but he knew it had to be done, at least for the time being. The guide was currently as safe as he could be in this hospital bed, and there were questions to be asked, and more prosaic explanations dealt with before the more important sentinel and guide issues were tackled – in Jim’s opinion at least.

Keeping his own expression calm and unthreatening, Jim smiled down at the young, somewhat battered face looking up at him, happy to absorb the pleasing impression it made. He had had hours in which to contemplate the young guide’s unconscious form and features, and had thoroughly approved of what he could make out of the compact body outlined beneath the hospital bedding, and the attractive face in repose. It was extremely gratifying to find that the guide was even better looking in the flesh than Jim had imagined. Now, however, those same features were animated and even more appealing, despite the bruising, the bandages and the tousled locks which still smelled of smoke. The kid’s heavy beard stubble added to his rather rakish charm, and Jim itched to see him cleaned up, healthy and healed. And bonded to him.

But that would have to wait for a while, although not too long, if Jim had anything to do about it.

In the meantime, there was cop stuff to be taken care of, so Jim seated himself once more in the visitor’s chair beside the bed, and began.

“I’m glad to see you looking better, Mr Sandburg. Are you up to answering a few questions? My name is Detective Jim Ellison, Cascade Central PD’s Major Crimes Unit. Here’s my ID,” he said, fishing the wallet out of his pocket. Sandburg took it, squinting closely at the gold shield and photo ID, which suggested to Jim that he must normally wear spectacles for reading and close work.

After a moment, the young man handed the wallet back. He looked slightly less suspicious, but no less anxious for all that.

“Um, OK, Detective Ellison. You seem kosher, but why would a Major Crimes cop want anything to do with me? What did I do?”

“Nothing, as far as I can tell, Mr Sandburg, unless you’re guilty of being in the wrong place at the wrong time. Were you aware that there was a meth lab at the other end of your warehouse?” Jim was certain that Sandburg was completely innocent. Apart from his own gut instinct, Simon’s latest update advised him that one of the surviving gang members had already confirmed during interrogation that they believed the warehouse to be deserted, and had no idea that there was anyone living in it. Unsurprisingly, the young man’s face reflected both shock and horror.

“You’ve got to be kidding me, man! I had no idea! I swear it! I mean, yes, sometimes I could hear a bit of noise, but you have to see the size of the rats there, man! I mean, like this!” and he held his
hands out to demonstrate something the size of a terrier. Jim couldn’t help but smirk a little at Sandburg’s vehemence and animation, even in his current condition, and truth to tell he actually believed the kid, having heard the creatures for himself.

“OK, Mr Sandburg, I do believe you. But unfortunately that doesn’t help you any. I’m afraid the building was completely gutted, so you don’t have anywhere to go back to. I’m sorry.” And he was, but only insofar as all Sandburg’s personal possessions must have been destroyed also, either in the blast or by water damage from the fire crews, and that would have to hurt.

He wasn’t wrong, and for a moment, Sandburg’s expression was tragic. “Oh, man!” he whispered, almost to himself. Even though he already feared as much, he had clung on to some vestige of hope that not everything had been lost after all. But apparently it had, and he really was homeless. “Everything gone! I can’t believe it. What else can go wrong?” Then suddenly he looked up again to meet Jim’s quizzical gaze.

“My car, Detective. Do you know if my car’s still OK? It wasn’t parked that close to the warehouse.”

Jim was pleased to be able to offer some small crumb of comfort after all, and replied, “The old Corvair? Yes, Mr Sandburg, it survived. My boss had it towed to the PD garage once the DMV had confirmed your ownership.”

Blair’s eyes closed for a moment as he sighed in relief. He wasn’t completely destitute then. He had his ‘escape duffel’ stowed in the car’s trunk, so he had a change of clothes, and most of his precious books and papers, plus his backpack containing his beloved laptop were still locked in his office at Rainier. If necessary, he could sleep in his car or crash on a friend’s sofa for a day or so until he decided what to do. Maybe now that he was both jobless and homeless he should try and contact Naomi? Yes, that’s what he’d do. And get out of Cascade before the Institute tried to put pressure on him to live up to his so-called guide’s duty. There were other places where he could pursue his doctorate, even if it took a few more years….

A slight cough beside him broke abruptly into his thoughts, and he opened his eyes again to see the Greek-god-detective regarding him speculatively. Blushing a little in embarrassment, he murmured, “Sorry, man. Just working a few things out. I mean, seeing as I can go home – er, that is, get out of here – tomorrow, I have to decide where to go. I’ve got a few options, so I’ll be fine,” he added, with a touch of bravado. Then suddenly a thought struck him. “Um, did I hear you right when you said you’d got my insurance covered, Detective Ellison, or was I hallucinating? What did you mean by that? Because I gotta say, if I do have to pay up, that could be a bit difficult.” To say the least! he thought to himself. How the hell can I afford this on top of student loans? I’ll be in debt for the rest of my life!

“Don’t worry about that, Mr Sandburg. You heard correctly, and your expenses are covered. It’s just a bit complicated to explain right now, and by the look of you, I’d say the happy juice has worn off, am I right? Look, it’s late – after midnight – so why don’t you try and get a bit more sleep? We can continue our discussion in the morning, and I’ll explain everything then, I promise.”

In truth, Blair really was feeling rough again, and he could easily read the sincerity in the big cop’s demeanour, so he gave in to his need for rest. Despite his kindness, there was something about the cop – something Blair knew he ought to be wary of – but right now he didn’t have the energy. At least he was safe here in hospital, so everything else could wait until morning, and on that comforting thought, he fell asleep.

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Following morning:

Jim yawned and stretched, feeling pretty darned good for someone whose long frame had been crammed into a visitor’s chair for hours. True, his limbs and back were protesting some, but the main reason for his general well-being was the fact that his senses had been so settled in Sandburg’s presence that he’d probably managed more hours’ real sleep even in these trying conditions than he had in his own bed ever since his hypersensitivity came on-line. Added to that, he had had the opportunity to freshen up and change his clothes, thanks to the useful overnight bag Simon had had the forethought to have had dropped off for him. Plus, he had been treated to some decent coffee and a breakfast pastry at the nurses’ station, so he was good to go.

Unfortunately, he didn’t think Sandburg was in anything like the same shape or frame of mind. The poor sap had been woken at regular intervals during the night – SOP for concussion cases – and hadn’t been allowed to shower or wash his hair, seeing as he had to keep the stitches dry. Unsurprisingly, he had turned his nose up at the anaemic breakfast offering placed before him, and his scowl spoke volumes when he was informed that he oughtn’t to have caffeine for at least another 24 hours. The only time he had brightened up some was when Jim handed over the duffel he had requested to be retrieved from Blair’s car. At least he wouldn’t have to leave the hospital in scrubs and paper slippers, so that just had to be a bonus. Having said that, once the young man had been discharged, Jim knew he was probably going to have his work cut out to convince Sandburg to come back to the loft with him. He probably wouldn’t make any fuss about accompanying Jim to the PD, because his car was there, but Jim wanted to take him up to Major Crimes so he could meet with Simon and he needed a plausible reason. They were communicating quite nicely at the moment on a superficial level, and he didn’t want to spoil things by getting heavy-handed just yet. Of course, he could always allow the kid to assume that he was still a potential witness in need of protection? Yes, that could work. And once he had the guide on his turf, so to speak, he would make damned sure that there would be no escape.

As far as Blair was concerned, he didn’t think he could honestly feel more out-of-sorts and confused if he tried. Physically, he felt awful, although he wasn’t going to admit that to the nursing staff, or to Dr Bright. No way did he want to stay here for a moment longer than he had to. Then again, his body was checking in with the various aches and pains caused by being thrown bodily onto the floor, and from having another large body, plus the sofa-bed land on top of him. His head still ached abominably, and the stitches were already itching beneath their dressing. But none of that really mattered when he could well have died. Should have died, in fact. Because now he knew that it was Detective Ellison who had saved his life, and had therefore earned Blair’s undying gratitude.

Of course, he assumed that it was pure happenstance. Ellison must have been investigating the meth lab when he realised that there was another occupant in the building, and had come to the rescue. But why he had stayed all night at Blair’s bedside was puzzling, unless, of course, Blair was considered to be under some sort of threat. Or perhaps the Detective didn’t actually believe he was innocent after all, despite his previous assertion. It was all too much to take in yet, as Blair still felt more than a little fuzzy. He was most definitely not firing on all cylinders at the moment, which accounted for his lack of concentration. If he had been functioning in anything like his normal observant fashion, he would already have picked up on various anomalies and hints surrounding the big cop and this whole bizarre situation. But right now he was most definitely under par. He really, really just wanted to lie down in a dark, quiet room somewhere and hide from the world for a while, but that wasn’t going to happen, and he sighed despondently as he sat on the bed, waiting for Dr Bright to discharge him.

Eventually, his patience was rewarded, and the small doctor breezed into the room. Blair roused himself to act as cheerfully as he could, wanting to allay her suspicions as to his real state of health –
and mind - so that she would discharge him, although he had a sneaking feeling that she wasn’t all that convinced by his Thespian display. *Not an Oscar-winning performance this time,* he thought morosely. *Not for the self-proclaimed master tap-dancer and obfuscator, for sure.*

Then again, there wasn’t any real reason to delay his departure any longer, so, after a thorough examination, and many words of advice – most of which Blair immediately discounted – Dr Bright signed him off. He wouldn’t have been quite so happy and relieved if he had been able to hear the exchange subsequently carried on in the corridor outside his room, however.

Finding Jim waiting outside her patient’s – or rather, ex-patient’s – room, Dr Bright took it upon herself to question the big cop directly in order to confirm her own suspicions. It might not be her business any longer, but she felt duty bound to do her best by the young guide. Fixing Jim with her most penetrating stare, she said, “Does he know, Sentinel? Does he know why you’re so interested in him?”

And Jim knew that there was no point in trying to demur. He figured that the nursing staff would have discussed their own theories about his continued presence, because it was unlikely that they would take his obvious interest in their patient completely for granted. It was equally obvious to Jim that, unrecognised by the man himself, Blair had already made a favourable impression on them, and they would take more interest in his condition than most of their charges. Jim figured it was a ‘guide’ thing, and could hardly fault Sandburg for that. The young man had attractiveness in spades, although he would undoubtedly laugh in Jim’s face if he was to say so.

Shrugging, Jim offered the tiny, fierce doctor his best smile. “No, Doctor Bright, he doesn’t. Not yet. I count myself very fortunate in being in the right place at the right time to rescue him, and I admit that, as soon as I laid eyes on him, I knew we were compatible. I just have to convince him of that.”

“You’ve started to imprint him already, haven’t you?” the perspicacious woman stated, her expression almost accusatory. And Jim felt that there was no reason to deny it, even though he wasn’t about to make any excuses on his own behalf. It wasn’t her business anymore, but he didn’t want to be unnecessarily rude.

“Yes, Dr Bright, I have. All my senses, except taste, have imprinted him, and there’s no doubt in my mind that he’s my guide. All I need to do now is convince him that he belongs with me. For life.”

The doctor contemplated him for a few moments longer before sighing resignedly. Finally, she nodded sharply. “And you’ll take care of him?”

And Jim had no problem with answering that completely honestly. “Yes, Dr Bright. Always, even if he doesn’t appreciate it yet.”

“See that you do,” the doctor replied firmly, and with one final, speaking glance, she turned about and went on her way.

Feeling as if he’d just been subjected to some sort of important test, Jim shook himself slightly, and then approached Sandburg’s room again. Time to get this show on the road.

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Shortly afterwards, Jim was driving uncharacteristically sedately back to the PD, hyper aware of the small figure hunched in the truck’s passenger seat. Sandburg had readily accepted his offer of a lift to collect his car, as yet unaware of any ulterior motive on Jim’s part. He still felt sore and muddled, and despite his usual dislike of resorting to chemicals rather than holistic remedies, he suspected that he would be taking some of the painkillers Dr Bright had prescribed for him, and which the detective
had insisted on filling out for him before leaving the hospital. He still couldn’t figure out why Ellison was being so kind to him, but right now he wasn’t knocking it. His ego felt as bruised as his body, thanks to both Clemence and Edwards’ heavy-handed treatment of him, and whereas he was of necessity usually fiercely independent, a little consideration from the handsome cop actually felt rather comforting at this time when he was at his lowest ebb.

With that thought at the forefront of his mind, he forced himself to make an effort to show his appreciation by being a little more sociable, even though he would have preferred to keep his eyes closed in meditation, searching for his centre and inner calm.

“Um, just wanted to say thanks again, man. For the ride, that is. And for getting my duffel for me. That was over and above, Detective, and I really appreciate it.”

Jim offered him a small smile. “De nada, Mr Sandburg. All part of the service.”

Blair returned his smile, impressing his companion with his unconscious allure despite his shabby appearance. In Jim’s view, the guide’s attractive face had lost none of its charm, even though the colourful bruising on his brow marred the smooth skin where the dressing wasn’t hiding it. Sandburg had only been able to have the most rudimentary of washes that morning, and a less than close shave before being allowed to dress in his own clothes, which, although clean, were well-worn and rumpled from being stuffed into his battered duffel. His long curls still smelled of smoke, and were pulled back in an untidy ponytail, and his face was pasty and drawn with discomfort, yet Jim desperately wanted to reach across the seat and pull the smaller man towards him, needing to indulge his senses with the guide’s sweet presence. Taste clamoured to be allowed to imprint the guide in the same way as his other senses had been able to do already, and Jim knew that, once the full set had been satisfied, the guide would be his, and his alone.

Yet Jim-the-man still had enough control of his primal instincts to hold on to his patience a little longer, in deference to Sandburg’s present fragility, although how long that restraint would last was hard to tell. He suddenly realised that Sandburg was talking again, and he shook himself out of his sensory reverie to listen and respond accordingly.

“Uh, Detective, could I ask you something? I mean, I don’t want to embarrass you or anything,” Blair was saying somewhat diffidently.

“Sure, I guess, Mr Sandburg. Can’t promise to answer though,” Jim replied with a smirk.

“Uh, OK, man,” Sandburg grinned in response. “It’s just that, earlier on, I recall you calling me ‘Chief’. I mean, don’t get me wrong, I liked it. I’ve had a lot of nicknames in the past, and most of them were not very nice. I just wondered why, you know? Seeing as we’re being all formal again now.”

For a moment Jim didn’t know how to reply. It had just come naturally, and he suspected that he would continue to use the name in the future, once their relationship was secure. Then he decided he might just as well be totally honest, because he had no doubt that, once bonded, he and the guide would have few secrets from each other.

“It just came naturally, Chief,” he began, gratified to note the small smile and flush of pleasure light up the pale features. “Someone I used to admire very much used to call me that, and it just seemed appropriate somehow.”

“Thanks, man. That’s a really nice thing to say,” Sandburg replied, his rich and soothing voice deepened with emotion. He didn’t pursue the subject, however, as they were approaching the PD, and Jim was about to enter the underground parking garage. The present crashed in on Blair again,
and he couldn’t help but withdraw into himself, his anxiety over what was to become of him over the next few hours momentarily overwhelming. Which of his friends should he contact who might have a sofa he could crash on for a while? Tim? Beth? Anyone…? Or was he *persona non grata* in academia now, and therefore socially ‘untouchable’?

Pulling up in his usual spot, Jim turned off the ignition and looked over at his passenger, frowning as he automatically noted the elevated heart rate and extra tang of distress souring the young man’s scent. “You OK, Mr Sandburg? Chief? Are you in pain again?”

Blair turned to stare at him again, his eyes huge with fear and stress. “Sorry, man. I…uh…it just hit me is all. I…I mean, I just need a moment to get my head around everything that’s happened. Nothing you need to worry about, Detective. I’ll be fine. You’ve been really supportive, man, even if I can’t understand why. Unless you need me to make a statement or something before I go?”

Jim latched onto that innocent query immediately. “Well, as you’re here, Chief, that’s probably a good idea. I’ll take you up to Major Crimes, and you can get it over with, OK?” And he patted himself somewhat smugly on the back as Sandburg nodded in distracted assent.

Climbing down from the truck, Jim went around to the passenger side, just in time to catch Blair as the smaller man seemed to stagger alarmingly as his feet hit the ground. He took the opportunity to take a large but surreptitious sniff of Blairscent while his strong arm supported the guide for a moment until he found his balance.

“Whoa, sorry, man,” Blair finally muttered, a delightful flush of embarrassment spreading briefly from neck to hairline. “Major head rush there. Must be shakier than I thought,” and he glanced apologetically up into Jim’s concerned face.

“No problem, Chief,” Jim replied, relieved when his senses told him that Sandburg’s vital signs were settling somewhat again. “Come on, the sooner we get this done, the better, and you can relax again,” and he gently urged Blair to accompany him to the elevators, his arm still loosely around the smaller man’s slender waist, ready to offer support again if necessary. And happy to soak up the grounding effect the guide’s proximity afforded him, of course.

By the time the car arrived, there were several other cops waiting to enter, some of whom Jim knew, and all looking way too interested in his companion. With a scowl, Jim urged Blair to precede him, placing him in a corner. He then planted himself uncompromisingly in front of the as yet unenlightened guide, presenting Blair with a good view of his back and broad shoulders and very little else. Intimidating glare firmly in place, and arms folded across his powerful chest, Jim effectively shielded the smaller man from undue and unwanted attention. Nevertheless, his senses told him that Sandburg was growing increasingly unsettled, and he couldn’t blame him for that. But let anyone make any malicious comments or lift a finger against the guide, and Jim would happily rip heads off shoulders.

For Blair, the short trip up to the Major Crimes Unit’s floor was indeed exceedingly stressful, for reasons that eventually provided him with an epiphany he would rather never have experienced. As the elevator rose, he felt as if his thoughts were becoming even more muddled than before, and that he was experiencing some sort of free-floating anxiety. He was both puzzled and concerned to experience a growing sense of curiosity, plus random flashes of anger and other fleeting emotions, all clamouring for attention even though he wasn’t conscious of calling up any such feelings or reactions for himself. It was when he felt a disconcerting swirl of lust that he began to get a clue of what was happening to him. That particular emotion left him abruptly when the car stopped at the third floor, and three of the other cops exited. At first he was greatly relieved, because the way he was feeling
right now, lust was the last thing on his mind. And that was when the penny dropped. The last thing on HIS mind!

Abruptly his brilliant, analytical brain started to reassert itself, and theories began to form with increasing rapidity; accompanied, it had to be said, by real fear and growing fury. It wasn’t his emotions he’d been feeling at all, but those of the people around him. And why was that? Because although he’d always been a ‘people person’, as his friend Tim had described him, he’d never experienced other peoples’ actual emotions before. So why now? OK, he understood that highly rated guides often discovered that they had the gift of empathy once they were online, but he wasn’t….or was he? It could just be the blow on the head that was making him feel so strange, couldn’t it? Did he have some sort of brain damage after all? Perhaps he shouldn’t have been discharged quite so soon? He desperately tried to come up with valid excuses, but deep down he knew there was only one possibility.

Goddess! The terrifying answer struck him with blinding intensity.

Ellison! It had to be! Ellison was a sentinel, and that explained his constant attention ever since the explosion. And the insurance cover too. It was standard for a bonded partner! Not only that, but he was probably an alpha, and that was why Blair felt so out of sorts and vulnerable. The sentinel had begun systematically to imprint him, and even though they hadn’t actually bonded yet, it appeared to have been enough to ensure that the guide and the empath in him was now online, and the nascent connection was there. And as far as he knew, there was no going back. No escape…. He would have to bond whether he wanted to or not if he wanted to stay sane, because that was the only way he could get effective shielding from now on. From his bonded sentinel. It was his worst fucking nightmare come true.

He suddenly realised that they were the only ones left in the elevator, and that it had stopped at the 6th floor, but he had absolutely no intention of meekly getting out to do Ellison’s bidding.

“You bastard!” he hissed in fury, pushing roughly past his human barricade, and reaching for the control panel. “You knew I was a guide, didn’t you? And you took advantage of me! That’s why you saved me, wasn’t it? Because you wanted to kidnap me; force me to bond.

“Well, it’s not happening, Sentinel! You can’t keep me here. I won’t let you!”

However, he never reached the buttons as his hand was seized, and he was spun around to face the angry cop. Who now resembled a primal warrior rather than the Jim Ellison Blair had experienced thus far. As the big man propelled him bodily out of the elevator car, Blair’s struggles increased as did his anger and fear. This couldn’t be happening! Someone, somewhere had to help him! This was a police station, for the goddess’ sake! Protect and Serve, anyone?

But apparently not. All Blair could feel was a lot more idle curiosity mixed with disdain and even sardonic amusement from those few people nearby in the corridor, and those emotions, added to the intense ones he was receiving from Ellison, quickly became all too much to bear. In his already weakened state, the empathic overload suddenly overwhelmed him, and his vision tunnelled as the pain in his head intensified. He dropped like a stone as the welcome darkness swallowed him, unaware of the powerful arms that scooped him up as the sentinel shoved through the MCU bullpen doors and marched over to Simon Banks’ office, looking to neither right nor left as he passed through the suddenly silent room carrying his precious burden.

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Simon’s head flew up, a ferocious scowl on his face as his office door slammed back unceremoniously on its hinges. Automatically opening his mouth to bellow at whoever was ignorant
enough to enter his inner sanctum in such an unmannerly fashion, his voice died in his throat as he beheld a sight he had never wished to see. His detective and friend, Jim Ellison, in full feral sentinel mode. And not only that, but a primal sentinel whose arms cradled a scruffy kid. A scruffy, unconscious kid who Simon immediately recognised as Blair Sandburg.

Although thoroughly taken aback by the unexpected vision, Simon had never been one to employ gentle, appeasing approaches when confronted by this sort of unacceptable behaviour, so he resorted to his tried and trusted method, barking out in his most commanding tone, “ELLISON! STAND DOWN!”

For a moment, he thought he might have exacerbated the situation when the sentinel actually growled at him, but a second later, the big man shook his head, his eyes squeezed tightly shut in a grimace of pure pain. Simon held his breath for what seemed like an eternity, only to let it out in a huff of relief as Jim raised his head and opened his eyes again, the cop and the man plainly back in charge.

Back in the here and now, Jim’s expression was one of shock and shame. He looked from Simon’s quizzical and rather accusatory glare down to the lax face of the young man he cradled in his arms, unable for the present to form any sort of verbal explanation. He could easily recall the events of the past 24 hours, right up until Sandburg had turned on him in the elevator, and after that, everything seemed blurred and unreal. How the hell had he ended up with the kid in his arms, completely out for the count? Surely he hadn’t physically attacked the guide? Sentinels were hard-wired to protect their precious companions, not hurt them!

So what had happened? He desperately needed to know, but until Blair woke up, he would have to remain in ignorance. No wonder he’d avoided this guide / bonding crap until forced into it.

Suddenly, he realised that Simon was talking to him, and he shook his head again, trying to take in what his boss was saying.

“You back with me, detective? Jim?” This time Simon’s voice was much gentler now his friend was fully aware again. When Jim nodded sharply, he continued, “Tell me then, Jim. What happened? Why is Sandburg unconscious? Has he had a relapse, and it sent you into Blessed Protector mode?”

And Jim hung his head at the question, unwilling to respond honestly even though he knew Simon deserved to know the truth - that the last thing Sandburg wanted was to be a guide. Any sort of guide. And now it would appear that Jim had managed to bring him online anyway. Hardly an auspicious start to their potential partnership.

Noting Jim’s hurt and confusion, Simon made a unilateral decision. It was his prerogative as the man’s boss anyway. “Come on, Detective. Let’s get your guide home to your turf. He clearly needs to rest, and you need to guard him while he does, so I’m driving you back to the loft. No arguments!”

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Shortly afterwards, the loft, #307, 852 Prospect:

Jim and Simon sat in contemplative silence, clutching mugs of fresh coffee while they watched over the still figure of the guide. Sandburg was still deeply asleep, and was stretched out on the sofa, wrapped up cosily in a warm afghan. To both men he appeared very young and vulnerable in repose, but whatever the rights and wrongs of securing his presence here, they knew that it was a fait accompli, and as such they would all have to make the most of it. The problem was that it was very likely that it would be Sandburg who had to give up the most, which was hardly fair.
Turning to face Jim, Simon knew it was time to get the ball rolling. The sooner they started to discuss this whole mess, the sooner they could start devising a workable plan for the future.

“OK, Jim. So, are you ready now to tell me just how you’ve reached this point? I mean, I had hoped that your meeting would have been straight-forward enough. You know, sentinel meets compatible guide, agree to work together towards a bond, and sort out what type of relationship works for you both. Why did your meeting go so wrong?”

Jim stared at the floor beneath his feet for a long moment while he marshalled his thoughts. This was going to be hard – almost impossible – to explain satisfactorily to his boss and friend; partly because however sympathetic Simon might be to the whole sentinel and guide issue, he was still a mundane for all that, and couldn’t be expected to comprehend the deeper, instinctive reactions activated by the primal bond. Hell, Jim didn’t understand the half of it himself, so what chance did Simon have? But he had to try, so he looked up again to meet Simon’s questioning gaze, and began.

“I’m going to have to ask you to be patient, Simon, because I think I’ll have to start from where you first heard about Sandburg, and what happened when I went in search of him. What I felt, and what those feelings led me to do, OK? It might help clarify things for me too.”

At Simon’s nod of agreement, he continued. “When you received the faxed information about him,” and he glanced worriedly over at the recumbent figure on the sofa, “I admit that at first I still didn’t want to know – as I think you were well aware. But then I saw his head shot, and something in me just clicked. It was the strangest thing. I don’t know how else to describe the feeling. I just knew I had to find him – see him in the flesh. So when I left your office, I drove directly to Rainier, and all the way there I seemed to get more focussed the nearer I got. And the stupid thing was, he wasn’t even there at the time, although I didn’t know it then. It just seemed to me that I could sense his presence – scent him, if you like, even though I’d never met him before – so I went in search of him. I found his office straight away, because his residual scent was so strong there. So addictive. It was empty, of course, and I felt so frustrated. Furious, even. But then I ran into one of his TA friends – a young woman – and she told me what had happened to him. She was absolutely distraught, Simon. Apparently he never wanted to be a guide, ever. He’d managed to stay under the radar all his life until a routine blood test showed up the guide gene. And then on top of that, the Chancellor told him he no longer had a job. She expected him to go and find his sentinel! I tell you, Simon, I felt so ashamed. That girl trusted me! She told me Blair had gone home, and so that’s where I went. “But however bad I felt about betraying her trust, I still needed to see him. It was like I had no choice, the drive was too strong. And when I saw that dump of a warehouse where he was living! Jeez, Simon, I was livid! I’ve never felt so protective – or possessive – of anyone in my life before, and I just knew I had to snatch him up and take him home with me whether he liked it or not. But then the meth lab blew as you know, and that’s how I got to rescue him. Fate, huh? Or serendipity,” and he chuckled ruefully at the concept.

Simon gazed at Jim for long moments, a frown of deep concern and no little puzzlement clouding his face. “Well, hell, Jim! I had no idea. I just thought there would be a bit of straight-forward tracking involved in finding him, but then it was just bad luck that you both got caught in that blast. Guess I should know better, what with all the weird shit that goes on in this town anyway! But it sounds to me as if you were pretty much primal, Jim, while you were seeking him out. You certainly weren’t yourself when you barged into my office. But I didn’t get the impression that you were acting abnormally at the hospital. There weren’t any complaints or reports of feral sentinel behaviours going on. So what changed when you got to the PD?”

Jim rubbed his face with both hands before meeting Simon’s gaze again, and the older man almost winced at the pain and confusion in the cornflower blue eyes. “You tell me, boss,” he murmured
grimly. “I suppose that I felt that he was safe enough in hospital as long as I stayed with him, so there was no need for over-protective posturing. And as far as I was concerned, everything was going to plan. I’d had the opportunity to imprint him with all of my senses except taste during our stay, and I was feeling pretty damned pleased with myself. The senses were working better than I’d ever known them to, which proved to me that he was meant to be my guide. Sure, I know I’d been told he didn’t want to be a guide, but I wasn’t too concerned about that. Just thinking of myself, I guess. And I assumed that, once I’d introduced him to you and the department, and the concept of working with me, he’d be happy with it. Grateful to have a job and a home again.

“And I’m still hoping that’s what’s going to happen when he wakes up, although I’m not so sure now that he’ll see it like that.

“But anyhow, when we were in the elevator, he changed abruptly. Screamed at me for kidnapping him, and demanded to leave. And that’s when I realised that my partial imprinting must have already triggered his empathy. I couldn’t let him go, Simon. No way. I had to make sure he stayed within my protection. He’s mine, Simon, even if we haven’t bonded yet. There’s no going back now. I can feel it. I know it!”

Simon looked over at the sleeping guide, and his mouth tightened in a troubled grimace. After a minute or so, he turned back to face Jim. The man looked haggard and drawn, and Simon knew that he’d never before heard Jim talk for so long, or reveal so much about himself, and the strain of doing so was obvious.

“Shit, Jim, I don’t know what to say. It never occurred to me that a highly-rated guide like him wouldn’t want to live up to society’s expectations and find a sentinel to work with. But then again,” he continued wryly, “seeing as how I’ve known a sentinel for some time now who never wanted his gift either, perhaps I shouldn’t be so surprised. Maybe you two rebels were meant for each other after all,” he added with a pained, half-grin. “I just pray that you don’t kill each other while you’re trying to work things out.”

“You and me both, boss,” Jim concurred ruefully. “But he’s waking up at last. Time to find out a few things about my new guide, huh?” and he quickly crossed to the sofa and knelt so he could study the youthful face minutely as Sandburg slowly regained consciousness.

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For Blair, the return to consciousness this time around was much more pleasant. He was warm, comfortable, and mercifully pain-free; and was basking in the residual bliss of the last scenes of a truly wonderful dream. In his mind’s eye, he could still see the golden image of the Greek god who was loving and cherishing him; the sexual attraction between them seeming to glow like late summer sunshine. Finally prising open lids that still felt heavy and torpid, Blair blinked lazily a few times, and then his sleep-soft face lit up with a gentle smile as he saw his dream come true, sitting so close beside him that he could reach out and touch it. He raised a languid hand and managed to cup his dream god’s cheek in his palm, quietly delighted when the ‘god’ covered his hand with his own, bringing Blair’s palm to his mouth. Soft lips kissed his sensitive skin, and Blair moaned quietly in pleasure at the sensual touch.

However, when a slightly rough tongue began to lave that same spot, his wandering attention was instantly captured. Something was wrong. His eyes snapped into harsh focus as a surge of what he could only later describe as an electrical current seemed to travel up his arm and through his body almost instantaneously, and he knew with a deep, instinctive and merciless certainty what had happened.

The ‘Greek god’, aka Jim Ellison, had imprinted him with his last sense, and the superficial bond
was irrevocably set.

He was lost.

Yanking his hand free with a horrified gasp, Blair pushed back into the sofa’s cushions, his eyes flicking rapidly back and forth as he took in his surroundings. His mind registered and catalogued the new information instantly, and he knew without a doubt that this must be Detective Ellison’s apartment. And here he was, in the sentinel’s territory, and at his mercy, lying on a comfortable sofa, and tucked in like a sick little kid.

Not happening. No way. He pulled himself up into a sitting position, trying to ignore the shakiness in his uncooperative limbs as he glared at the big man kneeling beside him.

“What the fuck have you done, Ellison? I thought I told you that I had no intention of bonding with you. What part of ‘no’ don’t you understand?”

The angry sarcasm failed to mask his real fear, and although the big cop’s face reflected a certain degree of sympathy and sorrow, Blair wasn’t fooled. He could ‘feel’ the desire and need leaking from Ellison’s mind to his, and he was forced to fight against its tempting pull. It wasn’t going to happen, whatever TPTB at the Institute smugly believed. He was going to fight this - this unlooked-for and unwanted ‘joining’ – with every intellectual weapon he could muster. And so what if his mind now felt cushioned and shielded from the external emotions that had so recently brought him to his knees? His newly-awakened empathy was all the sentinel’s fault anyway, and he needed to hold on to his anger and resentment in the cause of pure self-preservation.

“I’m sorry, Chief. You have every right to be angry.” Ellison’s tone was unexpectedly almost shy and contrite, and Blair’s uncharacteristic fury stalled in its tracks. He didn’t want to indulge in mindless anger. Naomi had always insisted that it was bad for the karma, and that he should let it go. However, just as he was trying to come up with a somewhat more placatory response, a polite but insistent cough from somewhere behind Jim’s right shoulder distracted him. He glanced up quickly, shifting slightly to peer around the barrier of Ellison’s bulk, only to meet the steady gaze of a very large, very intimidating dark-skinned man, who was studying him intently from the chair opposite.

“Uh, Chief?” Jim’s voice captured Blair’s attention and he turned back again to frown quizzically at the detective. “This is my boss, Chief. Captain Simon Banks of Cascade Central Major Crimes Unit. Captain,” he continued, turning to look at his friend, “allow me to introduce Mr Blair Sandburg.”

Blair turned to face the other man again, incidentally glad that at least Ellison had refrained from making any mention of the ‘my guide’ crap. Not that he expected that consideration to last for long though. Blair guessed that the huge captain was here to add his muscle to Ellison’s to convince Blair of his new role in life, but he wasn’t going to go down quietly, whether they wanted it or not. Naomi’s little boy didn’t just lie down and capitulate without a fight. No way. He might be completely new to this empathic stuff, but Blair could already feel what he could only identify as curiosity, irritation and impatience rolling off the big man, and that, rather than quelling the feisty young man in any way, actually served to aggravate him further.

Then again, despite the circumstances and the opposition, Blair had always preferred to mediate rather than threaten when faced with any kind of dispute, so he took a deep breath and forced himself to calm down and seek his centre. He didn’t really expect it, but there just might be a peaceful resolution to this whole mess.

Yeah, right! Keep deluding yourself, Sandburg!

His turbulent thoughts were diverted again when Ellison climbed somewhat stiffly to his feet,
grinning self-deprecatingly – and rather touchingly, although Blair would rather not have noticed it.

“Sorry, Chief. My legs are going to sleep here. Look, do you want a drink or anything? I know Dr Bright said no caffeine for another day or so yet, but I have water and juice?”

Distracted, Blair stared stupidly at him for a second, then muttered, “Uh, yeah, OK, man. Juice would be good. Thanks.” The croakiness of his reply bore testament to the dryness in his throat, so Jim eagerly grasped the excuse to retreat to the kitchen for a few minutes to try and steady his own thoughts. Filling up a glass from the jug of juice in the refrigerator, he placed it on a tray along with refills of coffee for himself and Simon, then returned somewhat reluctantly to the fray.

Handing over the glass of juice, plus one of the pain pills Dr Bright had prescribed; Jim was quietly relieved when Blair accepted both with little more than an annoyed grimace. He passed the fresh mug of coffee to Simon, then settled down with his own beverage on the loveseat cattycorner to the sofa. He instinctively wanted to remain close to the guide, but not so close as to aggravate Sandburg unnecessarily. The kid was skittish enough already without any uncalled-for intimidation. All three men sipped their drinks for a few minutes; eyeing each other warily while undoubtedly taking the opportunity to consider their next moves, when Simon put his mug down on the coffee table and fixed Blair with what he hoped was an understanding look. Thinking that it was up to him to lay out a few facts for the reluctant guide, he leant forward in his seat and began, using his most persuasive tone.

“Look, Mr Sandburg – Blair. I gather that this situation wasn’t one you wanted or expected, as it wasn’t for Jim here, but the fact remains that you two have found each other, and I’d be lying if I said I wasn’t glad. It’s been no fun witnessing Jim’s pain as he’s struggled to control ever more erratic sensory spikes, so finding a compatible guide in you hasn’t come a moment too soon. Not only that, but from my perspective, it couldn’t be better insofar as a fully bonded team can only benefit my department. Jim here has been nominated as Cop of the Year even without using his senses to the max, so with your backup, he’ll be phenomenal. All you have to do is accept his generosity in letting you stay here at the loft with him, and take the prescribed course at the Academy. You’ll probably be able to test out of a lot of the academic stuff anyway, and Jim will coach you for the physical training and the firearms familiarisation course.”

For a moment Simon honestly believed that Blair’s wide-eyed astonishment indicated his relief at learning how lucky he was, but he couldn’t have been more wrong. And then Jim had to add insult to injury by adding rather condescendingly, “There you go, Chief. See, it’ll be fine after all. You’re more than welcome to live here at the loft with me. In fact, I think you have to in view of our connection. You’ve been at school for long enough after all, so now you’ll have a proper job too--”

And that was when Blair exploded. “What? What? What do you mean ‘a proper job’? What do you think I’ve been doing? Do you think I’m some sort of ‘permanent student’, huh? Some sort of shirker? No way, man! I’m a teacher – as well as an anthropologist who happens to be working on his doctorate. And I’ve always paid my way, ever since I was fifteen.

“How can you say that I don’t have a ‘proper job’? And I’m a good teacher too. It’s people like me who educate young minds so that they don’t believe that people like you are freaks of nature! So they can appreciate what sentinels can do for society. How is that not important?”

Frowning, Jim opened his mouth to try to make a reasonable comeback, only Blair had already switched his attention – and his anger – to Simon.

“And you, Captain! How dare you think that I’m going to jump at the chance of joining the ranks of the pigs? Naomi was right when she told me not to trust any of you. No way am I ever going to be a jack-booted fascist thug!”
As far as Simon was concerned, that was the last straw. He couldn’t understand the furious young man’s attitude, and he sure didn’t intend to sit here and listen to his insults. Growling in irritation, he pushed himself to his feet. “Thanks for the hospitality, Jim, but I need to get back to the station. I don’t want to listen to any more of this kid’s crazy notions. I’m going to leave you to sort it out between you, and I’ll call in again tomorrow. By which time I’ll assume that you’ll have knocked some sense into your guide – pun definitely not intended.”

With that, he stalked to the door with Jim following close behind. He believed – hoped – he was right in assuming that Ellison wouldn’t actually hurt the young guide. Sentinels were programmed to protect them after all, weren’t they? So now was the time to escape before his blood pressure went through the roof.

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As the door closed behind his agitated boss, Jim turned back to face the sofa again, his expression both pained and angry. “Well, that went well – not!” he muttered to himself, then squared his shoulders ready to go on the attack again. He was determined not to let Sandburg out of his sight until the young man had seen reason. There was no other way. For either of them.

While Simon had been making his somewhat dramatic exit, Blair had managed to get to his feet, and he stood beside the sofa, holding onto the back for support in view of his continuing shakiness. Although he was unmistakably worried about being left alone with a large sentinel cop who could physically subdue him with ease, his face also reflected defiance, and Jim sighed inwardly at the young man’s obduracy even as he reluctantly admired his spirit.

“Where do you think you’re going, Chief? You need to rest up some more, and I can tell that you’re in pain again.”

“Newsflash, Ellison,” Blair snarked back petulantly. “I have other alternatives despite what you and your boss think, and I’m not staying here with you. I’m going to get my duffel, and find a cab to take me to get my car, and take some time out to process. Let me pass!”

“Oh, I don’t think so, Junior!” Jim replied, his patience just about worn out. “You’re hungry, still tired, and in no fit state to drive, and I’ll be damned if I’ll let you put yourself or anyone else at risk.”

For a fraught moment, Blair glared mulishly up at him, but then his stomach chose to rumble loudly, much to his annoyance and embarrassment. Common sense told him that Jim was right whether he liked it or not. He was hungry, and tired and in pain, and he really wasn’t up to driving anywhere in this state. With an ill-tempered shrug he broke eye contact with the intractable sentinel, although the bigger man was under no illusions that Blair’s capitulation was anything but temporary.

“Fine, have it you own way,” Blair muttered ungraciously. “But I need the bathroom, man. Like, now!”

Nodding briskly, Jim pointed the way, saying, “Do you need help?” unsurprised when the guide glared disgustedly at him.

“No thanks, man. Been taking care of business by myself for years now!” So saying, Blair straightened up and moved rather unsteadily towards the bathroom with as much dignity as he could muster, unmindful of the bemused eyes that tracked his progress.

Shaking his head, Jim grinned lop-sidedly at the retreating back, both concerned for the young man’s safety and ruefully impressed by his stubborn pride. As Blair reached his destination and closed the door behind him, Jim couldn’t help but call out, “Don’t lock it, Chief, in case you fall…” only to
hear the latch click deliberately into place. Goddam kid! he thought in annoyance. Pig-headed, independent little bastard. Then again, did you really want some cringing little sycophant? And I can always kick the door in if I have to.

Listening carefully to every sound coming from within the bathroom, Jim told himself that on this occasion his nosiness was justified on account of the guide’s current unsteadiness, and that in the future he would respect Sandburg’s privacy. In the meantime, he decided to do something about feeding his reluctant houseguest, so repaired to the kitchen to defrost the home-made chicken soup he had stored in the freezer. Something simple, quick and nutritious – just the ticket for an empty tummy which might still be queasy from medication.

In the bathroom, Blair took care of business, although not without a moment or two of disconcerting dizziness, and washed his hands and face at the sink. After drying off, he glanced at his reflection in the mirror above the washbasin, only to be horrified by the apparition who stared back at him. Swallowing hard, he took in the tangle, still smoky curls escaping from the untidy ponytail at his nape; the pallid skin accentuated by dark, scruffy beard stubble, and the spectacular, multi-coloured bruising spreading out from under the dressing on his forehead. But it was his eyes and the expression in them that truly shocked him. Wide, mournful and haunted, he hardly recognised himself in the blue depths, the shadows beneath and around them making the orbs seem almost too big for his face. He looked a wreck; every bit as bad as he felt right then; and the revelation shook him severely. Enough so that he deliberately hardened his expression, full-lipped mouth thinning to a tight, uncompromising line, as his eyes narrowed pugnaciously.

He wasn’t about to give in to weakness. Not now, knowing that it would fall right in with Ellison’s hopes and plans. He might feel down, but he certainly wasn’t out yet, so pulling himself up as straight as he was able, he nodded decisively at his reflection. Get a grip, Sandburg. Stop with the pity party, and stand up to him. It’s all you can do. What you must do if you’re ever going to get your life back....

After making another effort to contain his uncooperative hair, and straightening his crumpled clothing as best he could, he took a deep, calming breath and opened the door, emerging to the delicious aroma of cooking food. He paused for a moment, taking in the scene of the big cop pottering around in the kitchen, and was struck by an unexpected – and unwanted - pang of warmth and affection. He tried to quell it immediately, desperate to hang on to his protective anger and indignation, but it was hard for someone who was inherently generous, optimistic and easy-going by nature. And there was nothing wrong with being polite anyhow, so he moved forward, meeting Jim’s amiable grin with a nod.

“Smells good, man,” he offered softly. “What’re you making?”

Jim’s grin widened as he replied, “Chicken soup, Chief. Home-made, but not by me, so don’t worry. It’s some I was given by Sally – a friend of mine – and she insists it cures everything.”

Blair couldn’t help himself but respond to the big man’s friendly overtures. “Sally? Is she your girlfriend, man?”

“Nah, Chief. She was our housekeeper when I was a kid. Always very good to me, and I’ve kept in touch. She sends me culinary offerings every so often to make sure I eat well and look after myself!”

Blair nodded in answer, unaccountably relieved that there didn’t seem to be anyone in Ellison’s life at the moment. He hadn’t expected it anyway in all honesty, judging by the pristine apartment. Spotless and uncluttered, as he would have expected as befits an alpha sentinel, yet it was also
completely lacking in personal, homely touches, almost like a show home. He wondered how long Jim had lived here for it to remain so impersonal, and then decided it wasn’t his business after all.

He roused himself from his musing as Jim placed two steaming bowls of soup on the kitchen table, adding a platter of crusty bread and some crackers.

“There you go, Chief. Tuck in!” he said with an encouraging smile, relieved when Blair returned his smile and sat down as indicated.

“Thanks, man. Smells great, and looks good too,” and with a somewhat shy grin Blair picked up his spoon and took a bite. And found that the soup was every bit as tasty as it looked, and his appetite sat up and took notice. Within a remarkably short time, his bowl was empty, and his tummy was almost uncomfortably full, but he certainly wasn’t complaining. Sitting back in his seat, he smiled a little self-consciously over at his host. “That was really good, man. Really hit the spot. You want help with the clean-up?”

Jim smiled back while shaking his head. “Not this time, Chief. How about you go and make yourself comfortable on the sofa? I’ll come and join you when I’ve finished.”

Blair wasn’t entirely happy with the suggestion, but he wasn’t ready to make any alternative moves as yet, so he nodded and did as he was bid. No need to rub the sentinel up the wrong way too soon, since he had already made tentative plans of his own for later on.

The next few hours passed surprisingly comfortably, considering both men were resolutely avoiding mentioning the enormous elephant in the room. Jim had turned on the TV and surfed through the programmes until he found a Jags replay, and was delighted to find that Blair was also a great basketball fan. As for Blair, he was pleasantly surprised at how entertaining the big cop could be when relaxed, although he tried not to let it lull him into a false sense of security. He still wasn’t going to knuckle under as far as the whole bonding issue was concerned. Not without giving careful consideration to every available option anyway.

Eventually, Blair could stand the itching of his grubby hair no longer, so he diffidently broached the subject of taking a shower. He knew that he must smell pretty ripe to sentinel senses anyway, so he would be doing them both a favour. However, he wasn’t sure what sort of reaction he could expect from his host, and was quite taken aback by Jim’s response.

“Sure, Chief, but you know what Dr Bright said about keeping your stitches dry. If you like, I could wash your hair for you at the hand basin, then you could perhaps draw a bath to take care of the rest of you. It wouldn’t be any trouble, kiddo. I had medical training in the army, so I’ve done way worse for people I didn’t even like!”

Blair was at a loss as to how to respond for a moment. The offer was so tempting under the circumstances, but he was still wary of letting the sentinel in Jim take advantage. Then again, he felt instinctively that this time he could trust Jim-the-cop not to overstep the mark, so he reluctantly gave in to his baser needs.

“Um, OK, I guess, if you really don’t mind? I mean, I would appreciate some help with the hair, because it feels really gunky, but I can manage the bath thing myself, OK?”

He half expected a sharp retort, but instead Jim simply looked quietly pleased. “No problem, Chief. You want to do it now?” and when Blair nodded quickly, he rose to his feet and headed for the bathroom, knowing that the young guide was following him.
Once in the bathroom, Blair rather reluctantly stripped off the outer layers on his top half, leaving his undershirt on and removing nothing below the waist. No need to be provocative in any way, as he was nervous enough as it was for agreeing to let Jim do something as intimate as washing his hair. However, Jim was looking remarkably nonchalant and relaxed, if perhaps a little smug, and Blair used his new-found empathy to try and ‘read’ the other man. He decided that there was nothing untoward in Jim’s demeanour, so he sat on the chair Jim had provided for him, and leaned back over the washbasin. And in all honesty, the ensuing hair wash was profoundly enjoyable, almost to the point of hedonistic. The combination of warm water and sentinel touch almost had him purring in contentment, and he was hard put to contain his unintentional arousal.

Of course, he realised immediately that there was no way the sentinel wouldn’t be aware of it, and the thought acted like a cold shower, so once the final rinse was done, he was able to look Jim in the face again without too much embarrassment.

“Um, thanks, man. That was really good of you, and I appreciate it. But I can manage the rest on my own….”

“No problem, Chief,” Jim replied matter-of-factly, making an admirable effort to mask his disappointment. “I’ll leave you to it, then. There are more towels in the closet, so just help yourself and take your time.”

The relief on Blair’s expressive face was clear to see as Jim made himself scarce, but in all honesty Jim couldn’t blame him. He hadn’t expected the guide to accept his hair-washing offer in the first place, so he could hardly complain if the kid wanted his privacy for the rest of his ablutions, and the sentinel in Jim had thoroughly appreciated the chance to handle those tempting locks. The rest would come in time, he was certain. He just had to be patient.

As he soaked luxuriously in the tub, the almost too warm water easing away his aches and pains, Blair contemplated his proposed plan of action. Although it wasn’t all that late, both of them had had a fairly fraught day following a far from restful overnight stay in the hospital, so Blair intended to ask if he could have an early night. He knew that Jim had already made up the bed in the small under-stairs room for him, and he had noted the convenient fire escape at the window. He had also noted the white noise generator sitting on a side table at the foot of the stairs. If he could surreptitiously get hold of it when he went to bed, he intended to switch it on as soon as he was sure Jim was asleep, then grab his duffel, sneak out down the fire escape and make his way over to the house near campus where Tim and Beth had rooms. He had enough spare cash left to take a bus across town, or perhaps even a cab for part of the way, and once there, he would beg a bed for the rest of the night. He wasn’t entirely sure what the next day would bring, but as long as he was out of Jim’s territory, he could try and sort out something workable for both of them.

He just had to bide his time, and trust in his friends’ goodwill.

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Later that night:

Blair sat at the back of the bus he had managed to catch not far from 852 Prospect, clutching his duffel to him and trying to control the hammering of his heart within his chest. He was running on pure adrenalin, almost euphoric that so far his tentative plan had succeeded, but also terrified that his escape would be discovered too soon before he could reach relative safety. However, as the bus continued across the town, putting distance between him and the loft, he began to relax slightly, allowing himself to contemplate the last few hours.

Emerging from the bathroom, clad in warm sweats, Blair had felt 100% better, and hadn’t failed to
notice the approving look on Jim’s face. Keeping as cool and calm as he could under the circumstances, he had thanked Jim for the chance to freshen up, and asked somewhat diffidently if it would be OK for him to have an early night as he was still feeling a little rough. He knew that the sentinel would be scanning him, and hoped against hope that any abnormal physiological responses would be attributed to stress and his injury. And apparently his ploy worked, as Jim had simply accepted his explanation and acceded to his request. Not only that, but he had stated that he might as well make the most of an early night also, much to Blair’s relief, and had gone upstairs himself shortly after Blair had retired, not noticing the missing white noise generator as he had done the rounds and locked up for the night.

After that, Blair had simply lain down on his bed and concentrated on centring himself, internally repeating his favourite mantras and working hard at controlling his breathing and heart-rate so that Jim would be lulled into believing that his guide was drifting into a restful sleep.

Of course, Blair had no specific sensory proof that Jim had finally fallen asleep too, but the fact that he felt no strong emotions emanating from above convinced him that it was time to act. Therefore, taking his courage in both hands, he switched on the white noise generator, waiting for an anxious moment to see if there was any adverse reaction. When no such reaction occurred, he grabbed his already packed duffel, slipped on his hiking boots and slid open the window to shimmy down the fire escape to freedom.

During their desultory postprandial conversation Blair had ensured that he had ascertained the loft’s location in relation to Rainier’s campus, and as a frequent user of Cascade’s public transport system, he knew pretty much which bus services he would need to get there. And as luck would have it, a stop within just a couple of blocks from Jim’s building proved to be on the route he needed, so after a short, if anxious wait, he boarded a bus to putative freedom.

One change later, he was approaching the street where Tim and Beth’s lodgings were located, so he allowed himself to relax still further. He felt too enervated and strung out to maintain such a high level of tension and anxiety any longer, so praying that his friends would be at home, and feeling generous, he exited the bus and walked up to the communal front door. He rang the buzzer for Beth first, and was enormously relieved when after a moment she answered the intercom.

“Um, Beth? It’s me, Blair. I’m so sorry to bother you at this time of night, but could I come in?”

And his gratitude knew no bounds when his friend didn’t even pause before buzzing him in.

Beth met him at her door wearing a robe over her nightdress, which was hardly surprising considering the lateness of the hour. However, before Blair could utter a word of apology, she drew him inside and enveloped him in a warm hug.

“Oh, Blair! Where have you been, hon? We’ve been so worried about you! We heard about the explosion at your warehouse, but couldn’t find out what had happened to you! Thank the goddess you’re safe!”

“Um, it’s a long story, Beth, and I’m sorry to have worried you. It’s just, well; I wasn’t in a position to get in touch with anyone after being taken to hospital. It’s…I’m…uh, oh goddess, Beth! I’m bonded!” and at the look of absolute horror on his friend’s face, he broke down at last, the floodgates opening on his hurt and disappointment.

Immediately opening her arms to him again, Beth drew his head down to her shoulder and rocked him like a child for long moments, crooning meaningless words of comfort until his sobs gradually
died away, leaving him sniffling and embarrassed for melting down in such a fashion.

However, Beth was having none of that, and, taking his hand, she led him over to her sofa, where she sat him down and sat beside him, turning sideways on so she could see him properly.

“Tell me everything, hon, and then I’ll make a bed up for you on the sofa. Then again,” she continued, studying him intently, “perhaps it’s too much to ask at this time of night. Let’s get you comfortable, and we can talk properly in the morning when Tim can join us.”

And with blessings on her head, Blair allowed himself to be settled down for what was left of the night, falling asleep as soon as his head hit the pillow.

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Meanwhile, at the loft:

Jim woke instantly from a deep and restful sleep, knowing instinctively that something was very wrong. He had fallen asleep to the soothing rhythm of Sandburg’s heartbeats, grounded by the guide’s seductive scent and the soft susurrations of his breathing, only regretful that the young man was in the room downstairs instead of in Jim’s bed. However, now he heard nothing, and sat up hurriedly, already suspecting that he had been tricked. Barely pausing long enough to pull on a robe over his sleep shorts, he trotted downstairs and noticed immediately that the white noise generator he kept on the side table was missing.

_Damned sneaky little neo-hippy witchdoctor punk! The little shit’s pulled a fast one on me._ His furious reaction ramped up even more when he pulled aside the curtain that closed off the small, under-stairs room to see the empty bed and the window slightly open. Sandburg had plainly made off down the fire escape, and already his scent was diminishing. Angry but desperate for Sandburg’s efficacious grounding, the sentinel sent out his senses, reaching further and further out for signs of his missing guide, but without success. Yet he couldn’t help but continue, so attuned was he already to the young man’s precious presence.

And eventually the inevitable happened, and Jim zoned. Hard.

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Following morning:

Pulling up outside 852 Prospect, Simon climbed out of his sedan and made his way into the building. He was both impatient and concerned, needing to know how Jim had fared in persuading young Sandburg to accept his role as Jim’s guide, but worried that his less-than-tactful subordinate might have made matters worse. Pulling out his cigar case, he extracted one and stuck it in his mouth, only regretful that he couldn’t light it in deference to Jim’s sensitivity.

Reaching the door of #307, he knocked sharply, but heard no sound from within. Even more concerned now, since Jim’s truck was still parked outside in its usual place, he fished around in his inside pocket for the spare key Jim had given him a while ago for use in emergencies. Opening the door, he looked around him, calling out, “Jim? Jim, are you there, man?” but when there was no response he entered and closed the door behind him. He could see immediately that the lounge and kitchen were unoccupied, and by the look of things, the upstairs bedroom was empty also. Which left just the bathroom and the small room intended for Sandburg’s use. Quickly crossing to the stairs, Simon parted the curtain and peered inside, only to hiss in dismay. For there, standing like a marble statue in front of the fire escape, was Jim. A totally zoned Jim, who by the look of him had been there for quite some time.
Stepping around the bed to reach his friend, Simon carefully placed his hands on Jim’s shoulders in an attempt to turn the immobile sentinel towards him. Even with the robe on, he could tell that Jim was icy cold, and needed to be warmed up, but first he needed to try and rouse the man. And for the life of him, he didn’t know how he was going to manage it. Sure, he had on occasion had to resort to shaking or sometimes even slapping Jim to pull him out of zones in the past, but this was way deeper than anything he had ever witnessed before. This was the sort of zone that needed a guide’s touch, and the little bastard had plainly done a runner and left his sentinel stranded and vulnerable.

Angry and indignant on Jim’s behalf, Simon set about easing the other man down onto the small bed, wrapping the quilt around the broad shoulders in an attempt to keep him warm. However, although the sentinel complied with his directions, there was no animation in the frozen features. The lights were on, but there was very definitely no one home.

Knowing that there was nothing else he could do for the moment, Simon left the room and stood in the kitchen, cell phone in hand as he called in to the PD. Patched through to Joel, Simon quickly and succinctly explained the situation, requesting medical assistance for the zoned sentinel, and asking that an APB be put out for the missing Sandburg. The guide needed to be located urgently if Jim wasn’t to succumb to the zone and cease to breathe on his own, and it was very likely that Sandburg would need assistance himself; through the shielding that only his sentinel could provide.

Cursing the errant guide with uncharacteristic eloquence, Simon returned to Jim’s side, to watch over his friend until help arrived.

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Same morning, in Beth’s rooms:

Blair woke up to an equally unpleasant reality, which was far from what he had expected. Rather than feeling refreshed after several hours’ of undisturbed rest, his head pounded like the hangover from hell, and he was hard put not to moan aloud in agony as he gripped his temples, sure that his head was going to fall off his shoulders at any moment. For long minutes he forced himself to breathe deeply, trying to control the worst of the pain, and after a while, he was finally able to engage his thought processes, even though the results were definitely not what he would have wished for. Oh goddess! It’s true. The bond is already too strong and I need Ellison’s shielding. This agony – this pressure I’m suffering – it has to be outside emotional input. And I can’t bear it….

Just then Beth arrived at his side, accompanied by Tim, and both of his friends’ faces reflected their consternation at his state.

“Oh shit!” Tim murmured to himself as much as to Beth, swiftly cataloguing and analysing everything he could ascertain about Blair’s pitiful condition. “You said he was bonded, and it looks to me as if it’s a primal bond. We were afraid of that after learning about his high guide ranking. So who the hell got their claws into him? It must have been after the explosion, when he was at their mercy!”

“I think I know,” Beth replied softly, although her expression was hard and her pretty face was twisted by the fury and indignation within. “That detective who came to Hargrove Hall looking for Blair. I think his name was Ellison. I trusted that pig, and now look what he’s done! Bastard!”

At her words, Blair moaned anew at the aggression pouring off his friend, and both Tim and Beth tried valiantly to control their extreme emotions for his sake. But it wasn’t easy, and it was obvious that Blair was still in serious trouble.

Forcing herself to speak softly, Beth sat beside Blair on the sofa, taking his hands into hers as she
tried to send comforting thoughts to him. “Blair, hon, what do you want to do? Should we call an ambulance? Perhaps the hospital can give you some sort of temporary dampening medication?”

Blair gazed up at her for a moment, eyes glazed with pain, but then he slowly shook his head.

“No, Beth. There’s only one thing I can do. I have to go back to Ellison; my sentinel whether I like it or not. He’s the only one who can really help me, and I think he’ll need me too. I think he might have zoned in my absence, and I need to bring him back. I’m so sorry.”

“No, Blair,” Beth replied firmly. “You have nothing to apologise for. You didn’t deserve this, and it’s more than cruel that you should be forced to put it right. But if it’s the only way, then we’ll help you. We’ll take you back to Ellison, but I want to be sure that he won’t hurt you. We both need to know that.

“And don’t worry about clearing your office, hon. We’ll take care of that too, and pack up your stuff. I can store it here if you like, or get it delivered wherever you want, OK? You can let me know once you’re in a fit state to make a decision.

“But now we’d better get you on your feet, hon, and get you back to your sentinel, much as it goes against my better judgement.”

And all Blair could do was nod gratefully as his friends carefully eased him to his feet, ready to take him back to face his unlooked-for and certainly unwelcome destiny.

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Shortly afterwards, the loft:

Simon watched from the side-lines as the paramedics worked on Jim, giving him oxygen as they prepared him for transport to the hospital. Nothing Simon or they had done had had any effect on the zoned sentinel, so, in the continued absence of his guide, there was no other option but to put him on a respirator. The fierce scowl on the captain’s face bore testament to his turbulent emotions, and the paramedics were giving him a wide berth out of pure self-preservation.

The most recent update from Joel confirmed that Sandburg was still missing, and Simon’s patience had run out.

However, just as Jim was lifted onto the gurney, there was a tentative knock on the door. Striding over to pull it open, Simon’s jaw dropped as he was confronted by the sight he had least expected to see. Two young people, a man and a pretty redhead girl, supported a drooping Sandburg between them. The guide looked in terrible shape, and by the angry scowls on his companions’ faces, it would seem that they were prepared to protect him against all comers. It was on the tip of Simon’s tongue to let into them, needing to vent his rage, when Blair raised his head to meet the captain’s ferocious stare, and dispelled the vitriolic words before they were uttered. Thoroughly shaken, Simon took in the huge, wounded eyes and drawn, battered features, touched despite himself by the pain-filled words the suffering guide muttered.

“I’m sorry. I didn’t know…..”

The last vestiges of his ire dissipating in the face of such genuine misery, Simon stepped back to let the three enter, then carefully placed both large hands on Blair’s shoulders, encouraging the young man to meet his gaze again. Ignoring the other two for the time being, he asked gently, “What, Blair? What didn’t you know?”

Blair shuddered beneath his hands, then made an enormous effort to respond, his voice rough and breaking as he said, “D…didn’t understand the strength of our connection. I…I thought if I put some
distance between us I could come up with…with a plan for…for some sort of realistic working partnership. A…a relationship that allowed us some s…s…space. Some privacy.

“B…but I was wrong. ‘S too late. Bond’s already too strong. I…we…have to be together. Can’t survive without each other. So not fair….” This last tailing off into a sorrowful sigh.

“I’m sorry, kid. Believe me. I didn’t understand either,” Simon replied gently. Then, wrapping a strong, supportive arm around Blair’s shaking shoulders, he led the smaller man over to the gurney where Jim lay. “There you go, kid. Good luck!” and he backed away, leaving the guide to do whatever he needed to do to reconnect with his sentinel.

As the others in the room withdrew as far as they could in order to allow the pair as much privacy as possible, Blair sank wearily to his knees beside the gurney and rested one hand over the sentinel’s heart, while his other hand began to stroke Jim’s bicep. After the paramedic removed the oxygen mask at his request, Blair leaned forward so that his breath could easily reach the sentinel’s nostrils, and began to speak softly, encouraging Jim to wake.

“Come on, Big Guy. Time to wake up,” he murmured. “It’s OK, Jim. I’m back. You need to wake up now, sentinel. I need you to wake up. I…I don’t think I can live without you, Jim, and I think it might be the same for you. Please, man. Wake up for me?”

For a while there was no response – no sign that Ellison had registered his guide’s presence - so Blair carried on in the same vein, growing more and more frightened and frustrated by the minute. However, just as he was beginning to despair and ask for the oxygen mask to be replaced, he felt an increase in the heartbeat beneath his hand, and saw the tiniest twitch of Jim’s nose. “That’s it, man. Come on, Jim. You’re nearly there, sentinel. Come on….”

He was rewarded by Jim taking in a huge, shuddering breath, followed by another and another until the sentinel was once more breathing deeply and evenly on his own. And as the sentinel rose gradually towards consciousness, Blair felt the pain in his head recede as Jim’s shields automatically cocooned him, protecting his mind once again from external emotions. The relief was exquisite, and he collapsed gratefully to his butt beside the gurney, although he maintained his gentle grasp on Jim’s arm. With his eyes closed as he relished the much-needed peace, he missed seeing Jim’s eyes flutter open, the handsome head turning immediately to seek his guide. And those ice blue eyes weren’t accusatory or angry, but full of relief and gratitude.

His guide had come back.

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Part 3: Reluctant Heroes:

One week later, the loft:

“You sure you’re ready for this, Chief?” Jim asked, eyeing his new roommate and guide worriedly. They were about to leave for the PD for Blair’s first day as Jim’s official guide, but by the expression on the young man’s face, you’d think he was going to the gallows. But Jim could hardly blame him. The kid’s life had been turned upside down, and one week was hardly enough to try and right the wrongs that had been done to him. However, selfish as it may be, for his part Jim couldn’t have been happier. His senses sang in Sandburg’s presence, and he couldn’t wait to see how much better his performance in the field would be now he could use them properly. For sure, they still weren’t at maximum strength – that could only be achieved if they bonded fully and physically – but it was still a vast improvement, and he suspected that Simon was going to be more than happy with the results.
But the fact remained that Blair had lost everything he had held dear to him, and as yet the only thing Jim had been able to do for him was settle him in the small loft bedroom with his few surviving possessions, and try to offer what sympathy and comfort he could. He truly hoped that at some point in the not-too-distant future he would at least be able to get Blair reinstated into Rainier’s doctoral programme, but even if they managed to prove wrongful dismissal from his teaching post, Jim didn’t see how his guide would have time to resume that career and also do his duty as Jim’s backup.

Yes, Blair had every right to be glum, but even in the face of his own sadness, the young man still couldn’t help but throw himself into his new role as guide and helpmeet. Apparently it simply wasn’t in him to sit around feeling sorry for himself, his customary energy levels demanding constructive action. He had already changed several of Jim’s cleaning products and toiletries, and even though Jim had thought he had gotten a reasonable handle on creating a sentinel-friendly environment for himself, within a very short time Blair had disabused him of that notion. He could cook as well, so all in all Jim had no cause for complaint.

However, despite all that, Blair was still avoiding him wherever possible, plainly uncomfortable with the necessity for mutual physical contact. Their conversation was stilted, and confined to inconsequential generalities when not dealing with specific sentinel and guide issues, and Jim longed for some indication that his guide no longer believed that he was nothing more than some sort of indentured servant. Something had to give, and Jim prayed fervently that it would be sooner rather than later. His attraction to and desire for the beautiful young man under his roof was growing, and he really, really didn’t want to act on it against Blair’s wishes.

Jim’s brief reverie was derailed as Blair looked up at him, his young face serious as he finally responded to Jim’s query.

“Guess I’ll have to be, won’t I? It’s not as if I can get out of it,” he murmured despondently. “Best get it over with.”

And there really wasn’t anything constructive Jim could say in answer to that, so he simply nodded briskly. “OK, then, Chief. Let’s shake a leg.”

The trip to the PD was carried out in silence, with both men lost in their own thoughts. Although Jim glanced frequently over at his introspective passenger, he was at a loss as to how to address him without sounding like a complete imbecile, so he held his tongue. And as for Blair, he appeared to be trying to meditate, so Jim reckoned that, if that was what it took to give his guide a bit of peace of mind, then he should refrain from trying to butt in. That said, he couldn’t help but tune in to the young man’s vital signs, his ever-ready protective instincts on the alert for severe distress. And it had to be said that, as they pulled in to the PD’s underground parking lot, Sandburg’s heart-rate increased dramatically even as his breathing grew short and his facial muscles tightened in overt stress.

Pulling in to his usual spot, Jim turned off the ignition and faced Blair, his expression both concerned and, truth be told, a little impatient.

“Are you sure you’re OK, Chief? Your heart’s galloping, and I can sense your anxiety. Are you going to freak out on me as soon as we hit the MCU?”

He hadn’t meant to sound so critical, but he knew he deserved the response he got. Blair’s brows drew together in a frown, and his jaw tightened as he turned to glare at Jim. “You know what, Jim? No, I’m NOT OK! But you don’t have to concern yourself. I’ve been coping with bad shit for years on my own, so don’t worry that I’m going to embarrass you. Again!” and with that he threw open the passenger door and climbed out to stalk purposefully towards the elevators, not even bothering to
see if Jim was following him.

Feeling as if he’d been well and truly put in his place, Jim grimaced wryly to himself and locked up the truck, striding quickly after the retreating guide. Sandburg might believe that he was just fine with this new situation, but Jim believed that he knew better, and wanted to make sure he was on hand when the realisation hit.

In actual fact, although he wouldn’t ever admit it out loud, Blair’s emotions when he entered the elevator were anything but OK. He recalled only too clearly the last time he had ridden in this car, and although this time there was only him and Jim inside, it didn’t make him feel any better or safer. He didn’t want to be here, and he certainly wasn’t looking forward to being introduced to Jim’s colleagues. After all, some of them would undoubtedly have seen him going into melt-down, and then passing out like some damsel in distress, so how the hell they were going to react to him now didn’t bear thinking of. But he had no intention of cringing behind Jim’s broad back, or succumbing to the tears of shame and frustration he would have dearly liked to shed, so he straightened his shoulders as the car stopped at the sixth floor, and facing front and centre, stepped out into the corridor, head held high even if his insides quaked like jello.

Ruefully impressed by his guide’s show of bravado, Jim quickly stepped out behind him and immediately threw a supportive arm around Blair’s shoulders, ignoring the minute flinch the action evoked. He knew that, despite his reluctance to admit it, right now Blair needed his sentinel’s support both physically and mentally. Still relatively untried when it came to the empathic stuff; and stressed to boot; the young man would have to accept Jim’s shielding whether he liked it or not.

They entered the bullpen together, and for a moment no one noticed the new arrivals. However, seconds later, a strident, accented voice cut across the background noise.

“Hey, Jimbo! G’day, mate! Good to see you back. And with your new guide! Introduce me!”

As Jim frowned in exasperation, and a startled Blair turned towards the owner of the voice, a tall, attractive brunette strode towards them, a wide and friendly grin on her face as she turned her full attention on Blair. “Megan Connor, on an exchange programme from Down Under,” she continued blithely, ignoring Jim as she took Blair’s hand in both of hers. “And you must be Blair Sandburg. Simon’s told us about you, Sandy. But he never said you were so cute! Good luck keeping this big bugger in line. He needs all the bloody help he can get!”

Red-faced in embarrassment, Blair took a moment to respond, aware that he was now the centre of attention and not liking it at all despite the Aussie detective’s friendliness. But he quickly shook off his funk and summoned up a somewhat forced smile, which became much more genuine when Megan beamed happily back at him.

“Pleased to meet you, Inspector Connor. Jim’s told me a little about his colleagues, and it’s good to see you in person.”

“It’s Megan, Sandy, and I just know we’re going to be best friends. And here’s Joel. Captain Taggart. He’s my usual partner. He’s going to love you too,” she added in a conspiratorial aside, indicating a rather portly, genially smiling, dark skinned man who was making his way over to join them.

Cautiously trying out his empathic skills, Blair was relieved to discover that both Megan and Joel Taggart seemed to be completely without malice; simply pleased to see him; and he relaxed accordingly. When Joel took his hand and introduced himself also, Blair responded with growing enthusiasm, the slight bounce on his toes and sparkle in his big blue eyes offering a glimpse of his normal joie de vivre. Unfortunately, the cordial interaction unwittingly caused Jim a sharp pang of
jealousy to see his guide reacting so positively to his two colleagues when there was such a strained atmosphere between Blair and him. However, Blair quickly picked up on Jim’s anger, and shut down again, causing Joel and Megan to frown in concern, and Jim to feel mean and small-minded at his own bad attitude. Fortunately for him, he was saved from having to come up with some lame excuse for his behaviour as Simon chose that moment to stick his head out of his office door and bellow, “Ellison, my office. And bring your guide with you!”

Offering his friends a shrug and an apologetic half-grin, Jim gathered up his quiet guide and ushered him towards the captain’s office, mentally kicking himself for his over-possessive aggression even though he knew it was the sentinel within determined on protecting his own. Until Blair truly accepted the importance of his role in Jim’s life, he would undoubtedly continue to be irritated by such primal posturing even if it was indicative of Jim’s true feelings for him.

On entering the office, both men took the seats indicated by the captain, sitting across from him as he regarded them seriously from behind his desk. He was particularly focussed on Blair, and the young man had the uncomfortable impression that he was being assessed, and perhaps not living up to some expected standard. For sure he could tell that Captain Banks wasn’t particularly relaxed and affable, but at the same time, he recalled how the big man had treated him when he returned to the loft to get Jim out of that zone. Banks had changed abruptly from furious to sympathetic once he had realised how badly Blair was suffering, so the man wasn’t without finer feelings.

Now, however, Blair was soon to be instated officially as part of his team, even though still technically a civilian, so he supposed that the captain would expect and demand a certain code of conduct. Part of him was inclined to be obstreperous; because he was here against his will after all; but another part – the more predominant side to his nature - demanded that he do his best at all times, and he reluctantly acknowledged that that would undoubtedly turn out to be the case from hereon in. He therefore met the captain’s gaze steadily, keeping his cool and unconsciously creating a favourable impression despite himself.

From Simon’s point of view, he hadn’t been looking forward to this initial interview, simply because his job was hard enough without the additional stress that mollycoddling a new guide was likely to add, but if he wanted to keep his top detective on the team, it had to be done. Then again, the young man before him hardly resembled the fragile, hurting guide he had first seen, and he was pleased to note the serious and intelligent expression on the young man’s face and in his wide blue eyes. He realised that he shouldn’t really be surprised, given Sandburg’s history. He was, after all, highly intelligent if his records were anything to go by. Starting at Rainier at barely sixteen and achieving his Master’s by the age of twenty wasn’t anything to be sneezed at. But he was still very young and untried for all that when it came to the sort of environment he could expect to encounter as guide to a cop, and that most definitely pricked Simon’s conscience. But it was what it was, and there was no point in delaying the inevitable, so Simon began his welcoming spiel without further ado.

“Guide Sandburg. Blair. I’d like to welcome you to the Major Crimes Unit. I know that it’s not anything you could have foreseen, but as Detective Ellison’s guide, I’m sure you will eventually find at least some aspects rewarding. I’ll begin by giving you a quick run-down on the official paperwork and procedures you’ll need to complete today, and then leave you in your sentinel’s hands to get orientated….”

Sitting quietly beside his guide, Jim tuned out the routine speech as he scanned the young man carefully, his mind wandering as he relished the sensory input. Blair looked good, and Jim felt almost paternally proud of his appearance. The shining curls were contained in a neat ponytail at his nape, and although Blair had put in the two gold hoops that normally adorned his left earlobe in a tiny act of bravado, Jim wasn’t complaining. The lovely features were almost back to normal now, with the bruising on the wide forehead fading rapidly, and only a small dressing now covering the stitches
which were due to be removed the following day. Blair was wearing one of his remaining, soft flannel shirts, but with new, well-fitting jeans and hiking boots which had replaced his lost, scruffy ones.

Jim grinned ruefully to himself as he recalled the shopping trip two days ago to replenish his guide’s wardrobe. At first, Blair had refused to consider using Jim’s money to make the requisite purchases, his fierce independence surfacing at the suggestion. He had lived a hand-to-mouth existence for much of his life, and not just as a student, but had always got by through his own efforts, and student loans. It went against the grain for him to accept what he saw as charity, and he certainly didn’t like the idea of being ‘kept’ by Jim. It was only when Jim explained that he was receiving a grant to cover initial expenses before Blair’s stipend kicked in that the young man reluctantly agreed.

But even then he had insisted on trawling the sales departments, determined not to waste money unnecessarily on over-priced designer labels and such, and Jim could only admire him for that. Jim had also insisted that they purchase a cheap pair of readers as a temporary measure until Blair could visit the eye doctor again, but that had backfired on him somewhat. A happy Blair had immediately taken advantage of his new spectacles and disappeared into his small room at every opportunity to lose himself in his books and papers, and the rapid clicking of his laptop keys quickly replaced the sounds of the guide’s voice in Jim’s world. Even stilted conversation was music to the sentinel’s ears, and he could only hope that eventually they would reach a point in their relationship where Blair would seek him out and talk to him voluntarily.

Comfortable in the grounding presence of his guide, Jim allowed his senses to range further while he waited for Simon to finish, but within moments his attention was captured by a hushed conversation out in the bullpen. Megan and Joel were discussing him and his guide, and he didn’t care for what he was hearing. But it didn’t prevent him from continuing to listen in, even if he knew that he ought to be ashamed of his eavesdropping.

“Bloody hell, Joel,” hissed a plainly upset Megan. “Sandy looks about fifteen! How on god’s green earth does the captain expect him to cope with being Jimbo’s backup? He’s probably not even legal!”

“He’s not quite as young as he looks, Megs,” a less-than-happy sounding Joel responded. “I know he’s not twenty-one yet, but according to his files he’s travelled widely, and isn’t your usual naïve college kid. But having said that, I can’t help but agree with you. He should be back at Rainier teaching and working on his dissertation. If he’d wanted to be a guide, he’d have gotten tested years ago.”

“Yeah, that’s true, mate, but more importantly, what sort of relationship can he look forward to with Jimbo? I mean, from what I understand, there has to be some form of intimacy if the bond’s to be set and maintained. And by the look of Sandy, I would think that ‘consensual’ is way beyond his purview.”

“It’s none of our business, Megs, even if I do share your concerns. All we can do is be here for Blair if he needs us, but we can’t interfere with the bond. For better or worse, they’re connected now, and trying to split them up will endanger both of them.”

At that point, Jim realised that Simon had stopped speaking, and he quickly reeled in his hearing and turned his full attention back to his boss. It wasn’t easy to keep a neutral expression in the face of what he had just heard, but he managed it somehow, and even offered his friend and captain a small smile.

“Thanks, Captain. I’ll take Blair down to Personnel now, and we’ll get started. See you in a few.”
And if Blair shot him a bemused glance, having picked up on his internal disquiet, Jim made no comment.

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Two weeks later, MCU bullpen:

Blair followed Jim into the bullpen, his face as expressionless as possible for such a normally animated character, but unfortunately it was a look that was rapidly becoming the norm for the young man now. The past two weeks had been difficult to say the least, trying to adjust to his new life as guide to a sentinel detective, and in all honesty, it had been hard. As far as the work went, Jim had been thrilled to find out how adept Blair was when computers and paperwork were concerned. Not only was his guide a fast and accurate typist, but his IT and literary skills far outclassed anyone else in the department, and his quick mind easily absorbed all the niceties of the requisite databases and forms such that Jim had happily handed over that side of his workload to his partner. And to be fair, Blair didn’t mind, because even though most of it was mind-numbingly boring, at least it gave him something practical to keep him occupied.

On the other hand, he found himself generally side-lined when it came to case work, with Simon – and Jim, it had to be said – telling him firmly that he ‘wasn’t a cop’, despite the fact that on at least two occasions his diffidently offered suggestions had borne fruit. His agile mind enabled him to look at evidence from different angles, such that although his comments seemed to come from left field, they were usually right on the mark even though he was rarely congratulated for his unwanted input. It was hard for someone who had never before had his intellect called into question, even if his low self-esteem often caused him to feel socially inept, and now he felt adrift and worthless in his new world. True, the world of academia could be just as back-stabbing and jealously self-seeking as any large business corporation or public service sector, but he had always been able to hold his own amongst Rainier’s intelligentsia. Here, however, he was well aware that he was regarded by many of the cops, particularly the uniforms, as little more than ‘Ellison’s fuck toy / tagalong / bed warmer / gofer’ - delete as appropriate - having heard such comments for himself. It had to be said that, if Jim ever overheard any such mutterings, the perpetrator never repeated them in his hearing ever again, but the thoughts were undoubtedly still there.

He could expect no real backup from Simon Banks either. Although the man had proved to be sympathetic towards him when Blair had returned to Jim in such a poor condition, he had little time for a guide who had no wish to attend the academy and become a ‘real cop’. In his view, the ex-grad student was simply a necessary evil which he had to tolerate if he wanted to keep Jim in his department.

Blair had to admit that there were bright spots in his dull, PD existence, even though few and far between. Megan and Joel had made a point of including him in their conversations and banter, being very supportive of their new young friend, and Rhonda, Simon’s cool, blonde secretary, positively spoiled him. Some of the other detectives, like the ebullient, affable Henri ‘H’ Brown and his more reticent, dapper partner, Brian Rafe, had begun to accept his presence also, but generally he felt that he was just a joke, useful only to ground Jim while his sentinel was using his senses in the field.

Things weren’t much better in the loft either, and Blair knew that Jim was growing frustrated with him, but there was no help for it. The changes in his life had been too abrupt – too unavoidable – for him to come to terms with yet, and until he found a measure of peace within himself, he was unable to accommodate the sentinel’s desires. All he could do was soldier on, doing his job as guide and helpmeet to the best of his ability, and hope that eventually he could reconcile himself to his new role.
From Jim’s point of view, frustration was a mild description of what he was feeling, but he had no idea as to how he could ameliorate matters between him and his reluctant guide. As he crossed to his desk, he was acutely aware of Blair following closely in his footsteps, and as usual, didn’t like what his senses were telling him. The trouble was that unless – or until – Blair ever relented as far as real bonding was concerned, the superficial connection they had right now didn’t allow Jim into his guide’s inner thoughts, although it was adequate on a working basis. He therefore had to rely purely on what his senses told him about the tangible symptoms of young man’s demeanour, which wasn’t nearly enough for his peace of mind. Having said that, he had been practicing his scanning techniques diligently, and could now discern reasonably accurately how Blair might be feeling. For instance, right now, although his scent and physiological responses didn’t indicate overt distress, yet they were tainted with what Jim could only describe as deep unhappiness, and that did nothing for his ever-present guilt complex. But with that burden of guilt came irritation, however unfairly directed at his guide, and many a time already he had had cause to curse himself for his impatience and undeserved sarcasm. It was the same old responses again and again. React in anger and go on the offensive before anyone could get under his guard. It was a deeply ingrained behaviour which he was well aware of, but couldn’t seem to do anything about. Sad but true, and of no help whatsoever to their struggling relationship.

In all honesty, he had to admit that Blair was doing his best as far as his new role as guide was concerned. He worked hard to create a sentinel-friendly environment in the loft, and was constantly on the alert for anything that could adversely affect Jim’s senses whether at home or at work. Likewise, he had proved a godsend as far as Jim’s despised routine paperwork was concerned, and Jim knew that the other detectives envied his advantage on that front. But even though he reluctantly admitted to himself that Blair had made some very intuitive and effective observations during the cases they had thus far tackled together, he still couldn’t quite prevent himself from thinking of Blair as that naïve college kid, unprepared for life in the real world. It made no difference that, as Joel had remarked previously, Jim knew Blair had travelled extensively during his childhood, and despite his extreme youth, had already taken part in several taxing expeditions abroad during his studies. He just wasn’t a cop, and until he could truly embrace his new life in the PD, he would continue to be looked upon as merely an organic extension of his sentinel.

It certainly didn’t help that at home they still tiptoed around each other, and their conversation continued to be limited to generalities and stilted exchanges when Blair was unable to avoid contact. When he wasn’t actually engaged in mundane domestic activities or working with Jim on controlling the sentinel’s senses, he would make himself scarce, virtually locking himself in his little room with his books and his laptop, trying to study and absorb information as he always had; the clicking of those damned laptop keys a poor excuse for the sounds Jim really wanted to hear.

And there had been little progress on the bonding front, as Blair remained skittish and anxious when they were forced to make physical contact in order to maintain their sanity. He tolerated Jim’s platonic touches with commendable fortitude, inevitably tensing when the rather more intimate sniffing and licking of his neck occurred, but Jim was certain that he wasn’t mistaken in catching the occasional whiff of unwilling arousal which suggested that under other circumstances, Blair wouldn’t be averse to his advances. It was a small comfort to the inner sentinel; a promise of possibilities to come; and Jim had to be satisfied with that.

As the pair passed Megan’s desk, the irrepressible Aussie grinned widely at Blair, saying jokingly, “Hey, Sandy! How’re you doing, love? I don’t suppose Jimbo’ll let you off the leash long enough to give me a hand with my reports, would he? He’s one bloody lucky bugger to have a man of your talents as his right hand!”

Although he knew it was meant as a friendly greeting to make Blair feel welcome, Jim couldn’t help but stiffen in affront, especially when he discerned the brief surge of genuine happiness in Blair. He
was jealous, he knew, but that didn’t make him feel any better, and he couldn’t prevent his growled response.

“Do your own work, Connor, and stop interfering with my guide. He has work enough without you distracting him!”

As Blair frowned in hurt and embarrassment, withdrawing into himself once again, Megan responded in anger and disgust.

“Get over yourself, Ellison! Lighten up! Sandy’s allowed a bit of crack while he’s here, because God knows, he doesn’t get any from you, you po-faced sod!”

Knowing he’d overreacted yet again, making a fool of himself and upsetting his guide in the process, still Jim couldn’t bring himself to apologise. Instead he simply laid a not ungentle hand on Blair’s shoulder, and, ignoring Megan, steered the unresisting, if indignant young man the rest of the way to their shared desk.

He could virtually feel Megan’s accusing eyes boring into his back between his shoulder blades, and suspected that she wasn’t alone, but there was no way he was going to let his guard down.

It was almost a relief when a familiar bellow issued forth from Simon’s office.

“Ellison! My office, now. And bring your guide.”

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Once again seated before Simon’s wide desk, the pair waited more or less patiently for the captain to fill them in on what he needed from them. However, he was plainly in no hurry, taking his time to study them both in turn, Blair in particular, who was treated to a lengthy examination. It was only when the young guide felt the need to break eye contact and squirm uncomfortably in his seat that Simon relented.

He hadn’t intended to make Sandburg so uneasy, but he had wanted to see for himself how the guide was thriving – or not, as the case may be. Despite the already marked improvement in Jim’s performance in the field, Simon was well aware that things on the personal front weren’t going so well, having witnessed the on-going awkwardness between the pair.

Although it was still early days, he had hoped for some sign that sentinel and guide were beginning to mesh as a true bonded partnership, but that obviously wasn’t happening.

Sitting back in his chair, he rested his folded hands on his desk, and addressed them both, although his eyes sought and locked with Jim’s.

“So, Jim, Blair. Dare I ask how things are between you now? Or do I take it from that little macho display in the bullpen just now was indicative of your normal behaviour towards your guide? At risk of irritating your ‘inner sentinel’, Jim, I have to say that I agree with Megan. You do need to lighten up. Not only towards your colleagues, but, I dare to say, towards Blair also. I fully realise that, as a mere mundane I can’t hope to understand the deeper nuances of a sentinel and guide relationship, but I can tell when one of my team isn’t happy. And not just by the charged atmosphere in the bullpen, either.

“And you’re not happy, are you, kid?” he added, turning to face Blair; his commanding gaze demanding a response.

For a moment, Blair sat silent, torn between anger at the captain’s unwelcome prodding and anxiety regarding how Jim would likely react if he were to blurt out the honest truth. In the end, he decided that he would attempt a little of the obfuscation he used to be so good at, and see where they went from there. It didn’t take an empath to see that Jim really was irritated, and controlling his temper with no little difficulty, so Blair chose the diplomatic option.
“Um, well, I guess it’s not so bad, sir,” he began slowly. “I mean, it’s been a drastic change in direction for me – one which I didn’t expect – but I’m trying to make the most of it. I think – hope – that my presence is helping Jim control his senses, and I understand that his results are already improving. It’s just that, well, I miss my life and my friends at Rainier, and since I can’t go there now, it’s getting harder to keep in touch.”

He could have kicked himself at this last unintentional revelation, because it was something he had kept from Jim purely to avoid the response which was now forthcoming as Jim reacted to his words.

“What do you mean, Chief? Why can’t you go there? I don’t keep you under house arrest, and as long as you don’t stay away too long, I would have let you go and visit.” Jim’s expression was both irate and perplexed as he bridled at what he perceived as unspoken criticism. “I would’ve let him go and meet up with his buddies if he’d only asked, dammit! he told himself. But then again, a niggling little voice inside whispered slyly, are you sure of that? Jealous, much?

Raising his hands in a placatory gesture, Blair replied quickly, “Calm down, Jim! I wasn’t getting at you, honest! It’s…it’s just that Beth told me that Chancellor Edwards has made it clear that she doesn’t want me on campus. Apparently there was some adverse reaction to my dismissal, and she wants to avoid further trouble. So it’s best if I don’t show up there and stir up more ill-feeling.”

“Well, that’s a crock, Chief!” Jim snapped, his anger and indignation now firmly on Blair’s behalf. “I ought to go and confront that witch in person. I’m damned sure what she did was illegal. And you have every right to see your friends.”

However, before the subject could develop further, Simon interrupted peremptorily, “All right, gentlemen. Enough for now. You can carry on with this discussion between yourselves later, and I’ll be interested to hear the outcome in due course. What I want to talk about is how to strengthen your partnership and fix things between you. Would it do any good to go and see the counsellors at the Institute? They’re supposed to be the experts in such things.”

Both he and Jim were taken aback at the immediate and vehement denial that the suggestion elicited from Blair.

“No! No way!” he growled, his anger and distress clear to see. “After what that bastard Clemence did, I wouldn’t trust him or his people as far as I could throw them! He betrayed me. Gave out confidential information about me even though I’d made it quite clear that I didn’t want to be registered as a guide! I told him I didn’t want my results made public. He had no right to tell Edwards! No right to tell anyone!”

The astonishment on Simon’s face would almost have been comical under different circumstances, but right now laughter was the last thing on any of their minds.

“Wait a minute, Blair!” Simon began, confusion now uppermost in his expression. “Are you saying that the Institute deliberately violated your rights? That you specifically requested that your results remain undisclosed? I mean, I know Jim told me that your friend said that you never wanted to be a guide, but I didn’t really take it seriously. I just thought he must be exaggerating because the circumstances surrounding your meeting turned out to be so traumatic. When the Institute contacted me to tell me about you, no mention was made of your wishes one way or the other. I was supplied with your basic personnel file, medical records, guide rating and availability, and that’s all. I just thought it was an incredibly fortuitous coincidence.”

Turning to meet Jim’s frowning gaze, the two men exchanged a speaking look, before turning back as one to regard the smaller guide, who was trembling with barely controlled anger and distress.
“I’m truly sorry, Blair,” Simon continued, his tone gentle and compassionate. “I know that it’s too late to undo what has already happened between you two, but I promise that I’m going to follow this up. This must never happen again, even if Dr Clemence considers his actions justified. You were set up, no question about it, and that was totally unethical.”

Unfortunately, the whole question of pursuing justice for Blair had to be unceremoniously shelved when at that moment, an urgent call came in for Simon. Listening in unashamedly on account of the horror and consternation on his captain’s face, Jim overheard a message that sent a chill down his spine. Glancing over at Sandburg, who was experiencing both his sentinel’s and his captain’s profound dismay without the verbal explanation and was consequently looking on in wide-eyed trepidation; Jim reached across and squeezed his guide’s forearm in an attempt at tacit reassurance, offering the young man a grim smile before turning his attention back to Simon.

Terminating the call, Simon replaced the handset and locked eyes with Jim. “I’m guessing you heard all that, Jim,” he ground out, the ferocious scowl on his face betraying his simmering rage.

“Yeah, I did, boss,” Jim answered in a similar tone. However, before he could continue, both men were distracted by Blair, his youthful voice rising in pure anxiety and incipient panic.

“What? What’s wrong? What’s happened?”

Jim instantly reached over again and grasped one of his guide’s fluttering hands.

“Calm down, kiddo, and I’ll fill you in, OK? That was the Bomb Squad. They’ve received an anonymous tip-off that explosives have been hidden over at the court house. Some terrorist faction is threatening to blow it up in the middle of a major trial which is just about to commence. And they could have hostages.”

“Oh, my god!” breathed Blair in horror. “What are they doing about it? Can the building be evacuated?”

“It will be, son,” Simon answered him shortly, “but it has to be done carefully and quietly to avoid mass panic. And to try to avoid alerting the terrorists that they’ve been betrayed. And in the meantime, Captain Ross wants Jim to check out the scene. If anyone can trace those hidden explosives, he can. Are you going to be able to back him up?” and the big man’s steady gaze held Blair’s for long moments, looking for proof that the young man was up to the task.

Swallowing hard, Blair nodded sharply. “Yes. Yes, I can do it, sir,” he said firmly, even though there was an unmistakeable tremor in his voice. “Jim will need me.”

Grinning in relief and no little pride at his plucky guide’s words, Jim’s eyes expressed his approval even as his conscience suffered a pang of guilt for exposing Sandburg to such potential danger. He knew he couldn’t do the job without Blair’s grounding presence, although he dearly wished that it were possible.

But for better or worse, Blair was his true guide, and the tribe needed them to work together to avert possible disaster and carnage, at whatever cost to themselves.

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**Shortly afterwards, downtown, near Cascade’s Central Court House:**

“OK, Jim, Blair. Got your Kevlar? These are the most up-to-date plans we have, according to City Hall, so you should be good to go.” Captain David Ross of the Bomb Squad addressed the pair, his expression serious, but his manner exuding a quiet confidence as befitted his chosen career. His own
expression tight and focussed, Jim nodded sharply, his mind already in hunting mode as he contemplated the role allocated to him and Blair.

“Yes sir. As soon as we get the go-ahead, we’ll be on our way,” he replied, speaking for both of them. If he was concerned about Blair’s readiness to follow him into a potentially lethal situation, he couldn’t allow himself to dwell on it if he was to carry out his assignment to the best of his ability, so he concentrated determinedly on the business in hand. If they got out of this alive, then he would have time to comfort his young guide if necessary. But in the meantime, he had to trust in Blair’s ability to shelve his own fears while he worked for his sentinel, and the good of the tribe.

The three of them were presently standing amongst the organised chaos of the mobile HQ which had been set up a block away from the court house. After receiving a second tip-off; which had been authenticated both electronically and – more convincingly – by sentinel hearing and analysis as coming from the same source; TPTB had quickly mobilised a large task force to deal with the threat. A large contingent of cops, the S.W.A.T and Bomb Squads, plus the court’s own security services had been put on alert, and a swift plan of action devised. Two other sentinel and guide teams had also been made available, whose combined abilities were deemed to be crucial to the success of the operation.

Basically, as soon as the word came down from City Hall, one team, plus uniformed and plain clothes officers and on-site security personnel, would begin to evacuate the building in as calm and orderly fashion as possible, while keeping on the alert for possible terrorist presence. Since the number and identity of the alleged terrorists wasn’t known, sentinel senses would be invaluable in detecting anything or anyone out of the ordinary.

Meanwhile, the second team, plus some members of the Bomb Squad, sniffer dogs and other appropriately experienced personnel, would comb the underground parking garage, which was a potential site for the placement of explosives and / or car bombs.

Jim and Blair had drawn the short straw, so to speak, because of Jim’s greater sensory ability plus his prior experience in combat situations. With Blair’s help to ground him, he was to explore the sewage system beneath the court house, as it was believed that this was the most likely place for enough explosives to be located to cause the most structural damage as well as the most carnage and chaos.

Almost vibrating in place with nervous tension and anticipation, Blair glanced up at Jim’s stern profile, awed despite himself by the man’s sheer presence and hidden power. He might not have chosen to be here, but as an anthropologist, he recognised that this was ‘going native’ in the extreme. Being part of a team, and guide to such a talented sentinel, he couldn’t help but feel some pride in that even if he was terrified almost out of his mind. He just prayed that he would be up to the task, and wouldn’t let Jim or his colleagues down.

Almost as if he was aware of Blair’s thoughts and self-doubt, Jim returned his look, taking a moment to squeeze Blair’s shoulder supportively and allowing a flash of affection to warm his ice blue gaze before concentrating once again on his own state of readiness.

And then the command to go was received, and they were on the move, each member of the Task Force bound and determined to thwart the potential attack on their city if humanly possible.

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A few minutes later, and Jim and Blair were down in the main sewer system, following the plans which would lead them beneath the court house building. For a moment, Jim had struggled to control his extreme reaction to the combination of foul odours that threatened to overwhelm his senses, but with Blair’s voice and touch to ground him, he soon managed to filter out the worst of the smells.
Offering the young guide a wry, if strained grin, he murmured, “Thanks, Chief. That was pretty awful for a minute, I have to say. Are you OK? After all, you can’t dial it down!”

Grinning wanly in response, Blair snickered as he replied, “It’s not so bad, I guess, Jim. Once you get used to it, that is. But I’m going to need a long, hot shower once we’re done. This place is disgusting!”

“Sure is, Chief. So, let’s get on with it, shall we? Quicker we’re done, the quicker we can get cleaned up again.”

So saying, Jim turned to go, leading his guide unerringly through the maze of stinking, dripping tunnels towards their destination.

Several minutes later, Jim came to a halt, and Blair moved to his side to hear what he had to say.

“According to these plans, this next tunnel should take us right into the drain system directly beneath the courthouse. Keep your eyes peeled, Chief, for anything that looks out of the ordinary, if anything down here can be classed as such! I’m going to need you to stick close, and keep touching me and talking to me, OK? I’m going to be using all my senses bar taste, so I’ll need as much grounding as I can get.”

Nodding determinedly, Blair answered, “You got it, Jim. Good luck!” and after exchanging a quick glance that offered mutual support and tacit understanding, they set about their dangerous task.

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Meanwhile, inside the courthouse itself, the evacuation was going as smoothly as possible, with the majority of people maintaining their calm as they were ushered out of the building to regroup in an area of the city’s central square deemed far enough away from potential danger. Within a relatively short time, the courtrooms and offices had been checked out with no sign of anything untoward, so that the searchers were now going through the public areas such as the restrooms and cafeterias.

As they were carrying out their search, those in the underground garage were going about their business also, although it was no easy task with so many cars parked therein. However, they were determined to leave no stone unturned, so to speak, having been informed that the building above them appeared to be clear. If the tip-off was to be believed, the explosives had to be somewhere, and if not here in the garage, then they must be in the sewer system, and who better to locate them but the city’s alpha sentinel and his unwilling, but talented guide.

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Down below in the sewers, Jim was slowly making progress, his senses stretched to the limit as he was forced to continually filter out the stink of waste and noises like the scurrying of many rodent feet. He needed to employ sight also in the poorly-lit tunnels, such that he already had a headache, and his throat felt like sandpaper. But with Blair’s constant murmuring and gentle touches he was able to continue despite his discomfort, and at last their patience and diligence was rewarded. Hidden in a side tunnel, and packed around what appeared to be a huge underground central support pillar was a substantial amount of what Jim recognised as C4. Curtly ordering Blair to stay back, even though he knew the young man would most likely object, he approached cautiously, sight and hearing stretching out to ascertain what form of device was attached to it. As he might have guessed, Blair silently crept up behind him, so Jim simply shook his head in exasperation, and called in his information to the command centre, keeping his tone as level as possible.

“Ellison here. I’m directly beneath the court building in tunnel number SW 57. It branches off the
main sewer running East-West towards City Hall. There is a considerable amount of C4 packed around a support pillar, and it is connected to a timer. It’s probably one of a series of similar linked deposits distributed beneath the building, with this as the central trigger. The timer is currently at 9 minutes and counting. There’s no time to get the bomb disposal guys down here, so I’m going to try and defuse it myself. I’m sending Sandburg out now.”

Even as HQ responded, Blair growled mutinously, “No way, Sentinel! I’m staying here. You’ll need me!”

Jim didn’t have time to argue, as the command came back for them both to evacuate the area immediately. And there was no way Jim was going to obey that one either. Breaking the connection, he gave Blair a brief nod of reluctant assent, then concentrated on the device’s wiring, his delicate touch exploring the different connections while his sight and hearing tuned in on the timer’s LED display. With Blair’s warm palm resting on the small of his back, Jim used all of his military experience and sentinel know-how to discern the most probable wire to disconnect to safely break the circuit, and not having located any secondary detonator or booby trap, he took a deep breath, and then another, psyching himself up to do the deed.

“OK, Chief,” he murmured softly, sending the young man an affectionate, if exasperated grin. “Let’s do this!” and with a quick prayer to any deity who might be listening to save Blair if not himself, he disconnected the wire.

And nothing happened. The clock stopped at 4 minutes and 19 seconds, and Blair sagged against Jim’s back, shuddering now as he tried to hold back his hysterical laughter.

“Oh man! Oh, goddess! I thought that was it. Like, gone! Everything up in smoke,” he gasped. “You were fantastic, Jim. Truly awesome!” and for the first time, he spontaneously hugged the bigger man, his gratitude and admiration knowing no bounds.

As for Jim, his own relief was also laced with gratitude, because he knew that he would never have been able to accomplish his task successfully without Blair’s unerring support. That didn’t mean to say that he wouldn’t have words with his guide about obeying orders in the future, but for now he simply hugged the smaller body to him, revelling in a few shared moments of genuine admiration and mutual respect.

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Following morning, MCU bullpen:

When Jim and Blair pushed through the bullpen doors the following morning, Blair stopped dead in his tracks in surprise to see everyone present rise to their feet and break into enthusiastic applause. Automatically assuming that it was for Jim, he stepped aside, and added his own applause, grinning like a loon as Jim paused in uncharacteristic uncertainty.

“Congratulations, man,” Blair murmured. “Looks like you’re getting praise where it’s due!”

However, Jim scowled in fond irritation as he reached out and pulled the younger man to him, tucking him into his side as he growled, “It’s not just for me, Chief! What makes you think that? I couldn’t have done it without you!”

“He’s right, Sandy,” said a grinning Megan, who was in the vanguard as the bullpen occupants closed in en masse to surround the pair. “You’re a regular hero, love. And Jim too, of course,” she added with a cheeky grin, and without further ado, she grabbed hold of Blair and gave him a big, smacking kiss on the cheek before hugging the stuffing out of him. She did actually offer her
congratulations to Jim also, but Jim ruefully noted that his reward came in the form of a peck on the cheek and a none-too-gentle thump on the bicep.

Then again, everyone else present seemed to want to either hug both men, or shake their hands or slap them on the back, and it wasn’t until Simon bellowed from his office that the noisy meeting and greeting broke up.

“Ellison, Sandburg, my office. Now!”

As the pair made their way across the bullpen to obey their captain’s command, Megan watched them go, a speculative gleam in her eye as she murmured aside to Joel.

“You know, Joel, I think there’s something different about those two. I mean, I know that Sandy’s just proved to all and sundry that he’s a bloody good guide to Jim, and that’s just got to boost his confidence. But there’s something bigger somehow. Something stronger between them. Do you think they’ve bonded?”

“You could be right, Megs,” Joel replied thoughtfully. “I pray that you are. I believe they were made for each other, whimsical as that sounds. A sentinel and guide partnership to be proud of.”

Unsurprisingly, Jim had heard every word as he ushered Blair into Simon’s office, and he grinned smugly to himself as he closed the door. *If only they knew!*

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**Part 4: A Mutual Understanding:**

**Previous evening, back at the loft:**

It was two very tired and grubby men who entered the loft late in the evening, having undergone an interim debriefing and played their part in dealing with the aftermath of the afternoon’s operation. Just because the explosives had been successfully defused didn’t mean that the action was over and done with. They still had to be dismantled and removed and the area declared safe, and a follow-up investigation was in progress to trace and identify the perpetrators.

However, that was mostly in the hands of the local FBI now, along with other specialist anti-terrorist agents, so that at least for the time being, Jim and Blair could grab a bit of much-needed down time.

Unsurprisingly, once the rumour-mill had gotten wind of the threatened attack, the press had been quick to converge on the area outside the court house, and it didn’t take long for word to spread about Jim and Blair’s heroic efforts down in the sewers. Consequently, the moment they emerged to return to the mobile HQ, they had been pretty much mobbed by excited cameramen and pushy interviewers, such that Jim, already suffering from sensory exhaustion, came very near to losing it altogether. It was only his young guide clinging to his arm and murmuring soothing words that got them through the throng without Jim punching someone out.

Once inside the HQ, they were cheered and congratulated by all present, except for Captain Ross, who had made it very clear what he thought of Jim’s disobeying orders. And then he had shaken their hands and told them well done.

Once the area had been cleared as thoroughly as possible the task force dispersed, with the main players ordered to reconvene at Central PD the following morning for a full de-brief and consultation with the FBI regarding the follow up operation. On the orders of Simon Banks, who had arrived in person to check out and congratulate his men, Jim and Blair were finally able to slip away, managing
to avoid the milling media circus to return to the loft for some much-needed peace and quiet.

As soon as the door closed behind them, Blair dragged himself over to the nearest sofa and collapsed into it, leaning his head back against the seat cushions with a sigh.

“Gods! I’m wiped!” he murmured, closing his eyes wearily. “Never felt so tired in my life. I mean, this is me – ex grad student for whom all-nighters used to be the norm! Must be the effects of coming down from an adrenalin high, I guess. How do you cope with it, man?” he continued, addressing Jim and cracking open one eye. “I mean, with the sort of Action Man life you’ve led, you must have had to develop some sort of coping mechanism? You’ve got to let me in on your secret!”

Crossing over to join his guide, Jim grinned fondly down at the slumped figure. “Nah, no secret, Chief. It’s just something you get used to. And to be honest, today’s little fiasco was exceptional. Which is why I’m so proud of you, Junior, even if you did disobey my orders!”

“Yeah, like you disobeyed Captain Ross’s,” Blair answered with a tired grin. “But thanks, man. For the compliment. It means a lot to me.” Then he looked up and met Jim’s steady gaze, his own expression turning shy.

“Um, I was glad to do it, you know. Glad to be able to help. I mean, I was so scared I thought I was going to pee my pants, but I knew I needed to stay. It felt right.”

Jim’s smile became even warmer as he settled in the seat next to Blair. Hitching around so he could look the young man in the eye, he said softly, “It felt right to me too, Chief. I never thought I’d ever admit that I needed a guide, but I do. And you’re a perfect fit, kiddo. I’m just so sorry you’ve had to give up so much.”

Blair looked away for a moment, chewing nervously on his full lower lip as he was assailed by a new set of doubts. Doubts arising from a whole new concept that had hit him hard today, and which he had never expected. The concept of actually bonding willingly with this man. This sentinel who risked his life on an almost daily basis to protect the tribe. Sure, he wasn’t perfect. Jim the man was moody, irascible and anal, but he was also brave, loyal and protective of Blair to a degree which the young man had never experienced before, even from his mother. And suddenly he felt the need to reciprocate. But he was scared. Could he go through with it, and was he good enough? If he gave himself to Jim, it had to be forever. Would Jim want him like that for the rest of their lives together? Or would the passion soon die and be replaced by a routine working arrangement? Commitment was something Blair had never learned from his peripatetic parent, who flitted from relationship to relationship without a second thought; ‘detaching with love’ whenever her wanderlust kicked in again.

A gentle nudge brought him out of his brief reverie. “What’s up, kiddo? You look worried. Are you OK?”

And suddenly Blair knew what he had to do, even if it backfired on him. Turning to face Jim, he reached up and cupped the bigger man’s face in his palm.

“I…I need to…to say something, man, but it’s not coming easily. I…I think I’m ready now. To bond, that is. But I’m scared. I mean, Naomi always told me that it was the person, not the package that was important, and I’m so down with that. But…um…I had a bad experience with the only boyfriend I ever slept with, so I’ve only dated girls since then.

“And it’s not as if someone like you who looks like a Greek god would really want me anyway if it wasn’t for the fact that I’m a compatible guide.”
Moving slowly so as not to spook the already nervous young man any further, Jim reached out and cupped Blair’s cheek also, stroking the plump lips with his thumb while he savoured the slight burn from Blair’s beard stubble against his palm. Gazing deeply into the wide blue eyes, Jim replied with as much sincerity as he could muster.

“I would be honoured to bond with you, my guide. And I swear to you I shall never knowingly hurt you. I want us to be for always, Blair. Sentinel and guide, Jim and Blair. If you can trust me that far, I’d like nothing more than to take you to bed right now. Then again, perhaps you’d like to have a shower first? Get comfortable? We could always share one, babe. Save water and get to know each other. How about it?”

And Blair could think of absolutely no reason why not.

Having said that, once in the bathroom, Blair found his nervousness kicking in again. Always body-conscious, he never willingly undressed in public, and after seeing Jim’s magnificent body revealed in all its glory for the first time, it was all he could do to try and follow suit. But Jim was having none of it. Gently taking over the task of undressing the young guide, his own eyes glowed in pleasure and admiration as the smaller body was revealed fully at last.

“You’re beautiful, babe,” he murmured honestly, resting his hands on Blair’s shoulders. It was true. Although very different from his own buff physique, Blair was compact and perfectly in proportion. Not as overtly muscled, yet he was no skinny weakling either, and Jim was delighted to note the soft mat of chest hair which he couldn’t wait to run his fingers through. The cinnamon-coloured nipples peaking out from behind the light brown curls begged for his attention, as did the ample genitals nestled in a nest of crisper curls. Although the expression on Blair’s face suggested that he was less than convinced of the truth behind Jim’s statement, Jim promised himself that he would spend the rest of their lives proving it.

“Come on, babe. The sooner we get ourselves cleaned up, the quicker we can get to bed. And don’t worry, Chief. If you find that you’re too tired to do much after all tonight that’s OK. Just say you’ll come up and share my bed tonight and from now on, and we’ll take it from there.”

Greatly relieved by Jim’s patience and understanding, Blair nodded and smiled, his anxiety receding as he took Jim’s offered hand and stepped under the warm shower with him.

Over the next few minutes, Jim took great delight in washing his young guide, deliberately keeping his actions soothing rather than arousing until he felt the smaller body relaxing under his ministrations. And once he had relaxed enough, Blair shyly began to reciprocate; worshipping the sentinel’s sculpted form in his turn.

Only when the water began to cool did they step out, drying off quickly before going upstairs hand in hand, wearing nothing but robes.

Once they reached the bedroom, Blair’s heart rate increased noticeably at the sight of the big bed, but Jim was quick to reassure him. After all, he’d not expected such rapid progress tonight, and the last thing he wanted to do was make Blair regret his courageous decision. If he had to control himself, then that’s what he would do rather than scare the young man off, even if it was difficult in the extreme. It was easy to forget that Blair was still a few months off twenty one, despite the fact that he’d crammed more into his short years than most people experienced in a lifetime, and Jim refused to take him for granted in any way now he had offered himself so unselfishly.

“It’s OK, babe. We don’t have to do anything you’re not ready for, kiddo. But if it’s OK with you, I’d like to imprint you properly, then just hold you, if that’s as far as you want to go tonight. How about it?”
Nodding shyly, Blair allowed himself to be positioned comfortably in the centre of the large bed, and after climbing in beside him, Jim immediately pulled up the bedding to cover them both, easily discerning that Blair was embarrassed by his nakedness. Propping himself up on one elbow, he smiled softly down into the shy eyes gazing up at him with such trust and acceptance, even if coloured by a touch of underlying anxiety.

However, there was one thing Jim needed to get clear before he did anything else, because he knew that the success of their future relationship might well depend on it and he didn’t want to blow his chances before they barely began.

“Babe, I don’t want to upset you, but there’s something I think I need to know so I don’t inadvertently hurt you. When you said you’d had a bad experience, what did you mean? Do you feel able to tell me?”

Blair glanced away for a moment, biting his lip, but he knew he would have to ‘fess up. Jim deserved to know just why Blair had been so antsy about being touched, because it wasn’t all about his reluctance to bond, for sure.

“Um, well, when I started at Rainier, it was difficult to fit in at first. I was barely sixteen, you see, and way too skinny and nerdy for most of my peers. And I couldn’t believe my luck when Mike asked me out for a date. He was two years older, and gorgeous. A football jock, with a physique very like yours. I have no idea what he saw in me, but I was so flattered. I was lonely, and so grateful for his attention.

“Anyway, at first it was great. He was really nice to me, and we went out a few times. But then he said he wanted to make love to me, and I agreed. I mean, like I said before, Naomi always encouraged me to see the person not the package, so theoretically I didn’t have a problem. But it didn’t turn out as I expected. I mean, I guess it wasn’t really rape, because I’d agreed, but he got carried away. Wouldn’t stop even when I asked him to. He hurt me, and although he apologised profusely afterwards, I told him I never wanted to see him again. And after that, I only dated girls, because they were much safer. So now you know,” he ended, the unwarranted shame in his tone and expression piercing Jim to the heart. Unsurprisingly, the sentinel was instantly aggrieved on behalf of his mate, but Jim, as Blair’s soon-to-be-lover and life-partner, realised immediately that the empath would feel his indignation, and might well believe that it was directed at him, so he was quick to reassure the anxious guide.

“Oh, babe! I’m so sorry. I didn’t mean to upset you, but thank you for telling me. I promise that I’ll never ask you to do anything you’re not ready for, even though I dearly hope that one day you’ll trust me enough to let me take you, and take care of you,” and so saying, he lay down and encouraged a willing Blair to scoot into his arms for a reassuring cuddle.

After a few minutes, the cuddle became a little more active, and Jim deemed it time to begin imprinting the beautiful body fully and lovingly. With Blair’s growing cooperation, he tasted, listened, touched, sniffed and looked his fill until the smaller man was almost squirming in heated desire. Never before had Blair been the object of such single-minded, loving scrutiny, and his physical responses reacted accordingly. Greatly daring, he reached up and slipped one hand around the back of Jim’s neck, offering his mouth for a kiss. And a kiss he got. A kiss like he had never had before. Gentle yet possessive, worshipful and thorough, he moaned in desire. And when Jim reached down to take Blair’s straining shaft in his hand; it seemed quite natural for Blair to follow suit. So lost were they in the burgeoning throes of rising passion that with remarkably little time and effort, they had come within milliseconds of each other, and the bond sang between them, bright and clear.

Blair felt the sentinel nudge into his mind, but with care and respect, not the brutal invasion he had
half expected. And he reciprocated in kind, carefully entering Jim’s thoughts but not attempting to go where he wasn’t specifically invited, even if he could undoubtedly have forced his way in if he’d been so inclined. But despite their self-imposed restrictions; learning so much about each other in such an instant of exquisite enlightenment still left them both smiling contentedly into each other’s eyes; sentinel and guide as one once again as they always had been, and always would be.

Present: back in Simon Banks’ office:

As Jim and Blair settled into their seats under Simon’s shrewd gaze, Blair felt a moment of déjà vu before Jim’s warm hand on his knee distracted him. The difference in both men’s demeanour hadn’t gone unnoticed by their captain, and it was plain that he wanted to check them out before filling them in on what to expect in the upcoming inter-departmental meeting.

“Well, you two certainly look a whole lot better than when you went home yesterday. You especially, Jim. You look like the cat that got the cream. Is there something I should know?”

He wasn’t surprised when Sandburg ducked his head briefly, blushing most fetchingly before he raised his head again to meet Simon’s now warm regard. It was Jim who responded first, however, but not before sharing a mutually understanding smile with his guide.

“You’re right, boss. Blair has done me the honour of agreeing to bond with me, so we are now together in all ways. A true bonded pair.”

Simon’s grin was wide and genuine as he looked from one to the other. “That’s great, Jim, Blair! I’m truly happy for you both, and not just on my own behalf. I was worried that it might never happen – that there would be too much baggage between you – but I couldn’t be more pleased for you. You’ve already proved beyond a doubt that you have the potential to be one of the strongest pairs we’ve ever had in the Pacific North West, and I’m proud to have you in my department. Congratulations, both of you.”

Blair’s shy smile and quietly-uttered, “Thank you, Captain,” touched the older man, as did the open affection in Jim’s face as he took his guide’s hand. It did Simon’s heart good to see his friend so unconditionally happy at last, and he just prayed that their partnership would be long, happy and fruitful, because the gods knew, they deserved it.

Unfortunately, this wasn’t the time to be indulging in pleasantries with such an important meeting awaiting them, so with marked reluctance, Simon got down to business again.

“I’m sorry, guys. Much as I’d like to shoot the breeze with you for a while longer, I’m afraid duty calls. Although I sincerely hope that we’ll have time for a proper celebration very soon!

“Anyhow, I wanted to give you a heads up about the gathering in the Conference Room. Amongst the list of attendees which includes members of the Fire Department, S.W.A.T and a liaison from City Hall, the three of us will be representing MCU; David Ross will be there with a couple of his guys from the Bomb Squad; the other two sentinel and guide teams, and – joy of joys – SAC Green from the FBI’s Cascade Field Office. Apparently he, and some of his fellow spooks from the Behavioural Analysis Unit actually have some information they want to share with us lowly cops, so the sooner we get there the better. I for one want to find out exactly what they expect our role to be in the on-going investigation.”

His game face firmly back in place, Jim nodded in assent. “Yeah, you and me both, sir. Ever since 9/11 the BAU’s counter terrorism and threat assessment section has been working their asses off
trying to identify new threats to our national security. Wonder what they’ve come up with this time?”

“Let’s go find out, shall we?” and Simon stood to usher his friends out of his office to make their way down to MCU’s main Conference Room where most of the group were already assembled.

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As Jim and Blair preceded Simon into the conference room, once again they were greeted warmly by all present. A relaxed and calm Jim accepted the accolade with aplomb, although he knew that Blair was hard put not to duck behind his sentinel’s broad back; his ever-present low self-esteem bleeding through their connection into Jim’s sympathetic and understanding mind. Reaching out to pull the smaller man into his side and giving him a reassuring squeeze, he glanced down into the anxious blue eyes, admiring the pink-cheeked face looking up at him.

“It’s OK, Chief,” he murmured softly. “I know you don’t like to be the centre of attention, but you deserve this, so just go with the flow, OK? Let them show their respect for you for a moment.”

Blair nodded quickly, and took a deep breath, trying to find his centre. “OK, Jim. I’m all right, really. Just took me by surprise is all,” and with that he looked up and smiled shyly at the gathering, swiftly ‘reading’ them, and realising that their welcome was indeed genuine. Even SAC Green was only mildly impatient, so Blair allowed himself to relax a little more, and took a seat next to Jim, eager now to hear what information had become available during their few hours’ absence.

It was clear that SAC Green had taken the role of principal spokesperson upon himself, but as he began to speak, it soon became apparent that he was well-suited for the position. Looking around at the assembled group, he addressed them inclusively, demonstrating a good deal more tact and understanding of inter-departmental personnel management skills than his predecessor, SAC Mulroney, with whom Jim had crossed swords on various occasions, none of which had ended amicably.

“Ladies and gentlemen, thank you for coming. After yesterday’s incident, I realise that all of us must be physically tired, but I’m betting that not one of us here is willing to rest while the perpetrators of this potential outrage remain at large. However, once I have outlined what information we at the FBI have already gathered, I hope you will understand when I say that your on-going involvement will become considerably less than you’d probably like. And may I say immediately, that this is absolutely no reflection on any of your performances. Far from it. The reason why we’re all here today in one piece, had no civilian casualties reported, and the fact that Central Court House is still standing is due entirely to your efforts as a professional and effective inter-departmental task force, and you have every right to be justifiably proud of the way things turned out.

“I know we all recognise that we owe a particularly huge debt of gratitude to Sentinel Detective Ellison and Guide Sandburg for their ability and courage in locating and defusing the explosive charges, but each and every one here also played their part in clearing the area and safe-guarding the large number of civilians present.

“Having said that, unfortunately there is still an urgent follow-up operation to undertake, and this is where my agents, and my colleagues from BAU come into our own. Again I assure you it has nothing to do with your capability or otherwise, despite poor relations and lack of cooperation and transparency between our agencies in the past. It is more a matter of jurisdiction, pure and simple, and if you will be patient and hear me out, you’ll understand why.”

He paused there for a moment, taking the opportunity to assess how his audience was receiving his speech so far, and as Jim studied him in his turn, the sentinel realised that he was quietly impressed by Green’s demeanour. The man was being unexpectedly open and forthright, which was something
Jim had never before experienced from a ‘fibbie’, but likewise he was plainly no push-over. As Green recommenced his speech, Jim listened with rapt attention, well aware that everyone in the room was doing likewise.

“At this point, I want to introduce my colleague from the BAU, Agent Rossi, who will now fill you in on what we have surmised so far regarding the identity of the perpetrators, and the proposed course of action needed to apprehend them.”

The agent in question looked rather careworn and somewhat subdued, but when he addressed the group, his gaze and tone were compelling.

“First of all, ladies and gentlemen, I want to echo SAC Green’s welcome and thanks for attending here today, and to ask for your patience for a while longer as I run through the reasoning behind our progress so far. We already have pointers towards the likely nature of the perpetrators, and the first indicator is the reaction – or rather, non-reaction so far received.

“If the attack was from an international terrorist source, such as Al-Qaeda or ISIS, we would expect them to claim immediate responsibility, because even if the actual explosion was foiled, they would want to take the credit for the disruption caused and any potential panic and civilian unrest. But as yet there has been no such communication, although I wouldn’t be in the least bit surprised if they didn’t contact us retrospectively once the temporary media gagging order is lifted. Jump on the bandwagon, so to speak.

“Also, it has to be said that the type of explosive device used doesn’t suggest that type of attack. Radical Islamic terrorists like their elements of ‘spontaneity’, plus the instant gratification of martyrdom through suicide bombngs. The careful placement of these explosives suggests a reasonable level of competence, and a familiarity with the terrain. Or at least the knowledge of how to obtain the necessary local information and the wherewithal to set everything up well in advance without being detected.

“Not only that, but the fact that it was a relatively unsophisticated triggering device suggests that whoever placed it had no intention of being around when the chain reaction was set off. The fact that a simple but well-constructed timer was used rather than a remotely activated device suggests that they intended to be well clear of the area, so despite what the anonymous tip-off claimed, there never was a concurrent hostage situation. That particular snippet could well have been deliberately planted misinformation.”

At that point, Rossi paused in his explanation, his attention drawn to the soft voice murmuring in counterpoint to his own. It was the young guide, Sandburg, who appeared to be talking to himself rather than intentionally disrupting the meeting, his attractive face wrinkled in deep thought as he stared unseeingly at the floor in front of him. However, Rossi felt no more than fond exasperation at the unintentional interruption, charmed despite himself when the guide suddenly became aware of all eyes on him, and blushed deep red from neck to hairline.

“Uh…um… sorry man,” he stuttered. “W…was I talking out loud? That was unforgivably rude of me. I’m so sorry,” and he ducked his head quickly, cursing himself for his stupidity. How was he ever going to be taken seriously when he made such a sad exhibition of himself? He was more than surprised when Rossi simply smiled at him, however, addressing him kindly and not without some real interest.

“No problem, Guide Sandburg. In fact, judging by what I was picking up, I should say that you just made some very good points. So, if you wouldn’t mind, please repeat your thoughts for all of us.”

Although more than a little bemused by the situation, Blair quickly realised that Agent Rossi’s
interest and request was genuine, so, with a swift glance up at Jim to make sure of the sentinel’s approval, he began to speak, diffidently at first, then with growing confidence as Rossi nodded encouragingly at his words.

“Well, um, once again I apologise for interrupting you, Agent Rossi. It’s a bad habit of mine, and honestly, I didn’t realise I was doing it. But as you were talking, I couldn’t help but consider what you were saying. About the identity of the perps, and your reasons for believing it wasn’t some sort of foreign terrorist outrage.

“So, I began to think about the intended target. What motive would drive someone to such lengths? It has to be revenge, but is it against a particular person or a group? Or just a violent but non-specific anarchistic protest against ‘the man’?”

Realising that Rossi was nodding encouragingly at him, rather than smirking in disdain, Blair continued.

“I was thinking that, if it was the action of a home-grown terrorist group, what were they trying to prove? I mean, yes, the central court is a prime target, but so is the PD and City Hall. So was it a particular, high profile trial they were targeting? Did they represent some big, organised crime syndicate trying to destroy an important competitor or send a message? And that’s just about where I was at when you noticed me…” and he tailed off again, unable to maintain eye contact any longer despite Jim’s warm hand squeezing his knee supportively.

When he glanced up again, it was to meet Rossi’s approving gaze.

“Are you sure you haven’t done a bit of profiling training already, Guide Sandburg?” he murmured gently, his eyes warm. “Because if not, then I believe you have a raw talent that should be tapped as soon as possible. But to continue, your instincts are very sound insofar as they touch upon many of our own theories at BAU. And this is what we have come up with.

“Having pretty much discounted the likelihood of a foreign terrorist attack, we did indeed look at possible individual targets, and we feel that this is the most compelling answer.

“As you probably all know, the trial was supposed to commence yesterday against former governor Michael Sillitoe on corruption charges. Fairly high profile, to be sure, but still we believe that assassinating Sillitoe was not the intended ‘message’. Instead, we looked at who was presiding, and that was when my agents made the connection. Judge Marshall McManus is probably Washington State’s most prestigious and upstanding justice; well-respected and renowned for his incorruptibility and uncompromising stance against terrorism and organised crime.

“And I’m sure you will remember the media circus surrounding his sentencing of the leader of the Sunrise Patriots less than two years ago?”

A suppressed ‘Ahhhh!’ echoed around the assembly, as the proverbial ‘light bulbs’ flashed on, although it had to be said that Blair himself didn’t look any the wiser.

“Um, I’m sorry, but although I’ve heard of the Sunrise Patriots, I don’t know anything about them?”

Jim grinned fondly at him as he replied, charmed by the confusion on his young guide’s face.

“I guess it would be before you started at Rainier, babe. You probably weren’t even in Cascade at the time. I keep forgetting that you’re so young! Anyhow, the Sunrise Patriots are a bunch of evil-minded white supremacists who tried to hijack the PD about five or six years ago in order to get some of their ‘soldiers’ released. Their leader – an asshole by the name of Garrett Kincaid – ordered
the deaths of several innocent PD administrative staff before he was finally captured along with many of his followers. But for some time he was incarcerated in Conover, his lawyers claiming that he was too mentally unstable to stand trial. But when he was finally deemed sane enough to be brought before McManus and sentenced to life without parole, he cursed the judge and threatened that ‘his army of patriots’ would have their revenge. Looks like this might have been their attempt to prove that they’re still a force to be reckoned with, with or without Kincaid at their helm.”

Rossi nodded his approval as he smiled gently at sentinel and guide. “Our thinking exactly, Sentinel Ellison. Kincaid obviously still has a great deal of influence even from within his high security cell, so our task now is to seek out the remnants of the Patriots and put them away for good. Until the next group of misguided dissidents raises its ugly head, that is.

“And since our latest information suggests that their new base is somewhere deep in the forests of Oregon, to a great extent that precludes your involvement, I’m sorry to say. From now on, it will be a federal investigation, in cooperation with that state’s local law enforcement agencies.

“I’m sorry.” And there wasn’t a single person present who doubted the agent’s sincerity.

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Later that evening, Barney’s Bar:

Simon and Jim stood shoulder to shoulder, nursing a beer apiece as they watched Blair interact with the rest of the MCU team. The young guide seemed to be in his element, bouncing with enthusiasm and enthralling all and sundry with his charm and witty anecdotes, and Jim smiled wryly to himself as he relaxed into the mood. This is what he knew should be the norm for the grad student, and he could only be mightily relieved that he was now witnessing the ‘real’ Blair Sandburg at long last. He was only too well aware that he and his demands had had such a repressive influence on his new guide that Blair had inevitably suffered more than just a minor identity crisis, and he still felt guilty about that.

However, he also knew that this past twenty four hours or so had thankfully pretty much reversed that negative trend, and, thanks both to their recent bond and Blair’s new-found confidence following the successful anti-terrorist operation, he was now enjoying the benefits of a happy guide. Of course neither of them had any illusions that everything would be peachy from now on. There were still those misanthropes who would never accept the unconventional young man, or his role as Jim’s guide, but there were enough of their colleagues who could and did appreciate Blair to set the detractors straight. Likewise, Blair still had to decide what form of training and further study he would need to undertake to become more than just Jim’s civilian back up, but at least he had accepted that his principal loyalty was to his sentinel. And because he appreciated that loyalty so much, Jim was determined to do everything he could to allow Blair to enjoy some sort of life outside of the PD.

Suddenly, he was distracted by a deep chuckle from Simon, who broke into his train of thought. “So, Jim, this is what we’ve been missing, eh? Got to say that kid is quite the entertainer, isn’t he? He’s got the whole team pretty much eating out of his hand. Who knew?”

Jim looked thoughtful for a moment as he considered his friend’s comment. “You’re right, Simon, insofar as I think this is Blair’s true personality coming out at last. I knew he was deeply depressed and angry, and understandably so, but now I know him inside and out – as he knows me – and I realise just how badly he was hurt by my claiming of him. But he’s nothing if not generous and forgiving by nature, and I have to be grateful for that. And because of that, I intend to do whatever it takes for him to get his life back.”
Simon nodded pensively, his tone equally sincere as he murmured, “Glad to hear it, Jim. I know I was just as unsympathetic towards the kid myself to begin with. Simply couldn’t understand why he wasn’t jumping up and down in glee to find that, not only did he have a real gift, but also an instantly available sentinel with whom to bond. Guess he showed me how presumptuous and narrow-minded I was being, huh?

“But whatever the pair of you decide, I’ll give you my full support, Jim. I’ve already put in a formal complaint regarding the Institute’s breach of confidence regarding Blair’s test results, which the Mayor and the Commissioner have both endorsed. It certainly doesn’t hurt either that the Mayor wants to present Sandburg with some sort of civilian award for bravery. He’ll be too high profile to ignore at Rainier, for sure, so if you want to confront Chancellor Edwards regarding her treatment of the kid, she won’t have a leg to stand on.”

Jim’s grin was evil as he responded, his eyes cold and predatory for a moment as he said, “That’s good to know, sir. Blair deserves the recognition, and I have to admit I’m actually looking forward to confronting that bitch. But the most important thing will be to get Blair reinstated into the doctoral programme. He’s already had thoughts about what his dissertation topic could be, and I have to say I’ll back him all the way. He’s determined to do something that will enhance his position both as my guide and within the PD.”

“But if Jim needs me, then that’s where I’ll be. And I wouldn’t have it any other way.”

Megan tilted her head to one side, and gazed speculatively at the young guide for a moment before answering.

“Fair enough, Sandy. I’m truly happy that you two have finally bonded. I freely admit that at first I was worried about you. You looked so sad, and I wasn’t at all sure that Jimbo was treating you right. Not that I thought he was being deliberately cruel or anything. Just not really taking you seriously. But seeing you together this morning put my mind at rest. You both looked – well – different. Cute!”
“Why, thank you, Megan!” Jim grinned, appearing at Blair’s side and throwing an arm around the young man’s shoulders. “So glad we meet with your approval!” he added somewhat sarkily.

Blair snickered happily, and Megan threw back her head and laughed out loud in unrestrained joy. “Good on yer, Jimbo! Cheers, mates!” and she held up her beer glass to chink it first with Jim’s, and then with Blair’s soda bottle.

Not long afterwards, the party broke up, and Jim handed over the keys to his truck so Blair could drive them home. And as they watched the pair leave the bar arm in arm, Megan and Joel exchanged a knowing look. For Jim to allow his young guide to drive his precious Sweetheart, things must truly be good between them.

And rightly so.

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Epilogue: Rainier campus, some months later:

“Hey, Blair! Wait up, hon!”

Blair stopped and turned to face the owner of the voice, who was jogging across the courtyard towards him, a wide smile on her pretty face.

“Hey, Beth! I’m sorry, I didn’t realise you were behind me. I was caught up in wool-gathering!” Blair replied with a self-deprecating grin.

“No problem, hon,” Beth smiled, catching up with him and treating him to a friendly peck on the cheek. “Just wanted to make sure you’re OK?”

Knowing exactly where she was coming from, Blair returned her smile, grateful for her concern.

“I’m fine, Beth, really. Jim and I keep practising, and as long as neither of us is stressed, we can safely stay apart for several hours now before we need to reconnect. Of course,” he continued with a cheeky grin, “it does mean that Jim isn’t supposed to go out in the field without me, which means he has to deal with routine stuff like paperwork. And you know how he hates that!”

Beth snickered at his words, knowing only too well that Jim would prefer it if Blair was always at hand to do his grunt work, but respecting the sentinel’s willingness to allow his guide some space. It was something she would never have believed possible, but she actually liked the big cop now, having witnessed his caring and protective attitude towards Blair, and been reassured that Blair himself was as contented as he could be.

“So, hon, is Jim taking you somewhere nice to celebrate your birthday? Just think - twenty one at last! You’ll finally be legal to have a beer,” and she smirked condescendingly at her friend, jokingly emphasising the supposed superiority gained from being two whole years older than him.

Laughing out loud at his friend’s expression, Blair chortled, “Yeah, yeah! I know. You guys are all soo much older and more experienced than me! You’ll be breaking out the Zimmer frames before you know it! But seriously, Jim’s booked a table at Bellini’s for tomorrow night,” and he blushed when Beth responded with gratifying approval.

“Oh my! Bellini’s? You are so lucky, hon! That just has to be one of the best Italian restaurants in town! If not the best. But will you both be able to join us at the pub for a drink first? All your friends here want to celebrate your coming-of-age too, you know!”
Blair smiled up at her, warmed by her unconditional friendship. “I’m sure that’ll be fine, Beth, and thanks for asking. I think the table’s booked for 9.00 pm, so if Jim’s agreeable, we can meet you first and go on from there.”

Just then, Beth noted how her friend’s expression suddenly changed from slightly puzzled and distracted to positively glowing as he looked over towards the parking lot. Grinning widely herself, she followed his gaze to see Jim striding purposefully towards them, a warm smile lighting his classically handsome features as he approached.

“Hey, Jim! We were just talking about you,” Blair began, before being swept up into a warm and unselfconscious hug.

“Yeah, I could hear you,” the older man said, finally setting his guide back on his feet.

“Hey, Beth. Good to see you. And yes, we’d be happy to meet you guys for a drink before going to the restaurant. Were you thinking of the ‘Student Prince’?” he added, naming a popular bar near the campus.

“Yes, if that’s OK with you two. Would 7.00 pm suit? There should be quite a few of Blair’s friends there,” the young woman replied cheerfully.

“Great. See you there, then. But if you don’t mind, I’m going to steal away with my guide since he seems to be all done here for the day. I have plans for him…..” and he assumed a comical leer as he twirled an imaginary moustache, causing Beth to burst out laughing.

“Oh, get on with you! Honestly, who’d have guessed the pair of you would make such a good double act! See you tomorrow, hon, Jim!” and still chuckling, she went on her way.

Turning back to study Blair’s slightly quizzical expression, Jim smiled affectionately as he tucked a stray curl behind his guide’s ear.

“So, babe, are you really OK? I’m hoping you actually have finished here for the day, because I have to admit I’ve missed you. Nothing untoward’s happened,” he added hurriedly when Blair’s attractive face instantly took on a worried frown. “Just got fed up with endless reports, and Simon got fed up with my moaning, so he sent me home early. Told me to tell you to get me sorted out and softened up, so how about it?” and he waggled his eyebrows suggestively.

Relaxing again, Blair replied, “Oh, I think that can be arranged, Oh Sentinel Mine. It just so happens that my meeting with my diss committee went really well this afternoon, so I’ll tell you all about it on the way home. And then you can have your wicked way with me!”

“Deal!” said Jim happily, and taking Blair’s arm without further ado, he steered the smaller man over to his truck, suddenly wanting to get back to the loft as quickly as possible.

Several hours later, Jim lay in bed, relaxed and self-satisfied and warmly blanketed by his well-loved and dozing guide. Smiling fondly, Jim dropped a kiss on the curly head tucked beneath his chin, his hand ghosting over the silky skin of Blair’s back. The night was mild, so the lightweight sheet covering them was only pulled up to hip level, and Jim was heartily grateful that over the weeks they had been together, Blair had slowly gained in confidence so that he no longer automatically pulled the bedding up to his neck at every opportunity. The growing intimacy of the bond provided him with both physical and soul-deep proof that his sentinel thought him beautiful, and he responded in kind.
Having said that, up until now the pair had satisfied themselves with a lot of making out, frottage and mutually enjoyable hand jobs as Jim had been in no hurry to push Blair further than he was ready to go. However, tonight had turned out to be something truly special. Although officially there were still a couple of hours to go until Blair’s actual birthday, the young man had shyly asked if Jim would take him, declaring himself ready to try at last for the full bond. And Jim had agreed with pleasure, proud of his young guide’s courage, and determined to make the experience truly transcendental. And so it had turned out to be.

Jim relived in minute detail the way he had mapped and imprinted his guide, his touch driving the young man almost insane with heated lust as he was explored and prepared with a sentinel’s exquisite care and attention. And when the moment of joining came, the initial pain quickly transformed into the headiest pleasure as the pair had instinctively worked together to achieve a mutual climax that had nearly blown them away. As the bond flashed between them, joyful and glorious, all remaining barriers were blasted away, and they finally knew each other intimately at every level. And that knowledge was both empowering and all-encompassing, and they were truly two halves of one soul, for ever and ever, amen.

As Jim lay quietly contemplating his guide and lover, not quite ready yet to follow Blair into slumber, he pondered on this new depth of knowledge, and recognised that he could finally begin to forgive himself for seeking out and claiming his guide. Yes, for sure it might not have turned out so well for either of them, but as it happened, Jim was assured now that Blair was content with his lot. He had been in the young man’s mind, and knew it for a fact. Blair might no longer have time to teach anthropology at Rainier, but he was genuinely engrossed in his new life at the PD and as Jim’s guide and life partner. And not only that, but he was devoting every spare moment he could to researching and writing his dissertation, having been accepted back into the doctoral programme with open arms. And that in itself had caused Jim no little satisfaction, and his smirk became somewhat devilish as he recalled the process in detail.

Although rather embarrassed and self-effacing, Blair had been persuaded to accept the Mayor’s civilian award for bravery over and above the call of duty, and that, plus the repercussions of Simon’s official complaint against the Institute of Sentinel and Guide Studies had placed Blair in a strong position to demand his reinstatement into the doctoral programme. With Jim’s full support, he had faced up to Chancellor Edwards and had discovered that the woman had lost virtually all the respect and backing of the Board of Governors on account of her increasingly unethical behaviour. Indeed, it was highly likely that she would be replaced within the near future for bringing the University into disrepute. Perhaps unsurprisingly, his soft-hearted guide had expressed sympathy for Edwards, but as far as Jim was concerned it couldn’t have happened to a better person. And with the full backing of his dissertation committee, Blair had embarked on a new paper on the subject of Forensic Anthropology and its practical implementation at crime scenes, with particular emphasis on techniques developed specifically for use by Sentinel and Guide investigating teams. Jim couldn’t be more proud of Blair’s achievements, especially as he knew for a fact that Simon had already started the ball rolling in creating a new, full time consultancy position for Blair as soon as he had those three letters after his name.

And now they had attained their greatest achievement - the full bond - and things could only get even better.

Just then, slight changes in Blair’s breathing and heart rate warned Jim that his Guide was rousing, and he looked down, enchanted to see the sleep-soft young face peering slightly myopically up at him.

“Hey man, can’t you sleep?” Blair murmured, a tiny frown creasing the smooth brow.
“It’s OK, baby. Just taking a moment or two to do a little quiet contemplation. Nothing bad, baby, I promise! It’s all good,” and Jim dropped a kiss on the end of Blair’s nose.

Shifting back a little down Jim’s broad chest so that he could prop his chin on his folded hands, Blair gazed at his big lover thoughtfully for a moment before responding. However, just before speaking, he ducked his head slightly, suddenly irritated with himself when a faint blush coloured his cheeks. He looked up again when Jim placed a gentle finger under his chin and encouraged him to raise his head.

“I’m sorry, man. It’s just that I wanted to thank you for tonight, and now here I am, blushing like a schoolgirl! Humiliating, huh? And so not respectful to schoolgirls either,” he added with a self-conscious chuckle.

“Baby, you’re beautiful when you blush,” Jim replied gently. “And you know I mean what I say now, don’t you? But it’s me that should be thanking you, Chief. For your courage and trust in me. I’m just so happy that you agreed to be my guide in all ways after all. It’s all I could ever have hoped for.”

Blair grinned a little shyly in response, his soft blue gaze telegraphing his love and acceptance even as he spoke. “Then I think we should both be grateful, Jim. I know I wasn’t happy to find out about my gift. I couldn’t see it as everyone else seemed to, and the finality of bonding scared me. But even if our initial meeting wasn’t the best, I learned to admire you anyway. And from that admiration grew love. I admit I thought I would never be good enough for you, but you didn’t give up on me, so the least I could do was try to make you proud of me. And when it came down to the wire, I chose to be your guide. To do my best to back you up for the rest of our lives together.

“I love you, man. For ever and always.”

Jim couldn’t immediately find the words to express the depths of his love and delight, so instead he reached down and pulled his guide up and into his arms, cuddling the warm body close as he kissed the tempting lips next to his. After long, luscious moments, they pulled back with a soft, wet sound, and gazed into each other’s eyes. And then Jim glanced quickly over at the clock on the nightstand, taking in the LED display.

Smiling widely, he murmured, “Hey, baby, look at the time! It’s after midnight, so ‘Happy Birthday’, Chief. I love you!”

And they kissed again, sharing their love and knowing that nothing could come between them in this lifetime, and very probably the next.

The End.

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