Jim Ellison knows that Blair is hiding something. After all, every time he talks about his friends down in LA, he makes them sound like a bunch of hippy rejects who worship at the altar of free love. However, when Jim is kidnapped, he discovers that Blair is hiding something far more dangerous.
Jim crossed his arms. Blair was hiding something, he knew that. The man would never make it working undercover. "Uh huh," he said slowly. "And what are these people like?"

"Angel's crew?" Blair smiled brightly and grabbed a beer out of the fridge. "Cool. Totally cool. I mean, they are--" Blair ran out of words, a condition that scared the crap out of Jim. They were something flaky enough or illegal enough that Blair didn't want to talk about them.

"Maybe I should tell Simon I can't make this training," Jim mused. Even visiting Blair's flaky friends would be better than a week of interagency training. Simon just wanted his pound of flesh after having to smooth over Jim's less than tactful handling of their latest fed invasion. If feds didn't want to hear the cold, brutal truth, they should just avoid Cascade, that was Jim's theory.

"Whoa, hey. No need to do that," Blair blurted out, entirely too quickly. Jim narrowed his eyes, even more suspicious now. "I mean, Simon would have a serious cow," Blair backtracked. "Serious. If he can't torture you with training, he's going to... I don't know... put you on cat-sitting duty or something. No way, just take your lumps like a man."

"While you visit these friends," Jim summarized. "Friends I've never heard of before."

"Yes you have," Blair said with a frown that suggested he was not only telling the truth but that he was aggravated that Jim wasn't remembering something. "Xander's the one I tutored through his last year of high school."

"Oh." Shit. Okay, Jim had actually heard about that kid more than once, but he didn't connect Xander with Angel. Blair had probably said something during one of those stakeouts where Jim had just stopped listening. It wasn't his fault that Blair's ability to talk non-stop inspired a little tuning out. "And what are these other people down there like?" Jim asked. There was something going on, and Blair wasn't getting anywhere near LA until Jim understood exactly why Blair's heart raced and he smelled of nerves every time they talked about Blair going to visit.

"They're great." Blair took a deep drink from his beer, his Adam's apple bobbing.

"Great...." Jim echoed. He watched Blair, he watched as the little shit tried and failed to hide a dozen nervous ticks. His hand was a little too tight on the bottle, his heart pounded too quickly, his left eye squinted a bit at the corner, his body smelled of salt-sweat.

Blair put his beer down and glared at Jim. "Man, you're doing something, sniffing me or something," he complained.

"I'm watching you lie," Jim said.

"Hey, I am not lying. I am totally not mentioning things, many things, but I am not lying."

Walking over to the chair, Jim dropped down and leaned forward, his elbows braced on his knees. "Sandburg, if you don't come clean, not only will I be canceling out on the training, but I will handcuff myself to you on the plane to LA. You're lying about something, and if you're going down there to hook up with some hippy society drop-outs who grow pot by the acre, I will throw you in the closest holding cell."

"Hey!" Blair made his outraged face. "Man, that is not cool."
"Tough shit. The way you get in trouble, you'll get kidnapped by a drug cartel if you go down there alone. So either tell me what has you so nervous that you can't mention LA without breaking into a cold sweat or I will go down there with you," Jim warned. He wasn't kidding either. This need he had to make sure Blair was close and that he was safe, it was starting to get a little out of control. That's one reason he hadn't protested too much when Simon gave him the Chicago training assignment. Jim needed a little space to get his head screwed back on straight before he did anything stupid. But if he thought Blair's friends posed any sort of danger, Jim knew he would be on the first plane to LA, even if it got him suspended or written up.

"Fine." Blair spit the word out and threw himself back into the couch. "They're a little unconventional. And your world is so totally square," and Blair punctuated this by drawing a square in the air with his fingers, "that you would hate them. I know this. So maybe I don't want my friend hating my friends because that would be too much hate for one space, happy?"

"Why would I hate them?" Jim asked suspiciously. Other than drug dealers and pedophiles and rapists, Jim tended to not hate people on sight. He started mentally calculating the cost of a plane ticket from Chicago to LA and silently practicing his apology speech for Simon.

Blair sighed. "Because you would. You would totally hate them. Oh, you might be okay with Graham. Maybe. But then you'd get all weird because Graham sleeps with Harmony and I slept with Harmony, and trust me, when I go to LA, I totally plan to sleep with Harmony again, and that would break some rule of politeness in your middle-class brain."

"You slept with the man's girlfriend?" Jim demanded. That broke more than a rule of politeness.

"Actually, I think Faith is more Graham's girlfriend, but Harmony is very happy to be the third there, and man, I would totally not mind being fourth in that bed, but Graham has a weird aversion to cocks in his bed." Blair blurted out, and Jim's brain sputtered and had a small brown-out as it tried to process that information. Oh, Jim had certainly suspected Blair was bisexual, but he hadn't expected the man to just blurt it out.

Now that Blair was on a roll, he kept right on going. "And then Spike. Oh man, Spike would totally not get you. Totally. I mean, he would think your square was square and totally make fun of you, and the first time Spike wanted to sleep with me, you'd be off having some hissy about Spike cheating on Cordelia, and trust me no one cheats on Cordelia. If Spike sleeps with me or Angel or Xander or anyone else, he does it with Cordelia's permission. I only hope that I've been gone long enough that everyone feels a little need for rebonding because I would totally not mind sleeping with Spike, and maybe I could even get in there with Angel, although hopefully not at the same time. I am telling you, when Spike and Angel get going? Whoa. Seriously, whoa. And then there's Lorne, and he is like..." Blair whistled. "There are not even words to describe Lorne and what that man can do," Blair said with an expression that gave Jim entirely too much information. And still, Blair wasn't done. "Faith's offered to give me a ride once or twice, but man, that would be too weird. We lived together, you know. That was back when I was getting my Master's. And then there's Wesley, who is just a total sweetie. He totally acts like he hasn't slept with anyone in that house except Fred, and trust me, there is just no way. I mean, no way. Fred's a beautiful woman, but that house has enough sexual energy to solve the country's energy crisis, and he's a little more bent than he lets on, so I'm guessing he totally sleeps with Spike, and maybe Angel. Maybe not." Blair shrugged. "Angel's a little more uptight than you'd think. He's almost monogamous with Xander, which is totally odd. Well, except that he does have a lot of sex with Spike, but then those two have history, you know? Total history."

Jim's head was spinning. Fred was a woman, monogamy was odd, cheating wasn't really cheating, and Blair was apparently planning on sleeping with half the house, including the male half. Jim
could feel all the blood rush to his face. He was blushing. He was a fucking Ranger. He'd lived in barracks with men who didn't get sex for months on end and felt the need to describe every act they missed in crude and offensive terms, and he was blushing over Blair. Sometimes Jim hated life.

"I..." Jim had no words.

"Man, I knew you would react like this," Blair said, exploding up off the couch. "This is why I did not talk to you about them. I mean, they have their morals. Totally. True, their ethical standards don't exactly match society as a whole, but they are totally ethical, and you have that look on your face."

Jim didn't know what look he had on his face, but he suspected it wasn't a good one. "What, so this is a den of free love? Sandburg, do you have any idea the venereal diseases you could catch?"

Blair glared. "Sex does not go outside the family. Ever. Keep it in the clan, that's the motto."

"That is really not making it sound any better," Jim pointed out. "They all sound like..." Jim bit his tongue before he said something. From Blair's expression, his willingness to forgo the word slut wasn't winning him any points.

"Square," Blair announced, drawing another figure in the air. "Totally square."

"Yep," Jim agreed. "And I will be totally square in Chicago. You can have fun with your hippy friends, but if you catch VD, I will be saying I told you so for the next decade," Jim warned.

"Whatever," Blair said dismissively. "Your mind is closed. Monogamous pairings are not the center of everyone's universe."

With that, Blair turned around and stalked off. With a sigh, Jim watched as Blair went into his bedroom, slammed the door and turned the music up. Sadly, for him, monogamous pairings were the center of the world, and he refused to risk his heart when the person who he wanted seemed so unwilling to even consider one. Jim rubbed his hand over his face. Well, at least now he knew why Blair was trying to keep him away from LA, and truth be told, Jim really didn't want front row seats as Blair slept his way through the entire staff of the Hyperion Hotel. It looked like Chicago and cold showers were in his future.
The Rescue

Jim heard a thump at the top of the stairs, but his chair was turned the wrong way for him to see it. He slumped in his bonds to try and make himself look helpless. Sooner or later these guys had to underestimate him. They had to. The alternative was that Jim was going to die in this basement, and Jim refused to believe that. He would not die because the punk son of some murderer he’d put in prison saw an opportunity. Thank god Blair was in LA and hadn’t come to Chicago with him.

“Oi! He’s down here!” someone with an English accent yelled. Then there were heavy footsteps on the stairs. Maybe Harrison had called in friends. Damn it, Jim couldn’t take much more. His right shoulder was dislocated, at least two ribs were cracked if not broken, and he was dizzy from hunger. If the idiot trio had called for backup, things were going to get more than a little ugly. But Jim could only play the hand he’d been dealt. He kept his eyes closed and slumped against the ropes.

“Hurry up!” Someone else called.

“Keep your knickers on!” The person was standing so close that Jim was startled. It took him a second to realize that his hearing was wonky. He couldn’t hear a heartbeat at all. “He’s in rough shape.”

Jim ruthlessly suppressed a shout of joy as he felt someone cutting the ropes. This was his chance to get free. When the new guy knelt down to cut the ropes off Jim’s ankles, he bided his time until the last strand fell away. Then he brought his knee up as hard as he could under the guy’s jaw. Immediately, Jim leaped to his feet. He expected the attack to take this new enemy down. Instead, the bleach-blond punk stumbled backward a few steps before catching his balance.

“You soddin’ bastard. You hit me.” There was something wrong with the guy’s face—he looked twisted and deformed.

Jim answered with the best backhand he could deliver with his left arm. The disabled shoulder was a real handicap. Clearly it was more of a problem than Jim had anticipated because the punk grabbed his dislocated arm and pressed his fingers right into the joint. Jim screamed and went to his knees.

“Spike?” A much larger man appeared at the top of the stairs.

“He tried to attack me.” The punk—Spike—definitely sounded like he was defending himself. He put a hand on Jim’s neck, and Jim braced for the pain, but nothing could prepare him for the hot knives that seemed to carve into him. With one strong pull and a twist, Spike put Jim’s shoulder back into place. Jim could only pant through the pain.

“Can he walk?”

“He was strong enough to attack me two minutes ago. Bloody idiot.” Spike pulled Jim to his feet and then slammed him back against the wall. Now Jim had a much better view of yellow eyes and a ridged nose and forehead.

“What are you?” Jim didn’t want the answer, but he had never been one to live in ignorance. Spike grinned, and in the process showed off long fangs. Fuck. They couldn’t be real.

“Subtle,” the second man said as he came down the stairs. Jim looked at him. He looked normal enough—good looking in a beefy sort of way. But like Spike, he didn’t have a heartbeat. Jim could
hear water dripping and footsteps and his own heart, but these two had no heartbeats.

“I don’t do subtle, Peaches. Besides, you try staying out of gameface when someone kicks you in the face.”

“Maybe you should practice the skill.”

“Sod off.” Spike twitched and suddenly his face was normal. He had stunning blue eyes and he smiled at Jim. “So, this is Blair’s bit of nothing. Seems like he’s a something. You smell that?”

“Yeah,” the new man said. He came up to stand next to Spike, and Jim figured that his shitting trip had just gotten shittier. “I’m Angel, and this is Spike.”

Jim froze. Narrowing his eyes, he looked from one to the other and back. “Angel and Spike? LA Angel and Spike?”

“Seems like our boy told him something,” Spike said.

“Not enough,” Angel answered. He pulled out a cell phone and started dialing. “We came because Blair got a feeling that you were in trouble. We’re the rescue.”

“Speak for yourself,” Spike said, “I’m just feeling put out because he hasn’t been introduced to family properly, and I’m here to fix that.” He smirked at Jim and tightened his fingers around Jim’s neck. It made Jim worry about what a proper welcome might look like.

Angel shoved the phone at him. “Here.”

Jim took it, not sure he had a lot of choices here. For a rescue, this was feeling a lot like another kidnapping. He brought the phone up to his ear. “Yeah?”

“Jim?” Blair sounded panicked on the other end.

“Chief. Are you okay?”

“Me? You’re asking me if I’m okay? You got yourself kidnapped out of a hotel full of police? Are you okay?”

“A little roughed up, but I’m good. If you could tell your friends to let me go, I’ll call the local PD and get them on tracking down the three kidnappers.”

Spike interrupted. “Yeah, don’t bother mate. Those three aren’t alive to bother anyone again.”

Jim’s insides turned to ice. These two had killed, and Spike in particularly seemed rather gleeful over it. That was the mark of a psychopath, and Jim was too weak to fight him. Jim wondered if he could dial 911 on Angel’s phone before either of them could stop him.

Spike leaned close to the phone and spoke loud enough for Blair to hear. “You explain clan to him pet because I would hate to break your Sentinel before we could bring him home.”

Blair’s response was a barely whispered, “Oh shit.”

“Sandburg?” Jim demanded. This was definitely looking like another kidnapping.

“Let me talk to Spike,” Blair said. Jim started to hold the phone out, but Spike shook his head and tightened his grip on Jim’s neck. He was going to leave finger-sized bruises on Jim’s neck at this point.
“Are you two having tea down there?” a woman shouted from the top of the stairs.

“Blair, tell him,” Angel said loudly, nearly shouting at the phone.

Slowly Jim brought the phone back to his own ear. “Sandburg, what’s going on?”

“Oh man. This is why I didn’t want you in LA. Okay, how much have you noticed?”

“Do you mean the part where both of the men holding me captive are dead or undead or something?” Jim asked.

“Vampires,” Blair said. Well shit, that was the one word Jim had been trying so very hard to avoid.

“Yeah, and lots of people at the house are sort of human optional—not that everyone is. Sometimes humans even accidentally book rooms at the hotel. We tell them there’s a horror movie convention in town. It works better than you think.”

“Blair,” Jim growled.

“Right. Okay, so I’m part of their clan and if you’re part of my clan then that means that you’re clan to these two. And being clan with vampires is great if you have a friend who got kidnapped in a strange city. They’re good guys to have around when things go wrong, you know?”

“I know I’m pinned against a wall with two men who seem to assume they have a right to force me to go with them instead of calling the police,” Jim said bluntly. If Blair was in a mood to obfuscate, then Jim needed to cut through some of the bullshit.

“Oh, yeah. Okay, so clan function on hierarchy. You have Angel’s phone, so I assume you’ve met him and the person who’s holding you up against the wall is probably a lean blond man, right?”

“Spike,” Jim said.

“Right, you’ve met. Okay, so Angel is the head of the clan, which means he’s like the commanding officer, and he is usually fine with not giving many orders, but when he does, obeying is not really optional. And Spike is like an enforcer. What Angel says, Spike makes happen, and sometimes Spike is a little rough, so maybe you shouldn’t argue.”

Jim clenched his teeth. So he was being kidnapped and Blair’s idea of being helpful was to tell him to cooperate with the vampires. “Sandburg, tell your friends to let me go.”

“And I’m pretty low on the totem pole,” Blair said almost apologetically, “which means I don’t ever try to tell either of them what to do. I’ll talk to Xander. I promise I’ll go talk to Xander as soon as I figure out where he’s gone. Just don’t argue. Have you met the dark haired woman with them?”

“No,” Jim said. He eyed the room for weapons, but he couldn’t see anything and he was weak and he had no idea how strong vampires might be. Vampires. At this point Jim was starting to suspect that he was hallucinating this whole thing. Maybe he’d taken a particularly hard hit to the head in the last round of beatings.

“That’s Faith. She’s more human, so if you need something, talk to her. Angel, can you hear me?” Blair asked. Jim’s gaze shifted over to the larger vampire.

“Yes,” Angel shouted toward the phone much louder than really required.

“He doesn’t understand, Angel. Don’t hurt him if he tries to get away because that’s what his
training tells him he should do. I promise I’ll explain it all to him when you guys get home, or I’ll have Graham explain using military words, but don’t hurt him.”

Jim grimaced. Blair could have made this easier for him, given him some way out. Instead the little Benedict Arnold had warned his captors to secure him. “Sandburg,” Jim growled.

“Man, there is no way you can slip away from those two, but you can get hurt if you try. Spike is going to make sure you stay, and sometimes he forgets that humans are breakable.”

“Oi, I do not,” Spike objected before plucking the phone out of Jim’s hand and tossing it to Angel. “When I break humans, I mean to.” He gave Jim a particularly nasty grin. Then he grabbed Jim by one arm and spun him around before pinning him to the wall again. “Peaches, hand me the rope.”

Jim knew he couldn’t fight, not now, but the idea of having his hands tied behind his back when his shoulder had just been dislocated was almost enough to make him do something irrational. The pain would be excruciating. “You don’t have to do this,” Jim said as calmly as he could. His first goal had to be keeping himself undamaged. After that he could figure out a way to escape and then he’d find and kill Blair.

“Yeah, mate, we do,” Spike said. He looped the rope around Jim’s wrist. “Until you figure out that clan means you follow our rules, we’ll just make sure you don’t have a choice.”

Jim braced himself for the pain when his arm was pulled back, but instead Spike looped the rope around Jim’s waist before tying his other hand. With both hands tied down to his sides, Jim couldn’t fight, but the only pain came from the injuries Harrison had left him. Spike turned him around again, and then Angel was there in Jim’s face.

“I have a demon in me.” As if to demonstrate the point, the ridges appeared on Angel’s face and his eyes turned yellow.

“I noticed,” Jim said. He tried to stay calm, but he could feel the panic clawing at him.

“Blair loves you, and we love Blair. But my demon only know possession. Blair is mine. Ours. By threatening to take him, you become a threat to my clan.”

Icy fear went down Jim’s spine. He had no doubt that if he posed any threat to Angel’s clan that Angel would kill him as easily as he’d killed Harrison and his two idiot friends.

“But if you’re mine, then my demon doesn’t rage. It doesn’t mind if two of my clan find comfort in each other. If I were a good man, I’d give you that choice, but I just don’t think I can take the risk of you saying ‘no.’ This will hurt at first.” Angel moved closer, and Jim took a breath as Angel grabbed his ear and forced him to bend his head to the side. While he knew the bite was coming, Jim still couldn’t avoid the rage at having someone feed off him. His knees got weak, and he struggled in fear. None of it mattered. Angel fed for several long, miserable seconds, and then he pulled back. Jim couldn’t take his eyes off Angel’s red lips. They were stained with Jim’s blood.

“Now you’re clan,” Angel said calmly. He looked at Spike. “He’s hungry and damaged. Get him fixed up.”

“I do know how to take care of humans, mate.” Spike actually looked offended. After Angel had gone back upstairs, Spike turned and looked at him. “Welcome to the family.” Then he grabbed Jim’s good arm and started pulling him toward the steps. Jim was definitely killing Blair, just as soon as he figured out what the hell Blair had gotten him into.
Soldier to Soldier

The RV bumped to a stop, and Jim pulled against the chains that anchored him to the small alcove where Spike and Faith had kept him since rescuing him from the basement.

Rescue.

Jim suspected that rescue was the wrong verb. However, Spike had more talent at keeping a prisoner than Harrison. As much as Jim had been trying to find a way to free himself, he couldn’t find one crack in the security. He was chained to his bed in the RV by his wrists and ankles at all times unless Spike appeared to guard him as he took a bathroom break. Jim had tried to fight Spike exactly once. Apparently vampires really did have supernatural strength. Since Jim didn’t like ending up face down on the bunk with his arms wrenched behind his back, he’d decided to go along until he got a better opportunity.

At least Faith had fed him and Spike had escorted him to the bathroom regularly. And both said that they were taking him to Blair. When trying to break a prisoner, the captor should keep all promises vague, so the fact they had made that very specific promise, Jim could only hope they were telling the truth.

“Hey handsome, you ready to go?” Faith pushed back the curtain that provided Jim an illusion of privacy.

“I don’t know. Is Spike planning on dropping me in a hole?”

Faith laughed and crouched down to sit on the edge of his bunk. “Nah. Spike’s bark is worse than his bite.”

“No it isn’t,” Spike said as he appeared in the narrow corridor behind Faith. “My bite is soddin’ terrifying.”

Faith didn’t answer, but she did roll her eyes. Either they were playing a psy-ops game on him, or they had a sibling relationship. “Look,” Faith said, “this is hard on the Sandman, you know?”

“Not really, no,” Jim said drily. When he saw Sandburg, he was going to have a few words about secrets. Blair had definitely implied that his LA friends were hippy types, not demons.

Faith narrowed her eyes as she studied him. “Do not give Blair shit. He doesn’t need the guilt.”

Spike grabbed her arm and pulled her away from Jim’s bunk. “Sandburg can take care of himself. Go see to that boy of yours.” Spike pulled the key out of his pocket while Faith retreated. “Right then, are you planning on making a scene?”

“I don’t know. What are you planning to do?” Jim asked. There was no way he was making any promises.

For a second, Spike sucked air through his front teeth and seemed to think about that. “Faith’s right about Sandburg. He about threw a wobbly when he thought you were in trouble. I doubt he would have stayed here if Xander hadn’t sat on him. If you go trying to drag him away from his family, things are going to get dangerous, mate.”

“Dangerous.” Jim echoed the vampire’s word. “That sounds like a euphemism for me ending up dead.”
“Doubt it.” Spike shrugged. “More likely Angel will throw a fit, and he’ll lock you up in the basement. That way Blair won’t have to choose between his family and you.”

“Clearly Blair would choose you since he didn’t even bother telling me about your little merry band of monsters.” Jim tried to keep his voice neutral, but he could hear the bitterness in his own words. He thought he and Blair were friends. He told Blair secrets that he never shared with anyone. He’d cried in front of the man, and in return, Blair had hidden all this. Jim wanted to scream his frustration, and three days chained in a bunk on an RV had not improved that.

Spike’s eyes turned yellow. “More than likely he didn’t want you in the middle, but you are now, and you’ll find your place in the family or Angel’s going to take an interest in shoving you into a slot head first,” Spike warned him. At least Jim thought it was a warning rather than a threat. “And after that, he’s going to feel guilty about it and Xander will start in with all the rot about ethics and respect, and it’s likely to get unpleasant for all of us.” Spike leaned close. “Listen up, mate. If you make my life uncomfortable, I will make yours a living hell. Got it?”

Jim clenched his teeth, but he was still chained hand and foot so he really only had one possible answer. “Got it,” he agreed.

Spike snorted, but at least he reached for the chains around Jim’s ankles. “Angel’s the head of the clan, so stay out of his way. That attitude of yours is going to be like waving a red flag at a bull, and Peaches isn’t known for his patience. Cordelia and Xander are both human, but they’re higher than you in the pecking order, so if they tell you to do something, you bloody well do it or I’ll find you and teach you a few manners.”

As Spike unlocked the wrist shackles from the wall without unchaining Jim’s wrists, he waited for the rest of the speech, but none came. “What about Faith or all these other people Blair has mentioned around here?” Off the top of his head, Jim recalled that there was a woman named Fred along with Anya and Harmony and a guy named Lorne.

“Work it out with them,” Spike said. He took a step back and gave the chain a hard jerk, forcing Jim to stand or to get dragged by his wrists. Luckily his shoulder had time to heal or that would have damaged it even more. Spike led him down the center aisle past several more bunk bed style cubicles. The RV was built for practicality and ease of transporting serveral people. Jim suspected he wasn’t even the first prisoner transported, not when his bunk had been equipped with a heavy bar bolted in place.

“Welcome back, Spike.” A man climbed up the front stairs by the driver’s seat. He had a square jaw and the short haircut that Jim associated with soldiers. Oh, it was a little shaggy on top, but it was definitely too short for fashion.

Spike stopped, and since he was holding the chain to Jim’s wrist, that meant that Jim was forced to stop with him.

The new guy smiled with a sort of apple pie charm Jim hadn’t seen in quite a while. Either this was some corn-fed Midwesterner or he was a first rate con-man. “Faith said that no one has done much explaining.”

“Not really my thing, mate. Now move.”

The guy ducked his head, but he definitely didn’t move out of Spike’s way. “Blair’s a little worked up. Xander’s talking to him, but they thought maybe I should talk to Detective Ellison, soldier to soldier.” The guy glanced up without fully raising his head. The submissive pose didn’t match the wide shoulders or the idea that this guy was a soldier. Most of the soldiers Jim had known would
have fought until they couldn’t stand before submitting to a vampire.

“Xander, huh?”

The guy shrugged.

“Don’t let him get away or it’s your hide I’m hanging from the wall as a trophy.” With that threat delivered, Spike thrust the end of the wrist chains in the soldier’s hand and pushed past him to get off the RV. That left Jim with a new threat—and one that might be weaker than Spike if his display meant anything.

The new guy gave Jim a wry smile. “That’s Spike. What can you do? He’s too grumpy to actually like, but then he saves everyone’s lives so often that it’s hard not to like him. I’m Major Graham Miller, U.S. Army Ranger.” For a second, Jim thought the man might actually hold out a hand and offer to shake, which would be awkward since Jim still wore chains.

“Good for you,” Jim said. Graham. He was the one sleeping with Faith who Blair commented on being pathologically heterosexual. Looking at Graham’s military physique, Jim wondered what it meant that Blair was sorry that he couldn’t get in Graham’s bed.

“Maybe we can sit and talk.” Graham gestured toward the bench behind the driver’s seat.

Jim held up his hands and rattled the chains. “I think this is your show.”

Graham lost a little of the color out of his face. Maybe this one wasn’t as interested in the kidnapping plan. Interesting. It was also interesting that he chose to identify himself as a Ranger, not a former ranger. That combined with the fact that he was young to be a major meant that either he was lying or he’d taken enough difficult posts to rise in the ranks pretty damn fast.

“Take a seat, detective,” Graham gestured toward the bench. For now, discretion was the better part of valor, and Jim moved to sit where he’d been directed. “To let you know, the Army has already contacted the Cascade Police Department. The story is that Harrison kidnapped you because of his father’s arrest, but he was also being paid by someone from your past to hand you over. This mysterious someone is related to your work in the military and the details are classified. However, the Army brass has told your captain that you have been extracted, and Captain Banks now believes that you are being debriefed and that we are doing a threat assessment to determine if the current danger has been neutralized.” Graham delivered the explanation without a single twitch. There was no dilation in his pupils, no sour stench of fear-sweat. He was telling the truth.

“The Army contacted Simon?”

Graham nodded slowly. “The Army is well aware of Angel’s crew and the exact nature of their…” Graham cleared his throat at his word trailed off. “Everyone knows they’re vampires,” he finished.

“And you’re what? A liaison officer?” Jim guessed. The Army knew about vampires. Jim wanted to be angry or shocked, but the fact was that he had grown used to the fact that the government lied to people. Hell, he was ready to get it tattooed on his ass just so he never forgot that simple fact.

Graham sat down, the chain to Jim’s manacles still in his hand. “I started that way,” he agreed. “However, vampires are largely creatures of instinct. As long as I answered to the generals, they felt a need to dominate me in ways that were rather uncomfortable.”

“Rape you,” Jim guessed.

Graham’s shock might not be obvious to everyone, but Jim could see the way his pupils widened
slightly and the tightening of the skin around the base of the hair follicles so that the tiny hairs on his arm all shifted like grass in a wind. “No,” he said, and that was only a partial truth.

How the hell did someone only partially lie when denying a rape?

Jim watched the man closely, but Graham had already changed the subject. “Angel will avoid you if you can’t submit to him. His demonic side won’t put up with any challenges, but his human soul means he doesn’t want to hurt you.” Graham had calmed his physical responses so quickly that Jim almost doubted his own observations. “Spike is Angel’s main enforcer, though. He’s going to want to prove his superiority. Luckily with Spike that usually means getting our asses handed to us during sparring sessions. After a few years with Spike as a teacher, I doubt there’s a man in the Rangers who could take me in hand-to-hand. Unfortunately, Spike isn’t in the Rangers and most training ends with Spike sitting on me.”

“So they’re just friendly vampires,” Jim summarized.

Graham leaned back and looked at Jim. “You were a Ranger.”

“Was,” Jim confirmed. He suspected Graham had already seen his whole military file.

“Vampires are one more local population, Detective. Some are useful, some are unimportant, some are fucking dangerous and need to be taken out before they can do too much damage.”

“And you want me to believe that Angel and Spike are the good ones?” Jim asked.

“No.” Graham shook his head. “No, they’re the useful ones. When other demons are trying to inflict mass casualties, Angel and Spike fight to keep the status quo because they like the earth the way it is now—with no gaping doorways to other dimension to let in bigger and badder demons that would turn us all into feed animals.”

“And how many humans do they kill?” Jim braced himself and waited for the bullshit to start flying.

“They’ve killed plenty,” Graham said, which was more honesty than Jim expected. “But they’re both old enough that they considering hunting humans on the streets a game for weak vampires—and they kill weak vampires. They protect the people of LA better than the Army could. Anyone who doesn’t know about the supernatural is off-limits in LA and that rule sticks because Angel owns this town.”

Jim felt a cold chill travel down his spine. Angel owned the town? That sounded a lot like some sort of supernatural mafia. What the hell had Blair gotten himself into?

“What do you want from me?” Jim asked.

“For you to keep an open mind.” Graham fingered the links on the chain he held. “When I came here, I believed all the bad intel about vampires being monsters, and I was still willing to put myself under their authority because I believed they were the best way to defend my country and my world. I still believe they’re the best line of defense and the military agrees. They know that my loyalty is to Angel, and they are willing to accept that and give up all rights over me, including the right to reassign me, just to keep the lines of communication open.”

“So if they’ll give up their bright and shiny soldier, I should expect them to be even quicker to sacrifice me,” Jim finished. It was the most logical conclusion.

Graham gave him a half smile. “Yeah, they will. This crew has taken out necromages, evil law
firms, and gods bent on ending the world. The Army would probably give them nuclear weapons if
Angel asked nicely enough, so the two of us are small potatoes.”

Jim clenched his teeth. Once again he was a pawn and the generals moving the pieces around on
the board didn’t give a shit about the people whose lives they destroyed. Helpless rage crawled up
Jim’s throat, but he had to keep his calm. In a capture situation, anger was your enemy.

“Luckily, we aren’t small potatoes to this family,” Graham said softly. “There’s a chain of
command, and unlike a traditional vampire clan, that chain of command has nothing to do with
physical strength.”

“So you’re here to tell me who to report to?” Jim gave a mirthless laugh. “I’m not very good at
following orders, so don’t think I’m going to start saluting you, Major.”

“I wouldn’t expect you to,” Graham said. His tone of voice was odd. “Hell, I’m not the one to
explain clan, Blair is. However, Blair is so freaked out that if you yelled at him, he’d lose it, and
then you’d have more trouble than you could handle.”

Jim hated hearing this man—this man that Blair regretted not getting to bed—talk about Blair as if
he knew him. He didn’t know shit. “Blair is stronger than he looks.”

“Yeah,” Graham agreed, “he is. When Angel has a question about how the world works, he goes to
Blair. When Faith needs help recovering from the crap her birth family put her through, she went
and lived with Blair. When Xander was faced with making a moral choice that might have ended
the world, he asked Blair for advice. Blair carries a lot of emotional baggage, and I’m going to
admit that I’ve handed him some of that baggage because I didn’t know who else to trust.”

Jim clenched his teeth. Fuck. If Blair was in that deep with some sort of military-approved vampire
mafia, Jim had no idea how to extricate them from this mess.

Graham spoke slowly and deliberately. “Detective, Blair is right there under Angel and Spike and
Xander and Cordelia. Those are the four main officers. Angel runs the show, Spike is his right
hand, Xander is the one to keep those two on the moral straight and narrow and Cordelia handles
all the logistics. You piss them off and you will see the inside of the cells we have in the basement,
and the government is going to go out of their way to make sure that no one makes a fuss about
your disappearance.”

“So, is this a friendly warning?”

“This is me trying to explain how things work so maybe I can spare you a few bruises.” Graham
dropped the chain so it fell against Jim’s leg. “You can try and run, but Angel and Spike aren’t
going to let you do anything that will pull Blair away from them. They will use whatever coercion
they need to. However, if you submit then you won’t be trapped here any more than Blair is. If
they trust you to know your place in the family, then they won’t feel any need to keep an eye on
you.”

Jim’s stomach felt like it was twisting into knots. “So if I bow down to all these vampires, then I
can go home?”

Graham stood up. “I wish it was that easy. Blair talks about you like he follows your lead. That
puts you above me in the chain of command, Detective. That puts you above Faith and Fred and it
sure as hell puts you above Anya and Harmony. If you were at the bottom of the chain of
command, Angel could let you fall off the family tree without even noticing. But as long as Blair
looks up to you, that means you have to find a way to make yourself fit in that slot.”
“Or what?” Jim asked.

Graham shrugged. “I’m not a demon. I’m not even a little bit demonic the way Faith is, so I don’t have any of the instincts that they do. I just know that right now, being fifth in line for the family isn’t a safe place for any newbie, and that’s exactly where Blair has put you by talking about you like the sun shines out your ass. I just hope that Wesley is right about Sentinels being descendants of eudemon because you’re doing to need a few of those instincts.” Graham turned and headed out, leaving Jim sitting in the dimly lit RV by himself. His wrists were chained, but this was the closest he’d come to freedom since Harrison had grabbed him outside the hotel.

He should find a weapon and try to find another exit.

But if he did, he was going to have fucking demons looking to hunt him down and put him in his place, apparently. Jim couldn’t call Simon and drag him into this mess. Hell, he couldn’t call anyone he knew.

He looked at the RV’s door. He could talk to Blair.

Jim stood, caught between doing the sensible thing and searching for a weapon and heading out into the unknown. Clearly Blair needed him.

Actually, from the sounds of things, Blair needed and extraction team and then a deprogrammer to convince him to give up this crazy clan. However, Jim was short one team of a team. As much as Jim’s training told him to escape, Jim couldn’t leave Blair behind, not even when he was pissed as hell.

Grabbing the chain so it didn’t drag on the ground, Jim headed for the stairs that led down out of the RV. The vehicle was parked in a dark, dank basement level, but Jim could see the group of people gathered near a door. A man with short dark hair stood very close to Blair.

The second Jim put a foot on the ground, Blair’s head came up. Even in the dim light, Jim could see the distress on his face. “Jim?” he called.

Jim noted that Faith leaned against Graham and Spike was near the back of the RV smoking a cigarette. Jim had a feeling that if he stopped and did a full threat assessment, he would find that he was surrounded. However he didn’t have time.

When Blair practically threw himself at Jim, he put his hands up in surprise, only to have them caught between their bodies as Blair hugged him. “Holy shit. Seriously? You got kidnapped out of a police convention? Man, that is… that is seriously sucky karma,” Blair complained, but Jim could feel the tremors and smell the salt of Blair’s tears.

“Hey, Chief, I’m fine,” Jim soothed him. Yeah, the others were all nuts, but Jim couldn’t do anything to hurt Blair, even if Blair deserved to a good chewing out. Jim would just save the yelling until some time when Blair wasn’t already on the verge of tears.

“Fine?” Blair backed up a step and looked at him. “You were about to die. If they hadn’t gotten there… Harrison had a grave dug!” Blair was trembling harder now. “I saw a vision. Man, I never get visions, and this was a fucking strange time to start. I thought I was going to have a heart attack. They buried you alive.” The trembling was definitely getting worse.

Jim raised his arms so he could slip his chained wrists around Blair’s back, and then he pulled his guide close. “Hey, I’m alive and fine,” Jim promised. He tightened his arms as he felt the first of Blair’s sobs slip out. “I’m right here.” Jim kept his voice calm, but after what he’d seen, he couldn’t
ignore Blair’s words as superstition or more of Naomi’s crazy spirit walks. Blair had a vision of Jim being buried alive. Bile climbed up Jim’s throat and he held Blair closer.

“Come on, you don’t think someone like Harrison was really going to be able to hurt me, did you?” Jim tried to keep his tone light, but Blair grabbed his waist and held on so tight that it was uncomfortable. Not all Jim’s bruised and cracked ribs were totally healed yet. A woman with long, dark hair stepped up behind Blair and put her hand on his shoulder.

“Come on, Blair. Let’s get you and your man up to your room. After all, the rest of us have to deal with the Tritilli delegation later, and we don’t have time to stand around in the garage.” She was clearly trying to sound annoyed, but too much concern leaked through for her to be even a little believable.

“Hey, Chief, I’m still sore, so maybe you could show me where I could lay down and maybe you could get your friends to unchain me so I could have a long bath. How does that sound?” Blair still trembled, but the silent sobs stopped.

A voice from the shadows on the far side of the bus answered. “Get him up to their room, but do not remove the chains. Detective Ellison, if I find you anywhere other than your room, you will not like what happens. Are we clear?”

“Angel!” Blair said in an outraged voice, his head snapping up.

Jim suspected they couldn’t afford to be outraged. Angel sounded too on-edge for Jim to challenge on anything right now. “Understood perfectly,” Jim said. Part of him wanted to add a “sir” and another part wanted to tell Angel to fuck off. Jim ignored both. The dark-haired woman who wasn’t Faith started guiding them toward a door, and Jim mentally tracked all the players he could. Spike was moving toward the shadows where Angel stood. The man who had been comforting Blair watched with a troubled expression. Graham seemed more resigned than anything, but Faith was asking how people had done in their absence, and she sounded perfectly happy with the whole situation. A blonde vampire, as evidenced by the lack of a heartbeat, watched as they passed her on the stairs, and a reedy looking man with glasses stood behind the front counter of the hotel lobby as they came out of the hallway from the garage.

“Is that the Sentinel?” the geeky man asked.

“Not now,” the woman escorting them barked. “Seriously, Wesley, show some tact.”

“Of course. Excuse my lack of tact. And of course you’re the master of tact, Cordelia,” he said with more sarcasm than was really necessarily to make his point.

“Compared to you,” Cordelia snapped back, “and it’s mistress.”

Wesley muttered something under his breath that Jim couldn’t be bothered to focus on, but then Cordelia was ushering them into an elevator. “Blair, can you get him to the room from here?” she asked, but she kept talking before he could answer. “It’s room 208. That’s the family wing, and some of the family are a little loud with reunions, so if you hear banging or loud moans, try to ignore it. Some people are just tacky about oversharing,” she told him as she reached in and pressed the button for the second floor. She backed out before the elevator doors could close.

“Oh, and detective, welcome to the Hyperion,” Cordelia said, waving as the elevator doors closed. This was officially the strangest kidnapping Jim had ever endured.
Jim pushed open the door to 208 and found himself in a beautiful suite done in browns and blues. A front room had a large couch and wide screen TV while he could see the end of a large bed through a set of double doors. Above the couch, an eight or ten foot wide window stood high in the wall to let natural light from the back room into this front room. The whole place smelled of money.

"Oh man. Okay, I can explain," Blair said. He darted into the room and stood near a built-in bookcase half-filled with heavy volumes. He then promptly went utterly silent.

Jim tried to cross his arms over his chest, but he only had about eight inches of chain between his wrists, so he couldn't, so he dropped his arms down awkwardly in front.

"Shit," Blair said softly, his gaze going to the chains. "This is why I wanted to keep you away from L.A."

"I think I figured that out on my own."

Blair looked up at Jim's face. "Are you pissed?"

"Oh, I passed pissed three states back," Jim said. He had, too. With furious in the rear-view mirror, he had no idea how to react to any of this. Major Miller's comments about the army covering up for whatever this gang did had him even more worried than the chains. Jim couldn't even count the number of times he'd been in chains, both in training and when some bad guy had gotten the drop on him. Jim had survived. However, the idea that the Army would turn him over to Angel if he got out of the hotel had him worried.

Blair grimaced and backed up a step. "Okay, I can fix this. I'll talk to Angel... tell him that he has to let you go. But I had to send them. I couldn't let Harrison bury you alive. He was... he was so twisted. What he wanted..." Blair sounded like he was choking on the words.

Jim moved forward and caught Blair's arm in his hands. "Hey. Breathe, Chief. I'm okay."

Blair took a deep breath. "I don't normally get visions, ya know? I mean, sure, they run in the family, but that was..." Blair swallowed and then finished with a pained whisper, "so not good."

Visions ran in Blair's family--that was a new piece of information. "Runs in the family, huh?" Jim said.

Blair gave him a disgusted look. "Subtle. Real subtle, Ellison." With a sigh, Blair dropped down onto the couch and hid his face in his hands. "Just ask the damn question."

"Okay." Jim had no idea when he'd become the unreasonable one, but Blair's tone made it very clear that he was feeling like the abused party. Funny, Blair wasn't the one ordered to stay in the room or who was wearing chains. "You said visions run in your family. I get the feeling you aren't talking about Naomi."

Blair physically flinched, and Jim could feel his own discomfort and anger starting to swell. "Damn it, I think I have a right to a few answers," Jim snapped.

Before he could react, Blair was on his feet and darting toward the door. Jim cursed as the chains distracted him for the half-second it took for Blair to get out the door. When he got to the open doorway, Blair was already halfway to the elevator.
"Sandburg get back here!" Jim yelled. Blair glanced over his shoulder without stopping. Cursing under his breath, Jim headed after him, running to catch up before Blair could get onto the elevator. If Jim had to go back down to the lobby after Blair, he suspected Angel would be unamused. Jim's neck ached as he remembered Angel's fangs sinking into his flesh. That was not an experience he wanted to repeat, and if Angel caught him breaking the rules, Jim had very few illusions about how the vampire would react. Until Jim could find a way to get himself and Blair clear of this hotel and far enough away that the Army couldn't turn them back over, Jim was going to have to play along.

"Crap. Go back to the room," Blair said, an edge of desperation and panic in his voice. The elevator door opened with a ding, but luckily, Blair was moving back toward Jim, clearly trying to herd him back toward the room.

"Forget it, Darwin. I'm not going back without you, so either you come back so we can talk or I'm following you down there and taking my lumps from Spike or Angel or whoever the hell plans to bite me next."

Blair froze. His hands raised mid-flapping, he just froze. "They bit you?" Blair barely got the words out.

"Angel did before he went up front and refused to be around me," Jim said. He could feel something drag across his skin like cobwebs he'd walked through. Fighting the urge to turn around and look for the danger, Jim focused on Blair. "And he's going to bite me again if I go wandering around his hotel without permission, but I'm not sitting alone in that room with chains on my wrists as I wait for you to get over your panic attack. I need some honesty here, Blair, and I shouldn't have to go to Major Miller to get it."

Jim could see the words hit Blair with enough force to make him flinch. As much as Blair wanted to run, he didn't want to abandon Jim. Even if it was manipulative, Jim would take advantage of that guilt. "You're my only ally here, Chief. I need you to come back or I will follow you down there."

Blair swallowed and slowly lowered his hand. "You are not going to like this... you are totally not going to like this."

"I know that already. I need you to give me a few details about what I'm specifically not liking."

Blair sighed and nodded before he started back toward Jim, dragging his feet like a man going to his own execution.

"Chief, I promise to listen to the whole story before saying anything," Jim offered. He knew he sometimes got a little cranky, but if Miller was right about how much respect these demons had for Blair, Jim needed to keep his temper. The guys in the bullpen understood that sometimes Jim just needed to let off a little steam and Blair was a target of convenience. These people wouldn't.

Blair snorted.

"Hey, I'm not saying I'm going to be calm or happy when you're done, but I'll listen to the whole story before jumping to any conclusions," Jim promised. Of course that didn't mean that he wouldn't be mentally plotting their escape. The army's involvement just meant that Jim would have to be a little more careful about how he approached it.

When Blair passed him on the way back to the room, Jim turned and spotted Spike leaning against the wall on the far end of the hallway. As soon as they made eye contact, Spike pushed himself upright and started sauntering down the hall.
Blair immediately darted into the middle of the hall and put up his hands. "Oh no. This is not his fault!"

The idea of Blair trying to protect him made Jim's gut ache. Yeah, he couldn't defend himself from a vampire--Spike had proved that more than once. Getting shoved up against the side of an RV shower stall while half naked was a less-than subtle reminder of a vampire's strength. However, Jim would fight his own battles--he sure as hell wasn't going to have Blair take any punishment for him. He stepped forward and gave Blair a push toward their room.

"Get in the room."

"But Jim--"

"Now, Sandburg," Jim snapped. "Please," he added when Blair seemed like he was on the verge of getting stubborn.

Blair glanced back at Spike who watched from a distance. "No breaking him," Blair told Spike. "If you break so much as one tiny little bone, I will complain to Xander and Angel so much that they'll do anything to get me out of their faces. Got it?"

Jim could almost feel the growing danger. Spike narrowed his eyes, and unless Jim missed his guess, the vampire was two seconds away from putting Blair in his place. Enforcers rarely put up with even that much attitude, so Jim stepped between the two. "Sandburg, I broke the rules and I knew what I was doing when I did it. Let me handle this." He gave Blair another shove.

"Not even a little bone that he doesn't use much," Blair ordered Spike, holding up a finger and thumb to show how tiny the bone could be, but when Jim growled at him, Blair darted into the room. Jim reached in and pulled the door closed, even as Blair opened his mouth to make another comment.

Turning, Jim faced off against Spike and waited for whatever was going to come.

"Thought Angel told you to stay in the room, mate."

"He did," Jim agreed. He waited. After years in the army he'd learned that when you broke the rules, even the truly stupid ones, the best defense was to take your lumps without complaint.

Spike pursed his lips and looked mildly amused. "No excuses then?"

"Would you care?"

"Nope," Spike agreed easily. He moved closer, and Jim fought down an instinct to bring his hands up into a defensive position. The door to Blair's room started to come open, and Jim reached over and pulled it closed again. "Sandburg's usually smarter than this," Spike said.

"Usually he's getting into the middle of whatever trouble he can find," Jim corrected him.

Spike frowned and tilted his head. "Seems like you should be keeping him away from trouble."

Jim shrugged. He tried. He really did. However half of Major Crime tried to keep Blair out of trouble, and they all failed on a semi-regular basis. Henri complained that he was going to take up drinking if Blair managed to get himself kidnapped one more time.

After an awkward silence that lasted too long, Spike reached up and wrapped his fingers around the back of Jim's neck in a mockery of affection. Jim raised his chin and waited with as much patience
as he could.

"Are you offering me your submission?" Spike asked as he tilted his head in the opposite direction.

"I'm admitting that I can't stop you from taking it."

"Not the same then, is it?"

"No, not really," Jim agreed.

Spike tightened his hold, and his thumb pressed into Jim's windpipe. Fisting his hands tightly, Jim tried to breathe calmly and force himself into a stillness that felt unnatural. While Spike was actually a rather small man, when he moved right into Jim's space and pressed up against Jim's chest, his presence felt much larger than his physical body. "It'd be easy to snap it. Humans or mostly humans are fragile creatures."

Jim looked down at Spike and waited.

"Don't test the limits of vampire control." With that, Spike shoved Jim back into the wall hard enough that his head bounced off it. Before Jim could come up with a response, Spike was strolling down the corridor with a loose-limbed swagger that made it clear that he thought all was well with the world. The man was an asshole, and he had the power of life and death over Jim. This day just kept getting better.

The door to the suite came open an inch and Blair looked out. "Is the coast clear?"

Jim gritted his teeth for a second before nodding. "Yeah. Spike decided that killing me was too much trouble." Unfortunately, that's exactly what it felt like. Spike had no moral problems with crushing Jim's windpipe and leaving him to die on the damn paisley carpeting.

"Oh man, Spike isn't usually this much of an asshole. I am so sorry." Blair cringed a little.

"I get the feeling that Spike wouldn't want you apologizing for him," Jim said as he headed at the door. Blair backed away to let him into the room.

"Totally not," he agreed. Blair stood near the door into the sleeping area and gave Jim a long, hard look. "You're actually taking all this in better than I thought."

Jim grabbed a desk chair and set it in front of the door before straddling it backwards. Blair wasn't getting out a second time. "This isn't my first rodeo, Chief." He rested his forearms on the back of the chair, and the chains rubbed against the wood with a harsh rattle.

"Um, I'm kinda assuming it is your first demonic rodeo."

"True, but this isn't the first time I've been taken captive," Jim said. "It's not even the first time that I found out that someone I trusted at my back is part of the group that captured me."

Blair flinched. "Oh man. That is below the belt."

Jim had to tamp down on a flash of guilt. No matter what Blair's intentions, that was an accurate assessment of Jim’s current situation. However, Jim had been around Blair long enough to know that wasn’t the whole story. "Then start talking to me, Blair. From my point of view, you've just turned me over to some demonic version of the Godfather. I get that you were trying to save me, and I even understand that you couldn't call the cops talking about visions—"
“It’s more than that. I mean, yeah, calling the police would not have been helpful. Not even a little. I may not normally get visions, but trust me, I’ve seen how other people get treated.” Blair made a face.

“Blair,” Jim said sharply. Sometimes he thought he had a sixth sense for Blair’s breakdowns, and a big one was on the horizon. “Give me some information to work with here.”

Blair crossed his arms. “Your promise to keep your temper didn’t last long,” he said peevishly.

“I would be perfectly willing to listen if you would talk. Start with the part where you have visions.”

Blair’s gaze slid down to the floor.

“For God’s sake, Sandburg, I’ve had visions myself, so you know I’m not going to call you a crackpot.”

“I never said you would!”

“Then talk!”

“God you’re being unreasonable.”

Jim almost shouted something back. If they were back home in the loft, he would have laid into Blair right then and there, but they weren’t. He was in enemy territory, and he needed to keep a cool head. More than that, Blair was lashing out to avoid something. Now that Jim was taking a second to gather his thoughts, he could see that. Leaning back, Jim studied his partner. “Start at the beginning, Chief.”

“Oh man, who knows what the beginning was. Lots of people think that the universe started off pretty damn evil, but eudaimon fought to restore balance. They couldn’t beat back the evil demons, so they planted the seeds of humanity, hoping that humans would become their allies in the fight against evil, which totally does not preclude the theory that there is a great spirit who is more powerful than all the daimons and that protected humanity when the species was young.” Blair sounded ready to give an entire history of religions that Jim had never heard of, although the term eudaimon implied certain things.

He whistled to cut Blair off. “Save the religion lecture for later—much later—and start with how you met these people,” Jim suggested.

Blair blew out a breath, and Jim knew for certain that Blair was trying to hide information. The fact made Jim’s guts churn and he had a fight an urge to slam Blair into the nearest wall. Blair shrugged. “My uncle introduced me to Angel.”

“Oh man, who knows what the beginning was. Lots of people think that the universe started off pretty damn evil, but eudaimon fought to restore balance. They couldn’t beat back the evil demons, so they planted the seeds of humanity, hoping that humans would become their allies in the fight against evil, which totally does not preclude the theory that there is a great spirit who is more powerful than all the daimons and that protected humanity when the species was young.” Blair sounded ready to give an entire history of religions that Jim had never heard of, although the term eudaimon implied certain things.

He whistled to cut Blair off. “Save the religion lecture for later—much later—and start with how you met these people,” Jim suggested.

Blair blew out a breath, and Jim knew for certain that Blair was trying to hide information. The fact made Jim’s guts churn and he had a fight an urge to slam Blair into the nearest wall. Blair shrugged. “My uncle introduced me to Angel.”

“Your uncle?” Jim knew for a fact that Naomi didn’t have any siblings, and Jim had a feeling that Blair wasn’t talking about some unrelated person that Blair called uncle because Naomi had lived in the same commune with him.

With a glare, Blair said accusingly, “You’re like a dog with a bone, Ellison.”

“Yes,” Jim agreed, “I am. So, what was your uncle’s name?”

“Saul,” Blair said softly. “Uncle Saul. He was actually my father’s great-uncle.” Blair whispered that.
“Your father’s?” Jim found he was a lot less shocked than he’d expected. Naomi might be a flake, but the story about not knowing who Blair’s father might be didn’t sound right. Jim didn’t doubt that she’d done some sexual experimenting, but Naomi was not stupid or careless, even if she was perpetually stuck in the sixties.

“You’re really not going to like this.”

Jim held up his chained hands as a visual aid. “I’m already unhappy. Just give me all the information at once so I can deal with it and get over it.” Jim didn’t add that he needed more intel to make a decent threat assessment that was more precise than “completely fucked.”

Blair nodded. “Okay. But remember—you promised to listen.” Blair inched into the room and settled down on the arm of the couch, his gaze still firmly on the floor. “My Uncle Saul is my father’s great-uncle, a full D’fatum.”

When Blair went silent too long, Jim gently prodded him with a quiet, “D’fatum?”

“D’fatum are demons or eudaimon. Good demons.” Blair shrugged. “Not that most humans are willing to believe that anyone from another dimension or species is good. And actually, demons and humans can’t be totally different species or there wouldn’t be so much interbreeding, and trust me, there is. Most demons who are born that way have at least a little human in the bloodline.” He took a shaky breath, and Jim wanted to comfort him.

Right now that wasn’t an option, though. Until Jim knew all the information, he needed to focus on keeping Blair talking, which was ironic considering that usually the man wouldn’t stop. Of course, Jim was also painfully aware of how little Blair said about anything important as he lectured everyone on trivia that ranged from native marriage ceremonies to century-old urban legends around various police departments. Even now Blair was trying to get off topic and head into some academic discussion.

“But you were born eudaimon, right?” Jim asked, choosing the less offensive of the two terms.

Blair’s head came up and he looked at Jim once before his gaze skittered away. “Yeah,” he agreed softly. “My father was a quarter. He got a vision that if he slept with Naomi, they’d have an important child. So he did.” Again, Blair just stopped like a windup toy that had reached the end of its string-powered energy. He slid off the arm of the couch and dropped down onto the cushion.

“Did you know him?” Jim asked, taking a shot in the dark.

Blair shook his head. “He didn’t actually want a kid, ya know? He just followed the vision. But then my grandparents—Naomi’s parents—found out that it had been a demon that got her pregnant. They tried to force her to have an abortion. She ran away.”

Jim rubbed a hand over his face. Shit. Naomi had to have been incredibly young, and she had left home to protect Blair. All those times he had accused her of being flaky, and he couldn’t count the number of times he’d silently cursed her for refusing to put Blair first…. The guilt was definitely growing in his stomach.

“Is that when she went to the fatum side of the family?” Jim asked. He tried to gentle his voice the way he might with a victim, and he half-expected Blair to blow up at him. If Blair had accused him of trying to manage Blair’s feelings, Jim would have felt better about this whole conversation. Instead Blair pulled a leg up under him and hugged it.

“D’fatum,” he corrected Jim. And then he rested his chin on his knee for a second. “She didn’t
know where to find them. She went to one of her friends from summer camp. Then she learned her parents had found her and they planned to kill me. They thought I was evil.” Blair closed his eyes. “She changed our names and went underground. Most of the places we went, the people thought she was running from an abusive husband. A few thought her father had raped her, that I was the child of incest. She never told them the truth.”

“Fuck. I had no idea Naomi had that much steel in her,” Jim said softly. He couldn’t even imagine how hard that had been. He was a Ranger who had set up his own plans for vanishing years ago, but he could admit that he didn’t want to walk away from his home and friends. Naomi had been a teenage girl who’d made a choice that Jim couldn’t have made without a lot of soul-searching.

Blair gave a pained smile. “Devorah Heckscher. That was her name.”

Jim mentally filed it away. If he ever had a chance to track down Devorah Heckscher’s parents, he was going to give them a piece of his mind.

“My mom called me Blair so she could dress me as a girl. Her parents knew she had a boy, so she thought a woman running with a little girl would get less attention.”

“Smart move,” Jim said while reining in a cold fury that made him want to hunt these people down. “So how did you connect with your father’s family?”

Blair turned to Jim, his eyes cold and devoid of any feeling. Jim had seen any number of victims with that same dead expression. It meant that either Blair had burned through all his feelings or that he couldn’t let himself feel anything without breaking down. It killed Jim to see Blair hurting this much. However, as long as Blair was keeping this part of himself a secret, he was never going to be able to trust that Jim could handle the truth. Jim wouldn’t have that between them.

Eventually Blair answered. “We were in a commune and one of the women said she recognized my aura. She said she knew a group of D’fatum and that she could introduce us. My mother said no, but before we could leave, Uncle Saul and Aunt Jokina showed up. He gave my mother information on how to contact him, promised his protection and then let her leave.”

“She called him later?” Jim guessed. Blair didn’t answer, so Jim kept on guessing. “She got in some sort of trouble and decided to risk asking for help.”

Blair leaned back and stared up at the ceiling. “I got pneumonia and social services got involved. She was scared they would take me away, so she called Uncle Saul. He came and got us. I was twelve.”

“Were they nice people?” Jim asked. He couldn’t get any sort of reading on Blair’s emotions.

Blair sat bolt upright and gave Jim a nasty look. “They were great to me,” he snapped as if Jim had been attacking them. Maybe he realized that he was off base because he then visible sagged. “Just because they’re demons, they’re not… you know… demonic. Demon is a word. A word. And it’s a word human churches have been trying to paint as evil for millennia, but the original Greek daimon didn’t imply anything like that. Kakodaimon caused chaos and evil, but eudaimon helped people.”

“Chief, I know you’ve always helped me. I’m not going to judge you by anything other than what I’ve seen you do.”

“And I called in the people who put you in chains,” Blair said sadly. Now Jim could feel the despair.

Giving in to his instincts, Jim got up and went over and sat on the couch. He caught Blair’s hand in
his. “Look Casanova, I was willing to accept you when I thought you were coming down for an orgy of sex and drugs. I was going to search your bag when you got home, but I was willing to accept it. I don’t blame you for what happened after you asked them for help.”

Blair’s expression was so hopeful. “Really?”

“Have I ever been slow to tell you what I really thought?” Jim asked.

“Wow. No. You may have emotional constipation sometimes, but you are very willing to share blame wherever you think it falls, whether that’s me or the police commissioner. Totally willing. Overly willing.”

“Enough, Sandburg,” Jim snapped before Blair could really get off on that tangent. Sandburg. Hell, that wasn’t even technically his name. Blair had been born a Heckscher. That was a lot to take in. Jim remembered sitting on the bed while Naomi showed him baby pictures from the various communes and retreats she’d lived in when Blair was young, and she’d never breathed a word of any of this. Jim wondered if that was some last residual fear or if she’d lived her life as Naomi Sandburg so long that her other life had faded away. “So how did you go from your uncle to this crew?” Somehow Jim didn’t see Blair fitting in with some demonic Cosa Nostra, but they seemed to accept him as one of their own.

Blair gave a genuine smile. “Angel had found an object. The people at the museum didn’t know it, but it was a demon frozen in stone. It could have swallowed the world and send billions of people into a dimension controlled by kakodaimon, so Uncle Saul asked me to help him drive it to a place where it could never be found.”

“And that makes you smile?”

Blair gave a short laugh. “No. That was just the job. But Angel had just taken a human under his wing. Xander. He was so young and full of life, and it was totally amazing watching Xander pulling Angel out of his depression. Angel had suffered a hundred years of hating himself because of what his body had done while his soul was in the next world, and Xander managed to end all of it. I’m still not sure whether Xander liked the power he had over Angel or if he liked Angel or if he was just so desperate to get in on the fight against evil that he thought Angel was the way in.” Blair still had that fond look on his face.

“So Xander is human, but he’s still one of the top dogs around here?”

Blair shrugged. “He’s mostly human. He’s Angel’s consort. However, you’ll never find him fighting his way to the top. He mostly just nags people into doing the right thing.”

Well that sounded familiar to Jim.

“Was Angel running this… group back then?” Jim asked. It was hard to avoid calling the people around here a gang or a crew because that’s exactly how they seemed to function. Major Miller might have tried applying military terms, but the idea of rank didn’t fit what he was seeing.

Blair shook his head. “No way. Angel was lucky he had Xander, but that’s all he had. Without Xander, he would have hidden in the shadows and kept eating rats. Spike showed up when there was a big bad to fight, and even though Spike doesn’t have his soul, he cares about his family enough to curb his eating habits so he stayed close.”

“And Cordelia?” Jim asked. If Blair was willing to give Jim intel on the power sources around here, Jim was going to take advantage.
Blair laughed again. “She’s pure human, but the only way the demons around here could take her status would be to fight her, and they know they would have to kill her because she would never break. Angel’s the only one she’ll even bend for. She runs the hotel and she is the first to call Angel an idiot when he’s being one. What’s more, she is totally not averse to sending Spike to break legs when things don’t go her way. Most of the demonic community has backup plans to flee LA if she ever gets a demon upgrade. She’s scary.”

Jim nodded. So she was the consigliere. She would probably have more power than Xander, who sounded like he filled a more traditional family role—something like wife. “Blair,” Jim said seriously, “I need to know. What are they going to do? I’m a cop, Blair. These people are playing outside the law, so what are they likely to do to me?”

When Blair stared at him with wide eyes that had no answers, Jim felt the cold shiver run up his spine. Blair didn’t know. Blair had no idea what these people were going to do to him. Well fuck.
Jim half-heartedly watched television. As kidnappings went, this was one of the better ones. He’d give Angel’s crew four stars for accommodations, but he could feel the itch to move, to do something. He had to escape, and he couldn’t start formulating a plan until he got out of this suite. Right now, all he knew was that there was some sort of force field outside the bedroom and bathroom windows. And Jim was not going to use the word magic, although the force field was pretty hard to explain in any other terms.

“Hungry?” Blair asked with a hopeful smile.

Jim looked up, but honestly, he wasn’t. “I think I have too much on my mind,” he said. He shifted, and the chains on his wrists rattled. Blair’s gaze went right to them.

“I am so sorry.”

“Hey, I get it. You had a vision, and given a choice between being buried alive by Harrison and his idiot friends, and being here, at least I have cable here.” Jim gestured toward the television.

“Man,” Blair whispered. And that was guilt.

“You can lose the guilt, Sandburg.” Jim said.

“Hey great, just as soon as you stop being angry and passive aggressive.” Blair threw himself down into a chair.

If they were home in the loft, Jim would have a few choice words, but they were stuck in the Hyperion under guard by Angel’s crew. Jim studied Blair. At least he was. Blair seemed free to come and go. Jim wasn’t sure how to use that information, though. Blair didn’t seem likely to help them escape.

And that made Jim’s chest ache. He’d really thought that Blair was loyal, but maybe there was something wrong with him because it did seem like everyone in his life took turns stabbing him in the back. Thank God he hadn’t ever acted on his attraction to Blair. He didn’t need to see Blair betray him sexually as well as betray their friendship.

“Oh, and if you’re going to sleep with any of these people, be respectful enough to take it somewhere else,” Jim said firmly. “If I can’t leave these rooms, I really don’t want to be stuck in here with you and some clan member.”

“What? Hey, I would never...” Blair stopped, but that might have had something to do with the glare Jim sent his way. “Okay, I would totally sleep with several of the people around here, but I would never do it where it would make you uncomfortable.”

“That rules out whatever state I’m in, then,” Jim said.

“Nice. Really nice. Look, you just need to get to know them.” Jim was reserving judgment on that. Right now he needed to remain quiet and gather intel. He focused on the basketball game, which allowed him to ignore the chains on his wrists and the general unease he felt about Sandburg having sex with any of these people. Jim had never been good at cutting himself off from his feelings, which is probably why he had perfected the art of hiding them. So he needed to keep hiding his feelings for Blair and hide the fact that it was killing him that Blair had chosen this insane asylum over him.
An uneasy quiet fell over the room until a loud knocking interrupted the awkward silence.

“I’ll get it,” Blair said as he jumped out of his chair. Jim grunted. Despite his outward disinterest, he did keep his senses focused on Blair, so when Blair stumbled backward, Jim was up off the couch in a heartbeat.

“This room is entirely too small, but if Angel is unwilling to be reasonable, I will just have to make due.” Cordelia from downstairs swept into the room with a large portfolio like artists used tucked under her arm.

“Hey, it’s not like Spike is being reasonable man. Your vampire is just as weird as mine.” A well built man with dark, wavy hair followed her into the room.

“No one is as weird as your vampire,” Cordelia shot back. “Blair, we’re having the meeting in here. Could you clear the coffee table, please?” Her words were a request, but they had that same tone that commanding officers used to request them, and Blair reacted like he’d been ordered. He hurried to grab the remote and a dish with nuts off the table.

“Jim, this is Xander Harris. Xander, Detective Jim Ellison,” Blair offered in a hurried introduction.

Xander smiled. “Hey, nice to meet you. Any friend of Blair’s is a friend of ours, and chaining friends is unfriendlike, but it’s actually not totally without precedent. But still… sorry.” He held his hand out, and Jim shook hands warily. He’d thought that Xander might fill some familial role in this vampire mafia, but there was a sense of power in Xander, even if his words made him sound like a bumbling fool. He wouldn’t be the first to wear that disguise. Henri Brown did the same thing. He’d wear his bright shirts and grin at everyone, and very few people knew that he’d been special ops trained. It was a camouflage.

Jim gave Xander a quick nod. He sure as hell wasn’t going to say he was pleased to meet any of these people.

“Oh man, you didn’t just walk out of a meeting with the others, did you?” Blair asked as he watched, his scent slowly growing more and more sour with a sort of mild horror. He sometimes got that scent going when Jim ate fast food two meals in a day.

“Of course they did.” A beautiful blonde with short hair flounced into the room and threw herself down on the end of the sofa. Jim rarely saw women who genuinely flounced, but she did. “Can we hurry up and finish this? I have more important things to do.”

“Keep up running your mouth, and you won’t be able to do much of anything,” Spike said as he followed.

She rolled her eyes.

Blair moved to Jim’s side, which was good because Jim was feeling an overpowering urge to grab Sandburg, shove him in a corner. “Jim, that’s Anya or Anyanka. She doesn’t really have a last name since she used to be a demon.”

“I still would be if men weren’t bastards,” she said with a huff. “If I didn’t like men’s penises so much, I’d be tempted to wipe them off the face of the earth.”

“Which would be hugely of the bad,” Xander protested.

Anya rolled her eyes. “I wouldn’t wipe them off this earth, idiot. I’d just make a world of all women.”
“Which wouldn’t last long what with the lack of children,” Blair pointed out.

Anya shrugged. “Details.”

They were insane. They were all insane.

Spike leaned against the wall, and Cordelia hit Anya on the knee before looking at the seat. The seat Anya had chosen was the one closest to the map Cordelia had just laid out on the coffee table. Anya huffed, but she slid over to the middle.

“Right then, I’m with her. Let’s get this over with,” Spike said.

“We’ll wait for the others,” Cordelia said firmly.

Spike snorted. “Bloody hell. It’ll take a calf puller ta get Peaches’ head out of his arse. He can’t even look at soldier boy without getting cranky that Blair might have other loyalties.”

“I would never betray the clan. You guys are my family,” Blair protested, and Jim felt a wave of cold fury wash through him as he gathered one more piece of evidence that Blair wasn’t the friend Jim had thought. He needed to start thinking about his own escape and leave Blair behind, but the very thought of that made Jim’s bones ache. He wanted his friend. Problem was, Blair was turning out to be less of a friend than he’d assumed.

“You already did, mate. You hid this one from us, and that’s why Angel’s so bloody put out.”

“I didn’t hide him,” Blair said, but he smelled of sour guilt.

“Oh please,” Anya said. “If you’re going to lie, do it better than that. Are the others coming?”

“They’ll come,” Cordelia said with confidence, and she smelled as confident as she appeared. Spike took out a cigarette and put it between his lips without lighting it.

“I don’t have all day,” Anya said.

“Then you don’t have to be here at all,” Spike snapped.

“But I don’t like being left out. I am a member of this clan.”

Xander cleared his throat. “Maybe I should go… encourage him to come up here,” Xander said.

“Don’t bother, luv. Graham explains the military mind better than you could.”

Jim narrowed his eyes at the suggestion that someone was trying to explain his psychology to this mysterious Angel. “If he has a question, he can ask me,” Jim said firmly.

“Oh no,” Blair rushed to say. “That would be a monumentally bad idea. Angel has control over himself, but I don’t think anyone wants to actually see how far that control goes, not right now.”

“Meaning?” Jim demanded. In a blink, Spike was there, his hand wrapped around Jim’s throat as he casually slammed Jim back into the wall.

“Meaning this is his clan, and he’s a right prick about wanting to protect everyone in it. But then you come and Blair smells of misery and guilt. If it weren’t for the fact that Sandburg likes you, I’d recommend dropping you off at some suckhouse and letting them dispose of the body.”

“Hey!” Blair grabbed Spike’s arm. “Let’s play nice. Jim might even be able to help us find Jenny.”
“And even if he won’t,” Xander said as he came to stand on the other side of Spike, “we won’t kill a detective just because he was unlucky enough to nearly get buried alive by some bad guys. We don’t kill good guys, remember?” Xander asked, and again, Jim had that sense of power. Xander sounded like he was making a request, but it was like when a commanding officer made a suggestion. The fleeting sense of power running across Jim’s skin made him want to strike out, but he had more control than that. If he attacked now, he was not in a position to win. So he waited and let Blair and Xander make his argument for him, no matter how much that galled.

Spike gave Jim’s head one more smack against the wall, and then he retreated to stand at Cordelia’s side. She reached for his hand, and he took it.

“That’s Spike for you,” Xander said apologetically. Spike flipped them off with two fingers.

“That’s it. I have more interesting things to do than watch men fight, especially when the fight doesn’t end in sweaty sex,” Anya announced as she stood. Jim stared at her, not sure how to even process that comment. Before he could come up with any appropriate response for such an inappropriate statement, she had turned and walked out.

“Good riddance,” Spike muttered.

“Hey, she is very on the helpful side with magical research.” Xander went back to the dresser and hopped up to sit on the edge. “A thousand years of meeting people and seeing spells is huge with the useful.”

“She helped us find Fred,” Cordelia said. Jim got a strange feeling that as long as Xander and Cordelia were voting Anya into the clan, she was safe. Since they were both human, that might be Jim’s best chance of escape—to put pressure on them.

Blair explained quietly, “Fred is a technomage. She was a scientist, only another scientist stole her work and threw her into a hell dimension. It was one of the nicer hell dimensions, really, but still… not a place to vacation in. She was enslaved and suffered a lot of emotional trauma before the clan got her back.”

“They rescued her?” Jim asked, just to clarify. These guys weren’t coming off as the big damn hero types.

Xander jumped in. “Anya came to us after she lost her demony powers. She was trying to avenge the women this guy had enslaved and killed, and when she lost her powers and couldn’t stop him, she asked us for help.”

“I just want to say that I was only in it for the fighting,” Spike announced. “It was a bloody grand fight, too. Those wankers didn’t go down easy.”

“The scientists?” Jim asked.

Blair looked at him like he’d lost his mind, but then everyone else was too.

“The demons who lived in that hell dimension,” Xander said. “They were pretty low on the scary powers side, but they had brute strength and a love of swords going for them. But man, Angel loved running around in the sun and being able to let his Angelus out in a good sword fight. There for a while, I think he was considering moving there.”

Spike snorted, which seemed like a general denial of the truth of Xander’s statement. Jim ignored him.
“Angel and Angelus?” Jim was starting to get some real intel now.

Xander nodded. “Angel and Angelus are two creatures—one a soul that broods too much and loves with his whole heart, and the other demon who wants to own and care for those in his possession and who is really kind of terrifyingly possessive.”

Jim was fairly sure Xander was describing a stalker.

“Under the right circumstance and with the right spell, one side or the other can temporarily gain a little ground on the other, even if they’re supposed to be equals.” Xander held up his hand and showed it rocking back and forth.

“Bloody stupid, that,” Spike said.

“Anya’s right,” Blair interrupted. “If the curse was too rigid, it would be in danger of failing. All living things need to grow and flex, and magic is living. Totally living.”

It occurred to Jim that Blair was very comfortable openly disagreeing with Spike. Over the phone, Blair had said that he was low on the totem pole, but Graham said that Blair was high in the hierarchy. Based on this piece of intelligence, Jim suspected that Graham was right and Blair was undervaluing his own worth. Nothing new there. And now that Jim understood Blair’s past, he had a pretty good idea he knew where that insecurity came from. Jim definitely wanted to pay a visit to Blair’s biological grandparents on his human side.

“So if the demon has too much control, everyone is in danger,” Jim guessed. Possessive and demonic sounded very dangerous, and Blair was right at ground zero. The thought made Jim clench his fists.

“Completely, but that’s not going to happen,” Xander rushed to say. “I mean, the curse that linked the two—that is a Teflon covered armor plated sort of curse, and trust me, people have thrown some pretty big uncursing spells at it. A god tried to undo the curse, and when Ra has to throw up his hands and admit that a curse can’t be uncursed, that’s one tough curse, so we don’t have to worry about the soulless one coming to visit. But sometimes a really good spell maker can tip the seesaw a little. First one comes out and then the other, and the balance is still there so the curse lets it happen.”

“Great.” Jim was getting a headache.

“Which is why we need to find and kill this bint,” Spike said, and his eyes flashed yellow. Bint? Jim looked around the room, but Blair seemed to be the only one who showed any unease at the idea of killing some woman.

“I won’t participate in a murder,” Jim said firmly.

Xander nodded. “We need more people around here who are on the anti-murder side. Anya might be human, but she’s weirdly pro-killing anyone who bothers us.”

“Her body might be changed, but her morals and her mind are still very…” Blair let his voice trail off.

“Vengeance demony? Yeah. I get that,” Xander agreed. “So, it’s nice to know that Sentinels or Guardians or whatever name you settled on have more of a humanish moral compass. I get tired of being the compassy one around here.”

“You are not the only one who knows right from wrong,” Cordelia said archly.
“Yeah, but you send Spike to break legs and don’t let him kill and call that a win in the moral right column.”

“When they don’t pay their bills, it is,” she said, and she narrowed her eyes in a way that suggested that if Xander didn’t agree, she would make him pay. Jim was quickly beginning to think that she was not the weak link he was searching for. Jim shifted so he was between Blair and Cordelia. When he did, Spike grinned.

“Maybe we should explain all this so he knows what he walked into,” Blair suggested. Jim almost said something sarcastic about being dragged into this in chains rather than walking into it, but with Spike in the same room, Jim decided that poking Blair wasn’t worth the price he’d pay. After a second, Blair started. “Okay, I won’t bore you with the various demon religions and theories about how the world started, but basically you have the type of demons that like quiet and the type of demons that like mayhem. And D’fatum are definitely the quiet types, which is why we’re associated with the Powers that Be a lot of the time. And yeah, I totally see the irony in my family being the quiet sort of demon. And then there are other demons who are more neutral. Ra is a total neutral with five avatars, two into the murder and mayhem, two into peace and quiet, and one standing in the middle.”

Jim recognized Blair’s expression. His hands were starting to fly and he was about to get completely off topic with some tangentially related subject that he found interesting. Jim cut him off with a sharp whistle.

“Wow. You found the Sandman’s off switch. I’m impressed.”

Jim turned and saw Faith walking in. Graham was right behind her, and coming up the rear was Angel. The Capo. That was probably a mischaracterization, and Jim knew the danger inherent in mislabeling a suspect, but it was the closest he could come to understanding these dynamics.

Jim’s first observation was that Angel looked furious. That was strange because Spike looked amused, and Faith just chose the side of the couch opposite Cordelia and dropped down onto it without seeming interested in much at all. Blair pressed close, and Jim rested his hand on the small of Blair’s back, and Angel’s eyes actually turned yellow. At this rate, Jim was going to start working on a bumper crop of ulcers.

“Don’t be disrespectful, boy,” Angel said with a slight Irish lilt in his voice.

The danger swirled around him, and Jim resisted the urge to either strike out first or to put up his hands in surrender. “Blair was getting a little off track, and I wanted to know about the woman that Spike plans to kill.” Jim even managed to sound halfway polite.

Angel narrowed his eyes and took a step closer. Spike pushed off from the wall, and now Jim definitely felt the threat fill every inch of unused space.

Faith laughed. “Trust me, after living with Blair, I know how very off track that boy gets. Graham, why don’t you do your military thing?”

The tensions in the room didn’t exactly ease as much as they shifted. Graham nodded. “I assume we’re talking about Jenny Giles?”

“That’d be her,” Spike agreed. Jim forced himself to take a step backward because Angel’s expression was not making him feel any safer. Distance was his friend at this point.

Graham sat on the arm of the couch closest Faith. These people were not subtle with their alliances.
“Okay, this is the short version. We are the tactical support for a Ranger team that holds the pass, so to speak. The Hellmouth is currently closed, but it’s a weak spot between dimensions, and the Army has the best unit in the country sitting on top of it. They have a number of locals and a couple of demons helping them.

“We normally go down and help them when situations get difficult.”

Jim interrupted. “Wait, this group works with Ranger units?”

Graham smiled. “This group kicks ass with Ranger units, but it is a little like trying to get Marines and Rangers to cooperate.”

Jim almost laughed. Yeah, he bet. If Rangers and Marines were sent on a mission together, that was one serious mission. The two groups would work together seamlessly to take out the enemy. And then as soon as the area was secure, they would focus all their attention on kicking each other’s asses in everything from poker to sparring to who could spit the farthest. As an officer, Jim had tried to rise above that sort of over-active competition, but he usually failed.

Graham shrugged and gave Jim a look that suggested the two of them understood each other. Jim blinked as Blair bumped against him hard enough to make Jim look down.

“Right,” Graham said loudly, and suddenly the tensions shifted again. Jim felt like he was trying to look at the world through a funhouse mirror that kept shifting all the reflections into distorted shapes of themselves. “We asked for tactical support when we encountered an organized army that seemed to be taking up a demonic form of Nazism where they wanted to destroy all humans and halfbreeds. They had a doomsday weapon, so we coordinated an attack.

“Jenny Giles was one of the magic users embedded with the Ranger unit. Against orders, she prepared a doomsday weapon of her own—a magical bomb that targeted all demonic energies.”

Jim reached out and caught Blair’s arm by instinct. Fuck. Blair was part demon.

Blair curled his fingers around Jim’s arm. “Totally ruined her karmic load,” Blair muttered.

“Friendly losses?” Jim asked, his stomach sour. He’d seen that sort of stupidity on the battlefield entirely too much.

Graham nodded. “We lost two locals—fathers who just wanted to protect their families. Faith was incapacitated, and both Angel and Spike would have turned to dust, only they’re both old and suspicious bastards who poked around after they got suspicious. They’d prepared countercharms believing that Jenny Giles might target them. However, they didn’t anticipate that she would actually try to create a genocide device, so their counterspell didn’t protect Faith or our two locals. The Ranger unit had one of their own injured—a man whose great grandfather was a changeling, and their best frontline fighter also went down, although she’s recovered.”

Jim pressed his lips together. He understood the need for vengeance, he did. But he was a cop. “She should be arrested and brought to trial. If the Army has units assigned to demonic activities, then they’ll have some sort of court martial or war crimes tribunal set up.”

“They do,” Graham agreed. “We have a FISA court set up for demonic situations. Blair is considered an expert on local cultures, and he’s testified in front of the court multiple times.”

Jim closed his eyes as he took one more hit to the illusion that he knew Blair. Blair’s fingers tightened on his arm, but Jim really wanted some space. Unfortunately, the room was too damn small for him to get any. “So, why are people talking about killing her instead of arresting her?”
“She’s too fucking dangerous,” Spike said firmly. “She’s throwing all her magic at trying to undo the spell on Peaches here, and the quicker we break her neck, the quicker that shite stops.”

“I would rather arrest her,” Graham said, and he ignored the blistering glare Spike sent his way. “However, to be realistic, I don’t believe she will ever allow herself to be captured. If we get close enough, she will either kill herself or use her magic as some sort of super weapon. I don’t see her as someone who will let herself get captured.”

“Suicide by cop?” Jim asked.

Blair snorted. “Man, I wish. She’s going to be more like a family annihilator. I’ll save you all by killing you and sending you to your happy place. She is a zealot. Total zealot. Off her rocker and making the Kool Aid for all the kids to drink sort of zealot.”

“She believes she’s right and the rest of the world is wrong,” Graham agreed. “But the worst part is that her religious beliefs are tied up with most of us being dead. She might want to find a way to save Angel and Faith and maybe Spike depending on whether she thinks she can control him…”

Spike growled so ferociously that the hairs on Jim’s arms stood up.

“However,” Graham continued, “in her head, the world is better if the rest of us are dead. She’s trying to get the world back on schedule for an Armageddon, and she’s decided that the human members of this clan are keeping the demonic ones from picking a side and ushering in the final battle.”

Jim’s legs turned to water. Fuck. The truth of it was in every word Graham spoke, so Jim didn’t doubt him; however, there was one thing he sure as hell didn’t understand.

“Sandburg, you walked into this without telling me? Unless you want me to leash you, you’d better tell me that you didn’t know any of this was going on when you make your travel plans.” Fear fed the growing fury in Jim’s chest. He was actually in pain as he thought about Blair handling this alone. Jim waited, but Blair didn’t answer. His gaze skittered around the room without settling anywhere, and the cold realization sunk in through Jim’s skin.

Blair had planned to handle this alone. Or Blair had planned to handle this with his precious clan and leave Jim out.

Jim took one look at Blair, and he couldn’t stand to be in the same room anymore. Jerking his arm away, Jim stormed through the middle of the room with as much dignity as he could. Everyone stared, but that was fine. They could fucking stare all they fucking wanted. Jim got into the bedroom and turned around and slammed the connecting door so hard that he could hear something crack.

And the worst part was that he could still hear them planning their strategy. Dropping onto the bed, Jim tried to wish the whole mess away, but reality had never worked that way.
Faith has one or two things to say

Jim sat on the bedroom chair and looked out the window as the others discussed sightings of this woman they were hunting. Jenny Giles. Jim wasn't sure why the hell Sandburg thought that Jim would go along with people planning a murder. He was cop, and he took that responsibility seriously. Hell it was Sandburg who was always talking about how Jim had some damn "blessed protector" syndrome.

The only thing Jim could figure was either they didn't plan on letting him leave or they figured the Army would shut him up. And the Army hadn't had good luck with that last one.

Listening to the others talk, Jim was more and more uncomfortable. Spike sounded almost gleeful about the prospect of pulling the woman's intestines out. The others weren't quite as cheerful about it, but Major Miller did offer a number of military resources, including having his superior officers put a BOLO out with local cops.

Of course they weren't doing the right things to find a missing person. Everyone had quirks that made it impossible to hide. If these people were really good at what they did, they'd know that. They'd know that if Blair disappeared, you would be able to find him though his internet searches. The man did love to keep track of local celebrations and religious ceremonies. It was almost an obsession, and Jim suspected that might have something to do with his demonic side.

If Simon vanished, Jim would start with climates without hard winters because Simon's knee sometimes bothered him, and from there, start tracking down particular blends of coffee and certain cigars. Rafe liked particular designers. Henri was addicted to cheese curds he ordered out of Wisconsin. Everyone had their own quirks, and that's how you found a person who didn't want to be found.

Well, unless they completely changed all their patterns the way Blair's monk friend had given up his entire identity. But that was hard. Very few people could make a break from the past that effectively. One of the best ways was to look for people using search engines to look up loved ones. Jim knew very few individuals who could resist checking on parents or children or ex-lovers. That's why those who went into the witness protection program weren't allowed Internet access.

But he wasn't about to tell them any of that. If they wanted to hunt a woman down and kill her for sport, he wasn't helping.

Instead he focused on the street outside the hotel window. People wandered past, never aware of what sort of supernatural world hid inside. Jim wondered if he knew other people with demonic ancestors. If Blair wasn't completely human, then anyone could be.

Unbidden, a thought formed. Shit. The senses. Jim sat up. Could the senses mean that there was something not human about him? The possibility made the hair on Jim's arms stand on end. It made a twisted sort of sense, only something in Jim refused to consider it. The idea made his skin crawl and something dark pound at the base of his skull.

Wrapping his fists around the chains, he tried to focus on the here and now, and not all the dangers that swirled around him. Eventually the meeting ended, and the others wandered away until there were only two heartbeats left in the outer room. Of course, that didn't mean much considering that at least two members of this mafia didn't have heartbeats.

It was quiet for a while, and then a woman--Faith--asked, "You okay, Sandman?"
"Totally. Yeah."

"Really? 'Cause you aren't usually one for taking lethal actions. Usually you talk about forgiveness and patience."

"Sure, only Jenny keeps trying to end the world, and that's totally not putting her in the good guy category. I mean, if I thought she was trying to find forgiveness, I would stand between Angel and her and stage my own one-man protest. It would be the shortest protest in history, but I'd go there. I just... I mean... She's off the deep end."

"Fucking A," Faith agreed. "I mean, I'm not worried about the big Angelus, but he does give Graham a case of wanting to stay the fuck away."

"Yeah, well he's human. He'll never quite feel clan the way non-humans do."

"That's true, but at least my guy isn't a total asshole about it."

Jim clenched his teeth. He wasn't the asshole in this scenario.

"Jim is doing pretty good. I mean, he didn't know demons existed a couple of days ago. That is world-altering. That is like a complete and total...."

"Mind-fuck?" Faith suggested.

"Yeah. Totally. Completely. And Jim does not do well with mind fucks. Cut him some slack."

Sandburg's defense made Jim feel a strange combination of shame and affection. He didn't like it.

"Right. So attitude man in there gets some slack when the rest of the universe has to suck it up, is that it? I mean, did Fred get to tell those demons to stop calling her a cow because she needed a little time to adjust? I sure as fuck know that Spike didn't give a rat's ass about Graham's feelings when he first came sniffing around me. I haven't seen Spike break your precious little Jim yet, so it seems like he's getting a lot of slack, and his attitude just gets worse."

"Faith! He can hear you," Blair hissed.

"Good. He should hear some truth. When Graham and I got serious, he said he would never ask me to choose between him and clan, that he understood that you're my family and he wouldn't ask someone he loved to turn against family. But that's exactly what that asshole is doing. He acts like if you're our family that you can't really love him."

"Oh man, no, no, do not go there. We are totally not romantic. We are not a we, nope."

Blair sounded of panic now, and the band around Jim's heart got tighter. They weren't a 'we' and they never would be. At one point, Jim had thought that Blair's heterosexuality would get between them. Blair certainly leaked of hormones when he got around some leggy girl. But now the issues were equally unsurmountable. Jim had been betrayed by enough people. Caro had loved her job more than him. His father had loved money, his brother had loved his father's attention, his commanding officer had loved money enough to send Jim's whole squad to what should have been their death. Jim was done with coming in second.

"Do you really think that makes it any better?" Faith demanded. "You love him, and whatever kind of love that is, he's making you feel like shit for having a family."

"It's not that simple," Blair said in his most conciliatory voice.

"Fuck that!" Faith shouted. "Fuck that," she said softer the second time. "You're my family, and
Graham talks all about how Angel is my father figure, and he knows I love him that way, but Graham is fucking wrong. You're the closest thing I've ever had to a father. And yeah, Angel is the weird uncle I love the hell out of, but you're the one who called Angel to tell him that I had to eat vegetables, and you're the one who took me in when I was in trouble, and you're the first man who ever told me I was beautiful and then didn't want in my pants.” The raw emotion in her voice made Jim's chest ache with the echoes of her pain.

"You're my Sandman, and now you're in pain because this asshole thinks that I don’t fucking count. He think that you should pick him over your fucking family, over me. So if you think I’m going to keep my voice down for that asshole—”

“Hey!” Blair shouted, cutting her off. “You do matter. My family matters. Don’t go thinking that I’m going to forget you guys.”

That was just like Blair—totally off on some tangent. Jim figured Faith was more interested in castrating him, and he got it. He was uncomfortably aware of the fact that his behavior was making Blair miserable, but he couldn’t change how he felt.

Faith was pacing now, her footsteps travelling back and forth across the front room. “He’d be happy if you did. He’d just as soon take you out of here so we’d never see you again.”

“Hey, not going to happen. Totally not,” Blair said. And then Faith’s pacing stopped.

Jim gave the girl credit—she was a smart cookie and she had him dead to rights. Unfortunately, it didn’t matter what Jim wanted because Blair chose this screwed up crew of his, and Jim was not going to call them a family. Families did not plan premeditated murders or take police detectives hostage.

“He has his own issues. What did I always tell you about other people?” Faith demanded. “Sandman, you’re the one who told me that I couldn’t let people treat me that way. So, is this a case of do as I say and not as I do? Because I’ve got to tell you that hypocrisy is not a good look on you.”

Jim couldn’t take it anymore. He stood and crossed to the door connecting the bedroom area from the sitting room. He pulled it open and stood there, glaring at this woman who had the nerve to treat Blair that way. His nose itched at the smell of distress and frustration. Faith narrowed her eyes, and it was like a storm front passing through. She took a step toward him, and Blair was on his feet and between them in a heartbeat.

“Hey, let’s just all take seats… you know… as far away from each other as possible,” Blair said, an edge of panic in his voice.

“I’m not trying to take him away from you,” Jim told the woman. Clearly she had a pretty screwed up life because Jim knew for a fact that Blair hadn’t met her until she was in her late teens. Yeah, Jim sometimes tuned Blair out when he talked about his friends, but stories that featured Blair’s old roommate Faith tended to be a little more interesting than most.
“Don’t do me any favors,” she shot back, twice as angry.

“Oh man. Okay, the aggression levels are getting a little high.”

Jim ignored Blair. “Considering the way you talk about me, trust me, I’m not inclined to do you any favors at all,” he told Faith.

Her eyes narrowed more, and he could feel the danger. Jim reached out and caught Blair’s arm, moving him to the side.

“Oh, no. Do not even—”

Blair didn’t have time to finish because Faith leaped at him. Jim could read her intent a half second before she moved, and he threw himself forward and to the right, which allowed him to shove her into the side of the door jamb. She hit so hard that something yielded with an ominous crack, but it didn’t slow her down.

She whirled around, and Jim dropped to the ground a fraction of a second before her fist came through at face-level. He could feel the movement of the air. He sent a sweeping kick her way, but she leaped over it and landed a kick on his side. Luckily Jim ducked so the force of the blow went into throwing him backward instead of into cracking his ribs. He was still winded for a second. She might have finished him, only Blair had her arm and was talking a mile a minute. He held her until Jim got on his feet again, and then Faith brushed Blair off.

She didn’t do it fast enough, though. Jim landed his best punch on her face. And because his wrists were chained, he’d fisted his two hands together and hit her with the force of both of them. The punch slammed her back into the wall behind the lamp table. The lamp and table went flying, and the drywall cracked under the impact; however, she came right back at him.

Faith caught him by the arm and swung him around. She was so strong that Jim couldn’t control his momentum, and he had visions of going head first into the wall only to hit a stud behind the drywall. His fears were short-circuited when a jaguar screamed in fury. Faith released him, and he flew into the chair, which tipped over and dumped him on the floor on the opposite side.

When Jim leaped back up onto his feet, he saw his own spirit animal superimposed over Faith. Even though the jaguar had a ghostly form, Faith could hear something and she backed away, her arms held up defensively.

Jim attacked. He used his wrist chain as a weapon, aiming for her neck. Faith tried to drop low enough to avoid his tactic, but then the ghost jaguar raked her leg with his claws and she jerked back from that touch, which put her right where Jim needed her. He quickly jerked her to the side to keep her off balance.

She got in several hits, and Jim was almost sure she broke one of his ribs, but the fight ended with the chain around Faith’s neck and Jim behind her, pulling it tight. He had his legs around her waist to hold her, and every one of her attempts to free herself ended with him pulling the chain tighter. Jim could hear Blair saying something, but it was like he existed in a world with Faith, and nothing else was real.

Then it felt like lightning had struck, leaving the air charged in its wake, and Faith leaned back into him, the fight gone. Jim eased the pressure on the chain a little, but he didn’t let go totally. He would have kept the jaguar around too, but it vanished in a wisp of smoke.

“I’m not going to take him away from you,” Jim promised her.
She twitched, but she didn’t try to fight again. “You say that now, but you fucking hate us.”

“I’m not thrilled with Angel and Spike,” Jim said. “I wouldn’t ever try to keep Blair away from you. And if I tried, Blair would lecture me to death about family and loyalty. He loves you.” As Jim said it, he realized it was true. Blair did love Faith. That love was in every story Blair had ever told about her wild escapades.

Jim looked over, and Blair was watching him with undisguised worry. He cared about both of them, and maybe Jim had overreacted because he wasn’t in competition with a twenty-something year old kid who’d never got anything but the shit end of life.

“I love both of you, but man, I am not explaining this damage to Cordelia. Or Xander.” Blair looked around at the room. “You two are dead, and I’m not talking about the fun sort of dead, not when Cordelia sees the bill for this.”

Jim looked around and it looked like a hurricane had come smashing through the room. He unwrapped the chain around Faith’s neck and watched her warily. If she was going to attack him again, this is when she would do it. For some reason, Jim didn’t think she would, but he wasn’t fool enough to trust a gut feeling around someone as strong or as fast as Faith.

She got up and looked at the chaos. “First, for the record, Cordelia doesn’t scare me. Second, Gunn needs me for some new training classes, and I’ll be back, you know, about the time something big enough happens to make Cordy forget about this.” She gave Jim an evil look. “You can explain it to her,” she said, and then she turned and almost dashed out of the room.
Spike gets involved

Jim watched television and trying to ignore Blair. As much as Jim hated this whole situation, he certainly didn't want Blair to turn his back on a young woman who saw him as a father figure.

Father figure. That was one standard he'd never held Blair to. However, it was pretty clear that Faith did see him that way. Jim never had liked seeing young people hurt, so promising he wouldn't even try to take Blair away from her was a small enough promise.

"Faith is telling Spike," Jim commented as he overheard the conversation from downstairs.

"Okay." Blair drew out the word in a way that suggested he wasn't sure what to say. "Are you pissed about that?" Blair asked after a long silence.

Jim turned and glared.

"Hey, it's a legitimate question," Blair said, and he sounded outraged, but he held up his hands in surrender. Yep, that was Blair. He acted helpless right up until he sicced his vampire friends on you for a little kidnapping. He pretended to agree with everything, and the next thing you know, his mother and her sage had descended on your home and moved all your furniture and you weren't sure when you'd lost control. Jim had stopped underestimating Blair a while back, but he wished Blair would figure him out as well.

"Do you really think I would hold that against her? She's had enough trouble in her life that I don't want her doing anything that might be seen as disloyal to these people."

"You did not just imply that Spike would pose a danger to her, did you?" Blair demanded.

Jim gave Blair a long hard look. Jim knew how these criminal "families" worked. As long as everyone was loyal, they played the parts of the happy family. However, if someone betrayed that loyalty, small chunks of them would float up in the harbor. If that happened to Faith, Jim would hunt down every one of these monsters and kill them, and he didn't care how long it took.

"You are totally negative. Your negativity could open new hellmouths."

"Hellmouths?" Jim demanded.

"Do not ask, you so do not want to know," Blair said with a shiver. Jim felt an answering shiver run down his spine, and he made a mental note to ask Blair about hellmouths later. For now they were about have company.

"Spike's on his way," Jim said.

Blair bolted out of his chair. "Now?"

"Yeah." Jim nodded toward the door, and right on cue, Spike opened it without even the courtesy of a knock. He leaned against the frame and studied them with an almost amused look.

"I didn't bloody expect that, did I?"

Jim knew exactly what Spike was talking about. He'd listened in as Faith told him about the fight, so he just leaned back and waited to see how Spike would react. Jim had every reason to believe that Spike would beat him in any fight, so he wasn't interested in starting one.
Spike sauntered into the room. "I figured Faith would hand you your arse on a platter, but maybe you're more interesting than I thought." Spike looked him up and down, and Jim could feel the aggression slide over him like oil. The fact was that Jim was a little surprised too, but looking back, he wasn't sure she'd had her heart in it. He found that a desire to win meant a lot more in a fight than physical strength.

And his spirit guide had helped.

"Whoa. Okay, that would be bad looking," Blair said as he went to jump in the middle. Now Jim leaped up from the couch. He caught Blair by the arm and reeled him close. If Spike started something, Jim wanted to make sure he could shove Blair out of the way.

"You planning on playing nursemaid for him all the time?" Spike asked in a derisive voice.

Jim stepped forward, shoving Blair to the side. "I don't need a nursemaid. If you feel like beating me senseless while I have my hands tied, go for it." Jim glanced over. "Blair, stay out of it."

When Jim looked back, Spike was yellow-eyed and his forehead had grown new bumps. "I don't need you tied to teach you a lesson." His fangs made the words come out more sibilant.

"I'm sure you don't, but then, I don't think you mind taking advantage, either."


Spike completely ignored Blair, which was good. However that put Jim in the crosshairs. Under other circumstances, Jim might try to deescalate the situation. He certainly knew the tactics to calm a dangerous criminal, but yet something in him pushed him to challenge, to fight, to claim.

And that was stupid, because he was going to lose. But Jim never had been good at fighting instinct. He'd railed against it, denied it, refused to talk about it, but he'd never been good at fighting it.

"I can take those chains off, and you'll still lose."

Jim suspected he was right. However, what came out of his mouth was, "Maybe. Faith thought she would win." Jim stared Spike in the eye, even as the vampire stalked closer. Blair made a desperate little noise of protest, but he didn't say anything.

When they stood nose to nose, Spike grabbed the chain between Jim's wrists. "Let's just see." Spike whirled around and gave the wrist chain a hard enough yank that Jim was almost forced to his knees. He might have gone down, only Spike was moving fast and dragging Jim along with him.

Blair ran after them. "Hey, no breaking my Sentinel. Spike! You promised!"

Ignoring Blair, Spike headed for the stairs, pulling Jim along with him.

Downstairs, Faith sat on the utilitarian front desk and Cordelia sat in an alcove behind the counter at an ornate desk that would look at home in a palace.

"Spike?" an unhappy voice demanded. Jim looked and Angel stood near a tall cabinet that had the largest collection of old-fashioned weapons that Jim had seen since Blair had dragged him to a museum exhibit on medieval weaponry. "I thought I said he stayed in his room." Angel's eyes were slowly turning yellow, and the danger Jim had felt earlier intensified until he had a burning need to get the hell out of the room. Unfortunately, Spike held his wrist chain.
"Seems like he's ready to challenge into the clan," Spike said with a sort of wicked glee that made Jim's skin crawl.

"Oh man," Blair said softly. Clearly, that was one vote for not fighting.

However, Jim watched as his jaguar paced the edge of the room. It stopped and put its nose up in the air, scenting the room. If the jaguar helped him beat Faith, maybe it would be in a mood to help Jim now. Maybe that was the best escape strategy, although Jim had a sinking feeling he had no hope of winning any fight against Angel, spirit help or not.

Angel closed and locked the weapons cabinet and walked closer. "Has he?" There was an undercurrent of Irish lilt to his voice, and Jim's arm hair stood on end. He figured that had something to do with the fear scent coming from Blair.

"He beat me, fair and square," Faith said. That didn't exactly match what she'd told Spike. She'd told him that Jim had some sort of magical distraction--an animal that messed with her senses. Jim wouldn't call his spirit animal magical.

"Did he?" Angel asked.

"Hey," Blair said, moving between Jim and Angel. "Do you remember the conversation we had about humans and not breaking them? That totally applies here."

"I willna break him much," Angel said. He reached into his pocket and pulled out a set of keys.

"Oy!" Spike loudly protested. "You're not going to get a shot at him at all." He caught the keys that Angel's threw him and opened the shackles.

Rubbing his wrists, Jim backed away, wary of the coming attack. Blair had started to breathe fast, and Jim's attention was divided. That's the moment Spike chose to attack.

He leaped forward, and Jim threw himself back to avoid the brunt of the blow. Unfortunately, he couldn't move fast enough to avoid him altogether. Spike caught him by the arm, and Jim let Spike pull him forward. He knew better than to try and fight a superior strength. However, as Spike jerked him forward, Jim aimed a kick for the side of Spike's knee. The odd angle forced Jim to fall to the side, but the good news was that he took Spike with him.

The jaguar screamed as they went down in a pile of tangled limbs, and that clearly distracted Spike. He twisted around to check for another attacker, and Jim retreated to a spot closer to the stairs.

"Bloody hell."

"I told you," Faith called from her spot on the counter. Then she pulled her feet up under her and propped her chin on her hand to watch.

"That does make you a good sight more interesting, mate," Spike said. "So, spirit animal?"

Jim didn't answer. He slowly circled around as Spike tried to flank him. When Jim came near Angel, he paused, but Spike quickly said, "Ignore him, mate. If he gets in the middle of this, I'll call him a poof for the next century."

"Watch it, boyo," Angel warned, but he also didn't contradict Spike. In fact, he leaned back against the weapons cabinet.

Jim wasn't entirely willing to trust their word, so he moved closer to the counter. He wasn't sure if
he should be offended that Cordelia hadn't even bothered to look up from her computer.

When Spike leaped forward again, the jaguar raced between them. Clearly Spike could feel something because he checked himself and reversed direction, and that's when Jim attacked. He struck out at Spike's sternum. Vampires might not need to breathe, but maybe they felt pain.

Jim's fist connected so hard that his knuckles throbbed, but it was worth it when Spike fell to the ground with a curse. Unfortunately, Jim only got a half second of triumph before Spike tangled his legs with Jim's, slamming Jim to the floor next to him.

The jaguar screamed again.

"Not working this time, mate," Spike said. He ignored it as he and Jim wrestled, each trying to get the upper hand. Unfortunately, the fight wasn't even.

Soon enough, Jim was forced face down onto the floor. One of his arms was trapped under his body, and Spike had the other pinned behind Jim's back. With his other hand, Spike held Jim's neck, and instinct forced Jim to hunch his shoulders to try and protect the vulnerable muscles.

The jaguar raced through them, his spectral form feeling like a cool breeze across Jim's skin. Spike could feel it too because he cursed, and Jim chose that moment to get a knee up and try and throw the vampire. He earned himself a few inches of freedom, enough that it really hurt when Spike slammed him back down onto the marble.

"Bloody stay down, you nob. I'm trying to not hurt you," Spike snarled.

"Don't do me any favors."

"You fucking--" Spike didn't even finish his insult. Jim attempted to roll free, and Spike slammed Jim's ribs with his knee before getting Jim pinned again.

Pain rolled through Jim's body, and he could feel a need to stop, to admit Spike was stronger. The instinct pulled at him, the urge to escape the pain and the urge to admit the truth—they both drove Jim toward one inevitable admission, and now he fought that internal battle as much as he fought Spike.

"You done?" Spike demanded.

"I guess you can make me be done," Jim said, not even hiding his hatred of this whole situation. He felt like he was being honest for the first time since Spike and Angel had appeared in the basement.

"I can, but I don't want you hurt. I need you strong to help protect Blair. With Jenny Giles out there, we need fighters."

"What?" Jim tried to twist around. That wasn't the answer he'd expected. He'd expected Spike to crow about his victory. He'd expected pain.

Spike snorted. "What? Did you really think my goal was to beat you senseless?"

"Yes," Jim said.

Spike pulled him up, and Jim tried to take another swing, only Spike gave him a shove toward the center of the room. Jim had to take several running steps before he could turn to face off against Spike again. "This isn't about hurting you, mate. This is about seeing if you're strong enough to
trust with my family. If I can't trust that you're strong enough and fast enough to protect Blair, I
don't want you near him."

"I've protected him up until now." Jim glanced over to see Graham coming down to stand next to
Blair. Cordelia stood at the counter, and Angel watched with yellow eyes.

"Yeah? That's because I didn't know how serious he was about you. When he loves someone, he's a
bloody fool about it. Like that mess you got yourself into in that basement. He would have gone
running in there blind and gotten himself killed if he'd had half the chance."

Jim hated to admit that Spike was right about anything, but Jim couldn't deny that. Instead he
pointed out, "He didn't."

"Because we kept him safe," Spike snarled. "So, I'm wondering why it is you can beat Faith and
hold your own with me, yet you let to soddin' humans capture you."

"They caught me off guard."

Spike dropped his hands and Jim took a step backward, not sure if the fight was over or not. Blue
eyes studied Jim. "Where was your bloody spirit animal when you were down there? That's
powerful mojo, so why weren't you calling on it?"

"You think I do that intentionally?"

"I think if you can't, I'm not letting you out of this hotel unless you learn to. Get that under control
and you'll be a good bit stronger."

Jim kept his hands up and ready as Spike stalked him in a circle. Unfortunately his spirit animal
didn't show any interest in getting involved now. Jim was starting to wish he had something other
than a cat as a spirit guide. Cats didn't have reputations as reliable and steadfast companions, and
his spirit animal was proving that. "So, you're only doing this for my own good," Jim summarized.
He'd heard more than one abuser use that line.

"Fuck no. I'm doing this to protect Blair. If he gets killed chasing after you, the others will be a
right snit. I don't like having my life disrupted, and you're one giant disruption just waiting to
happen."

That sounded more honest. "So, you're just about yourself," Jim summarized. He preferred the
honesty.

"Fuck yes," Spike agreed. He leaped forward, and again, the jaguar jumped between them. This
time Spike didn't flinch away, so when Jim leaped forward toward him, they met in the middle.
The end was rather anticlimactic and again, Jim ended up on the floor, this time on his back. His
skull had hit marble hard enough that he could still hear the ringing long after Spike pinned him.

"You're good. You're never going to be good enough to take me, mate." Spike leaned close, and
Jim struggled. Unfortunately, Spike was right that he couldn't take Spike. "Could be that you're
strong enough to fight with me, though," Spike offered. He wrapped his hand around Jim's throat,
and now the urge to tilt his head was nearly overwhelming.

"Fuck you," Jim snarled.

"If you need me to, no problem," Spike said, and suddenly Blair was there, sliding across the
marble to kneel next to Jim.
“Whoa, hey, off-limits. No way do humans settle status with sex. That is very much off limits.”

“Blair!” Jim shoved at him to get him away, but Blair clung to his arm. Jim would get upset that Blair was interfering, only Jim had already lost this fight with Spike and the only fight he was trying to win now was inside his own head. He could feel the pressure building up, and Blair was like the lightning rod that the storm was drawn to.

“Jim, hey, I know Spike is pushy, but he’s a good guy, and I mean that literally. He has been on the front lines of saving the world, which is why the Army is willing to work with him.”

The pressure in Jim’s head grew stronger, and his eyesight kept going out of focus. Jim couldn’t decide if Spike’s fingers were too tight around his neck or if his senses were acting up.

“That’s right, pet,” Spike said, “after all, you’ve been there when I’ve helped save the world, at least that first time. But,” and here Spike turned his gaze back to Jim, “I’ll burn the world alive if it means protecting Blair, protecting Cordelia and the rest of this family.”

It felt as if something sliced through the rising storm front allowing cold air to wash over Jim’s body. Almost involuntarily, he tilted his head to the side, and Spike struck. His fangs sunk deep into Jim, and Jim could almost feel the flesh parting and the blood flowing. Blair tightened his hold on Jim’s hand, and Jim felt like he was spinning.

When Spike sat up, his lips were red with Jim’s blood. He held his hand out, and Jim took it without a thought. Spike stood and pulled Jim up with him. “You’re clan,” Spike said, and something shifted in Jim’s world. Spike didn’t seem threatening, and logically that didn’t make sense. However, Jim couldn’t deny that most of his aggravation with the vampire had vanished like smoke.

Of course Spike had been violent. Jim’s kidnapping had nearly pulled Blair away from the family.

“Was that…” Blair’s voice trailed off and he took a couple of seconds to gather his thoughts again. “Wow, that totally was,” he whispered.

Jim might have asked what he was talking about, but Angel stepped forward. That sense of imminent danger Jim had felt earlier had vanished. Jim still could feel the potential for violence, and he certainly realized that Angel was far more powerful than anyone Jim had met before, but the undercurrent of fear was gone.

“You don’t have your powers under control, and that’s dangerous,” Angel said.

“My powers?” Jim looked at Angel, not sure what he meant.

Angel frowned. “You should have been able to get out of that basement with your spirit guide—Spike is right.”

“Course I am,” Spike said with undisguised arrogance. “I’ll call up the Green Bean and see if he can drop by.”

“The Green Bean?” Jim was not understanding this conversation.

“Oh boy. That’s not good,” Blair said. Jim might agree if he had any idea what anyone was talking about.
The others wandered off to other parts of the hotel, but Cordelia continued to work on her computer, and Spike lounged near the exit. The aggression had eased, but Jim definitely got the impression that he would be taken to the ground if he went for a phone or door.

Blair walked over to sit on the cushion next to Jim. “Wild, huh?”

He sighed. “That’s one word for it. Slightly insane would be another.”

“I hear you.”

Jim gave Blair a weary look. “Don’t start channeling Naomi, I can’t handle it right now.” Jim fisted the chain between his wrists. He really hated that Spike still had him chained. If they wanted Jim to respect their point of view, it would be nice if they stopped chaining him.

“You’re actually handling this pretty well. I mean, Spike took you down, and you totally handled that well.”

“Too well,” Jim said.

Blair gave him a concerned look and for a long time, he waited, but Jim had no idea how to explain any of his feelings. “What’s wrong?” Blair finally asked.

“Would you like a bullet list or a PowerPoint presentation?”

“Oh man, you can turn the pissy off right now.”

Jim knew that he was taking his aggression out on Blair, but it wasn’t like he had a lot of other options. Getting out of the house and going to a Jags game was not on the table.

Blair leaned into Jim’s shoulder. “Come on, talk to me. I know it may not seem like it, but I am totally in your corner. I always have been.”

“You’re right that it doesn’t seem like it right now.” Jim held up his chained hands. It was a low blow, but he never had been good at curbing his tongue when he was pissed. Caro always accused him of being a closed-up bastard, but that’s because he worked very hard to make sure she never saw the nastier side of him. And the more frustrated he got, the more he wanted to lash out at everyone.

Blair cringed away from that accusation, and Jim wished he had kept his mouth shut. From across the room, Spike glanced over, but he didn’t seem inclined to get involved. There was one mercy.

Blair said softly, “I wanted to keep you away because I didn’t want you forced into all of this.”

“So you were protecting me?”

Blair snorted. “Totally. And don’t think that I don’t know you’re trying to change the subject. Something is bothering you.”

Jim missed the days when he could get away with a bluff. Sandberg knew him too well. “Things changed.” Jim wasn’t sure how to explain it any farther than that. They had just changed. One second he hated Spike, and the next he just couldn’t summon the same revulsion.

“Okay,” Blair said slowly, clearly trying to figure out what Jim was not saying. “Something in the
hotel or something in you?”

“Both?”

“Something with the senses?”

“Christ, Blair,” Jim snapped, “can we have one conversation without it coming back to the damn senses?”

“Maybe if you didn’t hide everything when it came to the senses we could. As it is now, the second you stop talking I start wondering what’s wrong with them.”

For a time, Jim just glared. “Nice, Sandburg.”

“I gave up nice for Lent.”

“You’re Jewish.”

“I’m eclectic. I take a little bit of this religion in a little bit of that religion. I consider myself as a global thinker. Now if you’re done obfuscating, what’s wrong?” Blair poked a finger into his chest.

Jim stared off into the distance.

“Hey, if you want I can do my pitbull impression. I’ll just grab on and hang on until you finally get so annoyed with me you give up and talk. It will be like the battle of the Wonderburgers all over again. And man, you totally lost that one.”

Now Jim glared, but Blair had developed an immunity. Since he really didn’t want a prolonged defeat, he yielded. “When Spike and I fought, something shifted. It’s like when the pheromones were messing with my emotions.”

“So it is about the senses?”

“No. It’s not. I would recognize if these were pheromones. I don’t know what’s going on.”

Blair held up his hands in defeat. “Okay, we can deal with this. Tell me how you felt before the fight.”

“Like if someone turned Spike into a pile of dust that I’d buy them a beer.” Jim rubbed his hand over his face. It wasn’t normal for people’s emotions to shift so quickly.

“Oh man, bad karma. I mean, yeah, he comes on a little strong, but you have to give him a chance.”

“That’s the point, Chief. I don’t feel that way anymore. And I can’t come up with one logical reason why my feelings have changed so much.”

Blair narrowed his eyes. “Okay,” he said slowly. “Describe your feelings now.”

That took some thought. Jim couldn’t easily sort his feelings, and that was something else that disturbed him. While Jim often disliked his own negative emotions, he understood them. He understood his anger and his fears. He didn’t understand this. “I feel like Spike is a giant pain in the ass, but if someone came in here with a wooden stake, I wouldn’t think twice about pulling my weapon to defend him.”

Blair leaned back. “Oh man,” he whispered. He sounded slightly horrified and from Jim’s experience, things which horrified Blair left him running for an exit. “Okay.” Blair seemed to
verbally stall out again. “Oh man,” he returned to a few seconds later.

“Should I slap you upside the back of the head to restart your brain?”

Blair glared at him. “That never works on your computer, and it won’t work on me, either. I just… I mean, I totally didn’t expect this. I mean, yeah, I’ve read some of the older demonic texts, but this… oh boy.”

“Blair,” Jim growled.

Holding up both hands in surrender, Blair scooted away. “Hey, no need for violence. Fine. You are not going to like this, though.”

“My dislike button broke. Try me.”

Blair blew out a breath and licked his lips nervously. “Okay, where do I start?”

“If you start with the gods creating heaven and earth, I’m giving you a wedgy.”

“I am so totally going to cut you off red meat until your testosterone levels come down.”

“Sandburg!”

“Fine! You’re part demon.” Blair blurted it out loudly. Cordelia and Spike both looked in their direction, and Jim could feel his face start to turn red. “Sorry,” Blair said when he noticed the attention. “But it totally makes sense. You and Spike established dominance, so the stress of the unresolved tension eased. It makes total sense. I mean, that’s why Angel is less cranky now. Either that, or he’d going into his Angel-heavy phase.” Blair held out his hand and tilted it back and forth. Jim assumed that he was referring to Angel’s soul and demon problem. If Angel had a demon in him, Jim had no idea why this Jenny person would want to do anything to disturb that balance.

“Look, Sandburg, neither of my parents drank blood.”

Blair’s expression turned dark. “Neither of mine did either,” Blair said right before he punched Jim in the arm harder than he needed to. “Way to show your homocentric bigotry.”

Jim could have kicked himself. He walked into that one with both eyes closed. “I didn’t mean it like that. Your father knew he was a demon. Trust me, no one in my family is waving the human-optional flag,” Jim said. Not that he’d asked his mother. She’d walked out on them, and he never had understood why. He had a really uncomfortable feeling that she might have had a reason that had less to do with his father than Jim had always assumed. Blair was giving him a calculating expression that suggested he was thinking the same thing.

“Wouldn’t I have noticed if I was part demon?” Jim demanded.

“Right, like the way you’d have spirit walks or spirit animals. You might have senses or powers that were superhuman or like d’Fatum, you’d have unusual luck either for good or bad. Yeah, you don’t have any of those signs.” Blair crossed his arms.

“Sarcasm is a bad look for you, Sandburg.”

“Bite me,” Blair suggested.

Jim had definitely hit a sore spot with the blood drinking demons crack. For a second, Jim had a really evil thought about Simon having to design a cultural sensitivity workshop centered around
the non-human population. “Wait. How many demons are there in Cascade?”

“Not as many as you’d think. I mean, it’s a big city with lots of prey and a decent climate, but the vampires are definitely in short supply, and there are a few eudeamon, but not that many.”

“Bad mojo,” Spike offered from across the room.

“Which really means good magic,” Cordelia said. “Vampires are drawn to certain magics, like the power of the hellmouth.” She stood up from her computer and headed over to the counter where she began to fuss with her nails.

Spike wandered her direction. “Right enough. Some shaman or another put out some pretty strong spells up in that part of the country centuries ago, but the mojo still lingers. Big chunks of the northwest and Canada feel like a bloody sugarplum land of goodness.” Spike’s face made it clear he didn’t like the idea.


“Not some place I’ll visit twice,” Spike said. “Got more raw power lying around here, and it isn’t tainted with some purity and life shite.”

Blair’s face lit with academic curiosity. “Now that would an interesting bit of research. Oh man, do you think anyone has recorded pre-European magical use in the area?”

“Oh no,” Cordelia said firmly. “Every time you start talking about being interested in something, Angel goes and buys more books. Let’s make this very clear, Sandburg. If you talk him into buying any more research books, you will stick around and index every single thousand-page magical tome. Am I clear?” Cordelia stalked out from behind the counter, fire in her eyes. Jim leaped up and stepped between her and Blair.

“Bloody terrifying, isn’t she?” Spike asked as he gave her a lewd grin.

“And I’ll show him why I’m terrifying if he talks Angel into any shopping sprees,” Cordelia poked a finger in Blair’s direction, and then Spike was there, winding himself around her.

“Now, luv. We’ll just have to nick the bugger’s credit cards and spend it on some nice jewelry first, won’t we?”

She raised an eyebrow and looked at him with all the warmth of a cobra. “Unless you want another round of my fiscal responsibility and capital investments lecture, you won’t touch his credit cards. He won’t touch his credit cards. No one in this hotel will touch any credit card, unless they’ve stolen it, and then I don’t care. But the first bill that shows up on my desk is going to lead to pain and humiliation, clear?” She started glaring at Spike, but she quickly moved to glare in Jim and Blair’s direction.

“I totally forgot how terrifying she is,” Blair stage whispered.

Jim definitely wouldn’t say that to her face, but he agreed.

“Bloody right she is,” Spike agreed, and Cordelia gave him a fond look.

“You have work to do,” she told Spike. “I haven’t gotten any payment from the Sangant family.”

“Right. I can take care of that.” Spike made a strange noise and grinned viciously.
Jim narrowed his eyes. “Are you going to break kneecaps to collect money?” he demanded. He didn’t care what Blair said about dominance, he was a police officer, and he would not allow innocent people to get caught in the middle of the demonic mob.

“I hope so,” Spike said. “Sangant tend to cave as soon as they think they’ve gotten enough attention from the clan leaders, so I’ll have to break one of ’em pretty quick before they give in and offer up tribute.”

Blair moved to Jim’s side. “Demon tribute and clan relations, now that is a field an anthropologist should cover.”

“They’re demons?” Jim’s brain was going to break. How many demons did LA have, anyway.

“Yep,” Blair said. “Sangant put a lot of stock in being noticed, so they’re going to aggravate Cordelia until she notices them, and then they’ll pay their tribute for having stayed here. Cordelia is the expert in demon bill paying rituals. I keep telling her she should get an anthropology degree out of her work.”

“I don’t think anthropologists study demons, Chief.”

“Harry does,” Cordelia said, “however, I am far more practical than to get a worthless degree.” She sniffed and gave Blair a dismissive look that made Jim bristle. Blair just laughed.

“That’s Harriet. She’s Doyle’s wife. They come through here every once in a while, but Angel definitely isn’t comfortable with him. Back when Angel was struggling with his Catholicism and trying to keep Xander sin-free, Doyle encouraged Xander to follow his gay heart.”

Spike snorted. “Seems to me you were in on that, too. You went head to head with the priest.”

Jim looked from Blair to Spike and back. Sometimes he’d felt like this with Caro’s family. They had all these family stories and inside jokes, and he’d sat at Thanksgiving not understanding half of what was being said. “What priest?”

“Like I said, that was Angel’s Catholic phase. Hopefully he’s over it now. He is, right?” Blair asked.

“He goes to mass a few times a year,” Spike said with a shrug. Clearly he was bored with the whole conversation and he wandered back toward the main entrance.

“He goes to church?” Jim would admit to a few pre-conceived notions about demons, and going to church didn’t really fit into that picture. Okay, so Blair was a demon, and he could see Blair going to church, but Catholic vampires? That was a bit of a stretch. Jim wondered if they were pulling some elaborate practice joke.

“Ponce,” Spike said derisively. Jim wasn’t sure if that was directed at him or at Angel. “Where is Lorne? I’m not standing around all day waiting for him, especially if there are Sangant to break.”

“He’s coming.” Cordelia headed back to her computer.

“Well if he keeps me waiting, I’m locking that one up in his room and going out.” Spike poked his thumb in Jim’s direction.

“I thought we had the dominance problem solved,” Jim said drily. He might not have the same gut-level hate and fear around Spike, but he still resented the hell out of being locked in his room like a kid.
“Until you can get your spirit animal under control, you’ll stay bloody chained and I’ll lock you in your room unless me or Peaches is around to babysit.”

“Ixnay on the abysittingbay,” Blair said.

Jim and Spike both gave him incredulous looks.

“But it is hugely weird that you could call up your spirit animal here, and now in that basement. I wonder if it has anything to do with the presence of other demons.”

“I don’t have other demons in Cascade, and I saw the jaguar there,” Jim said.

“And I’m part demon,” Blair said.

“Oh, yeah.” Jim still wasn’t sure how he felt about that. Then again, if Blair was right, they both had something inhuman in their family tree. Jim sat back down on the sofa and rubbed his hand over his face. Blair also believed in karma, and if he was right on that one, Jim had definitely done something truly shitty in a previous life.

Blair sighed and sat next to him. “This is why I wanted you to stay far, far away.”

Jim snorted. “Yeah, because I’m too square for this group.”

“You said it. I didn’t.”

The silence grew heavy and for a time, Jim focused on watching Cordelia file her nails and Spike lean against the wall. There wasn’t much else he could do, especially not when his wrists were still chained. Then Spike pushed away from the wall and stood in the middle of the entrance. “He’s here. Luv, call Angel.”

“On it,” Cordelia said, as she picked up the phone. “Angel, Lorne is coming.” She paused a second, listening, and then sighed. “That man has got to learn some phone manners,” she said before hanging up the phone. Jim could feel something slide over his skin and he stood and looked toward the main staircase. Angel was just at the top, Xander at his side.

Jim turned back around as the front doors opened, and his stomach dropped. Fear rose up like a wave, and he caught Blair by the arm and pulled him close. Holy shit—that was a demon. The creature had green skin with scales or something clear around the hairline and horns. Red horns. Red demon horns. They matched his red eyes. And his red lips. And possibly his red eyeliner. Its features were roughly human with two eyes and a mouth, but the nose was long and narrow in a way that didn’t look human. And his heart… Jim could hear the strange throbbing of a four-stroke heart where humans had two clear sounds. Or maybe it had two hearts.

To make the whole thing more surreal, it had on a leisure suit and pink shirt.

“It’s a demon,” Jim said once he overcame his horror.

“Well aren’t you a sweetie for noticing,” it said.

Xander hurried past Jim and he grabbed the demon by the arm like he was an old friend. Then again, he probably was. “Hey, Lorne. You have saved our bacon because we have trouble of the ‘what the hell’ sort.”

Lorne smiled. “That’s what I’m here for, cutie. At least, I’m here for you unless you want Angel to sing. I have not imbied enough alcohol yet for that sort of sacrifice.”
Spike interrupted. “None of us have.”

Angel glared at him.

Xander pulled Lorne into the lobby. “Actually, Lorne, this is Jim Ellison. Jim, this is Lorne. He’s our bartender, aura seer, and general ambassador. Lorne, Jim is… um…” Xander cleared his throat.

Blair finished for him. “Man, he is completely freaking out because he’s known about demons for less than a week, and you’re totally on the stereotypical side in terms of looking like a demon, unlike the rest of us.”

“Speak for yourself,” Cordelia said. “I am not a demon, unlike the rest of you freaks.”

Blair cringed and shot Jim a worried look. At this point, Jim wasn’t sure he even cared if he got called a freak because he was standing in a room of them, and he wasn’t the weirdest.

“Diplomatic as always, Cordie,” Xander said. She rolled her eyes.

“So, what’s the problem that Spike couldn’t discuss over the phone?”

“Didn’t say I couldn’t, said I wouldn’t,” Spike said. Jim would have resented that sort of manipulation, but Lorne seemed to look at Spike almost fondly.

Angel moved to a spot so near Jim that the missing heartbeat made the hairs on his arms stand up, even if most of his earlier disquiet had faded. As much as Jim didn’t want to admit it, he was fairly sure Blair had a point about the dominance fight. And after this, Jim either needed several beers or a really good therapist.

“Lorne, this one has a spirit animal, but he doesn’t have the sort of control he should,” Angel said.

Lorne visibly perked up. “A spirit animal? Really? So what are we talking about? Shaman? D’Fatum?” He looked to Blair for a second before focusing on Jim again. Kovitch? Frophia? Although you really don’t have the whole slime vibe that comes with being Forphia. You’re more tall, all-American, and likely to watch football.”

“Basketball,” Jim corrected him.

Lorne smiled. “So, sing a few bars for me, and let’s see what’s up with this spirit animal of yours.”

“Sing?” Jim looked at Blair.

“He can see fates and souls, but only when you sing,” Blair explained.

Lorne walked over to the counter and leaned against it. “Otherwise I’d be buried under visions, and that does not sound like fun. So give me a few bars of your favorite ditty and let’s see why you’ve lost control out of your beastie.”

Angel looked at Jim. “Sing.”

Everyone was looking at him, and Jim found that the lyrics of every song he’d ever learned fled his brain. He could only remember one thing. He started the marching song that he’d been forced to chant on hundreds of training marches.

Roland was a warrior
From the Land of the Midnight Sun
With a Thompson Gun for hire
Fighting to be done

Jim stopped, uncomfortable with performing in front of others.

Lorne gave a low whistle. “He is blocked up so tight it would take a plumber to get his magic flowing again.”

“What magic? Oh no. I do not have magic.” Jim started backing up.

“Oh sweetie, you should be all over the magic. You’re a Sentinel, at least that’s what Burton and Blair call you. The old ones would call you Marduk’s Warrior. But either way, you are a virtual storm of magical energy, only it’s all bottled up like a tempest in a tea cup.”

"He bloody well used his spirit animal against Faith, and he tried using the beastie against me," Spike said, and he sounded almost angry.

Lorne shook his head. "I am not seeing a speck of magic shine through. He couldn't call on his spirit guide with a satellite phone."

"That's why he didn't use it in the basement," Angel said. He studied Jim in a way that reminded him of a sergeant looking for a mistake during inspection.

“I didn’t use my spirit guide because I don’t know how,” Jim said. He wasn’t sure if he was offended by the idea that Angel expected him to use magic or the idea that he couldn’t do it well.

“Okay, here’s the ten thousand dollar question,” Xander said, “why would someone’s magic be plugged up? Are we talking spiritual hair in the drain?”

“Good question,” Blair said softly. That bothered Jim more than he wanted to admit because Blair was supposed to have the answer to these things. At the very least, he was supposed to throw himself into finding an answer.

“I’m more interested in figuring out how to fix it,” Angel said. He kept studying Jim, but he draped his arm over Xander’s shoulders. Xander leaned into him.

“That is going to take some research,” Lorne said. “If we knew who had blocked your powers it would be a lot easier.” Lorne looked at Jim.

“Who? Do you mean someone did this to me intentionally?” Jim demanded.

“Oh man, that is so not cool.” Blair touched Jim’s arm. “But Spike’s right. Jim has called up his spirit guide several times. He’s breaking through whatever is blocking him sometimes.”

Lorne shook his head. “I can promise you this, he is not using his own magic.”

Angel took a step closer, and Jim fought an urge to back up. “Then what is he doing?” Angel asked.

“It could be that someone is calling his spirit animal up for him.” Lorne turned and looked at Blair.

Immediately Blair started backing up, his hands held up to ward off the looks he was getting. “Oh no. I swore off all magic when I gave up the whole fate and good versus evil deal. Remember? I am 100 percent limited to human abilities. No more d’Fatum for me.”

“Except the part where you got a vision about my death,” Jim pointed out. If he was going to be in the deep end of the weird pool, he was dragging Blair in with him. Blair glared at him.
“You know what you can do to prove that. Let’s hear your golden voice raised to the heavens,” Lorne said.

Blair stared at him for a second before he blurted out, “You can’t be serious.”

“Sweetie, I am always serious about singing and drinking. Well that and really good fashion. And artwork. People simply don’t take artwork seriously enough. But the environment that surrounds you has such an impact on your emotional and spiritual life.”

“Oy. Don’t get off on that rot. We’re talking about why the soldier boy has a magical block,” Spike interrupted. “Sandburg, sing.”

“But—”

“Sing, Sandburg,” Spike said with a big of growl in his voice.

Blair narrowed his eyes, but he sang.

Breakin’ rocks in the hot sun
I fought the law and the law won
I fought the law and the law won
I needed money ’cause I had none
I fought the law and the law won
I fought the law and the law won

Lorne took a step back. “Oh, Sweetie. Jim there doesn’t have any control over his magic, but you have totally tapped right into it. You’re the one calling up his spirit animal.

“Bloody hell,” Spike said softly. No one else seemed to have anything to say.
Angel had called up Wesley, and with Blair, they had vanished into the hotel library. Jim had not been invited.

“What do we do now?” Jim asked.

“I go collect some money, so you’re going up to your room,” Spike said firmly.

Jim gritted his teeth.

“Hey, I’ll show him the kitchen. We can find something to eat or something to fix or something that doesn’t include being locked in a room,” Xander said. Before Spike could comment, Xander had grabbed Jim’s arm and started pulling on it.

“Hey!” Spike objected, and Jim expected to get jerked back. Instead, Spike watched as Xander spirited Jim away.

Jim might have to amend his theory about who had the most power in the hotel.

“Hey, Xander,” a woman with long blonde hair said, and she bounced a little when she saw him. “Hey! New guy! Is he family or a prisoner?” She looked down at the chains.

“Um, a little of both,” Xander said. “You know, he’s Blair’s friend.”

“Oh! Yeah! He’s why Blair didn’t have sex with me this time.”

Jim stared at the woman. That was… that was something he definitely didn’t want to know about.

“Yeah, well you have Lindsey.”

She shrugged. “He shares. I keep trying to talk Wesley into joining us, but no… he’s too high and mighty to share our bed anymore.” She smiled at Jim. “I’m Harmony, and if you and Blair both want to join us, that would be totally awesome.” Her smile grew even brighter, and Xander rolled his eyes.

“Um… Blair and I aren’t… I don’t think sex would be appropriate.” Jim had no idea how to be polite under these circumstances.

“The chains are fine. Angel keeps Lindsey in chains all the time. It’s kinda fun.”

Jim looked at Xander in horror. “He has a hostage here?”

“Um…” Xander grimaced. “He’s not a hostage as much as he is evil and we sort of keep him out of trouble. His law firm sort of traded him to us.”

“Traded him? Like slavery?” Jim demanded. He couldn’t imagine Blair going along with this. He might be a little more ethically flexible than Jim, but he wasn’t that morally malleable.

“Evil law firm,” Xander said with a shrug. “Their contract was slightly soul enslaving, so when the firm traded him to us, it sort of stuck. It’s like Wesley. Technically he’s a slave because there was this contract and a misunderstanding and this problem with translating, but when we found him, we traded for him so he could stay here.”

Jim’s stomach churned. “Welsey is a slave?” If these people believed in slavery, Jim could be in a hell of a lot of trouble.
“Technically,” Xander said. “We’re trying to fix it.”

“It’s not like he minds, at least not since Angel got his soul back,” Harmony said. She looked at Jim with a bewildered expression that he didn’t understand.

“And he knows he’s family,” Xander reassured her. “But I’ll let you get back to work.”

“Okay,” she said with a little bounce, and then she headed down the hall. She stopped to look back at them. “And if you want to have sex, I’m really good at not biting,” she said, “or I’m good at biting too, if you like that.” And then she was gone.

“She bites?” Jim asked.

“Vampire,” Xander said.

“Her?!” Jim focused and tried to hear if there was a heartbeat on the other side of the door, but he couldn’t hear anything.

“Yeah, sometimes vampires aren’t very vampirey.”

“I can’t see her hunting down prey,” Jim said weakly. She definitely didn’t fit his idea of what a vampire looked like. Angel and Spike might not be stereotypical vampires, but they had the power, a sense of danger that clung to them. Harmony really didn’t.

“She had a place in a suckhouse where addicts go and ask to get bit, only she kept calling the clients losers.”

“A suckhouse?”

“But she went to high school with me and Cordelia, and she was one of Cordelia’s cheerleaders, so when things didn’t work out for her, Cordie brought her here.”

“Oh.” Jim really didn’t have a response to that. “So, she works here?”

“She’s housekeeping, basically,” Xander said before he started down the hall again. Jim followed. “Amber and Jarod work for her, and those three do most of the grunt work, which would make me feel bad, only they seem to think they’ve won the vampire lottery, so it’s one of those things I put down to demons being weird.” Xander pushed open the door, and Jim found himself in an updated commercial kitchen.

“Who are Amber and Jarod?”

“Vampire housekeepers.” Xander leaned against a counter. “You know, at one point, that would have sounded really, really wrong. I bet this is all pretty weird for you.”

“You could say that. I guess for you this is all normal.”

Xander shrugged. “It didn’t use to be. I was a normal 16-year-old who had a crush on the new girl and then I found out the new girl fought demons. It was an ego crushing moment.”

“Ego crushing?”

“You try finding out that almost everything in the world is stronger than you are, considers you a food group, and that the girl you like can toss you into the middle of a tombstone without even breaking a sweat.”
Jim felt like he was getting half a story. “She threw you into tombstones?”

“Usually she only did that when she was trying to keep me from getting eaten by a vampire, but yeah. She actually did that a lot.”

“That's... I really have no idea what to say.” Honestly, it bothered the hell out of him that Xander had been faced with all this when he’d been little more than a kid. At sixteen, he should have been worried about his GPA and maybe his baseball team, not demons. It made Jim’s own dysfunctional childhood seem normal by comparison.

“Yeah most people have that reaction.” Xander laughed. “If I hadn't grown up in Sunnydale, I'd have that reaction too. Every once in a while someone asks me about being gay and about how working in construction and being gay isn't always the safest thing to be. They act like it's a big deal that I'm open with my sexuality. But the reality is bigger and scarier than a few homophobes. Of course it helps that Angel was so completely freaked out about the gay thing that I didn't have room to do much panicking.”

“I have trouble seeing Angel freak out about anything.” Jim pulled out a stool and sat at a long prep counter.

“Stick around. You'll see it. Actually, the next time it rains, watch when he goes outside and then completely panics about his hair. It's actually kind of amusing.”

“Hopefully, I'll be back home before it rains.”

Xander pulled out a stool at the end of the prep table and sat. “Yeah. This whole thing kinda sucks for you doesn't it?”

“Just a little,” Jim agreed. “Are you sure we can’t help them with research?” Jim felt like he had a better chance of going home if they found out why his Sentinel powers were acting up. As much as he didn’t like the idea of magic, he had to admit that if he’d had control of his spirit animal during his kidnapping, he would have had a better chance of escape. He never had controlled the jaguar, but he had faint memories of Incacha calling it up. The idea that others controlled part of his life made him even more uncomfortable than the idea of magic.

“Nah,” Xander said. “There are only so many books we have on people with magical blockages. If they needed us, they'd call us. But trust me, you don't actually want to help them with this part. Besides, aren't you a cop? I wouldn't think research would really be your thing.”

“Don't kid yourself. Most of being a cop is doing research. I spend more time looking things up than I do chasing bad guys.”

Xander gave him an odd look. “That's actually kinda disappointing. I feel like all the cop shows from my youth lied to me.”

“They did.”

“Well that's cheerful.” Xander traced figures on the stainless steel as an awkward silence fell. “Um, so do you have family back home?”

“None that I speak to,” Jim said. “You?”

“Well I still speak to my mother, but it's awkward. She's actually the one that accidentally sicced a wish demon on me. I mean it turned out okay, but she doesn't actually know what goes on in Sunnydale, so sometimes it's hard to have a conversation with her. I mean, how do you talk about
potential world ending badness, when your mother just thinks that world ending badness is some sort of weird metaphor for trying drugs. I've never actually tried drugs, but apparently my mother assumes I've tried quite a few.”

“I can see where that would be awkward.”

“Yeah, Graham says it's the same when you do special ops for the military. You did all that stuff, right?”

“Yes, but it's not something I plan to talk about.”

Xander laughed. “You are exactly like Graham. So, what is Graham telling people back in Cascade about why you're here?”

The seed of good humor Jim had been nursing evaporated. “Apparently the Army went with some story about how I was being targeted because of some of my work when I was on active duty.”

“Hey as stories go that's actually pretty good.”

Too damn good, as far as Jim was concerned. It wasn’t likely to set off any alarm bells back in Cascade, at least not quickly. “I suppose I should be grateful. If my boss came looking for me, I don't think he would like what he found.”

“Would he come looking for you?”

“Of course he would. Why wouldn't he?” Jim glared at Xander.

He shrugged. “Oh nothing. It's just that pretty much every job I've ever had, when I didn't show up for work, my boss just hired somebody to take my place. It was hard keeping a job in high school when I was trying to do homework and fight the forces of evil. Forces of evil really don't respect the starting time at your job.”

And Jim immediately felt guilty about glaring at the man. Xander might be part of a demonic mafia, but he had suffered a shit life. “It's different with Simon. He knows I wouldn't leave unless it was something that I really didn't have control over,” Jim said. “Unfortunately, Major Graham's story is actually pretty reasonable. My guess is he's going to buy it, at least for a while.”

“Do you want to call him?” Xander asked.

Jim froze. He studied Xander, trying to find the trap. Spike had made it very clear that if Jim went near a door or phone, he’d suffer for it. “I don't think contact with home is on the agenda anytime soon.”

Xander jumped off his stool and went over to another counter where a cordless phone was plugged into the wall. He brought it back to the prep table. “It can be. We have a phone right here.” Xander gave Jim a smile and held it out. When Jim didn’t respond, he put it down between them. “It’s a phone. You know, one of those things that you dial in you can reach someone on the other end. I mean I know I had to show Angel how to use one, but I assume you actually know the technology.” Xander gave Jim an awkward smile.

“Of course I know how to use a phone. My concern is that I don't think I have permission to use a phone.”

“Is this one of those weird demon things where you're not going to use the phone unless Spike or Angel specifically tells you that you can? Because if this is a weird demon thing I am totally okay
with weird demon things.”

“This is not a demon thing,” Jim snapped. “I don't feel like getting my ass kicked because I did something that they don't approve of.” Immediately Jim regretted his lack of control. He couldn’t afford to make enemies in this house. However, Xander didn’t seem offended.

“Oh. I can fix that. If I'm telling you to use the phone that means you have permission, and trust me neither of them will say anything about it. Well, Angel might complain, but he'll complain to me in private later. And that's okay because I don't actually listen to him when he complains. He gets all cranky and talks about structure and rules and I pretty much just ignore him. Unless he gets really upset, and then I have sex with him. Trust me after sex, nothing upsets Angel.” Xander stopped and looked at Jim. “That was too much information, wasn’t it?”

“Yes.”

“I do that sometimes.” Xander grinned and pushed the phone toward Jim. “However here is the phone, and I am officially giving you permission. So go ahead and call your friend. It sucks when you're fray adjacent, but it’s way worse when you’re stuck at home and you don’t even know what's going on. I wouldn't want your friend to worry.”

“You're sure?”

“Oh yeah. I'm sure that it sucks when you get stuck on the sidelines and I'm sure that you have permission to make that call. Go ahead.”

Jim reached out and pulled the phone closer. “Aren’t you worried about what I might say?”

“Not really. I mean I assume you don't want your friend dragged into all the weirdness with you, so I'm assuming you're going to say things will make him stay away. But even if you said something that made your friends come running down here, Graham could fix it.”

“You're putting a lot of faith in Graham and the military,” Jim warned.

“Not really. I don't have a lot of faith in the government but I do have faith in Graham. Give Graham access to Angel’s credit card and it's actually kind of scary what that man can accomplish.” Xander turned and headed for the refrigerator, leaving Jim in control of a phone. Jim was uncomfortably aware that anyone could show up at any time, so he dialed as quickly as he could. Rhonda wanted to talk, but he promised to give her all the details later, and asked for Simon. And he lied because he wasn’t going to tell Rhonda any of this. Ever. The woman deserved the peace of mind that came with believing demons weren’t real.

Within a minute, Simon came on the line. “Jim?”

“Simon.” Jim couldn’t believe how relieved he was to hear Simon’s voice.

“Jim, it's good to hear from you. What in the world did you get into now?”

“Trouble,” Jim said, and he felt like a thousand pounds had been lifted from his shoulders just hearing Simon’s voice.

“I'm starting to think I shouldn't send you anywhere without a SWAT team as back up.”

“And this time I can't even blame it on Sandburg,” Jim said with a laugh. He took a deep breath before starting to spin the cover story he’d been given. “This time my own past came back to bite me in the ass.”
“How bad is it?” Simon sounded ready to lead the charge himself.

“I’ve got good backup down here. Things are a little strange, and the whole Sentinel thing is not making this any less strange. I actually talked them into letting me come to LA so that I could be closer to Blair. Senses are acting up a little.”

There was a long pause on the other end. “How much do they know about the senses?” Simon asked, and his voice sounded strained. He never had liked lies, and the senses were one huge lie waiting for someone to discover them. Jim hated that Simon had to lie and cover for him.

“They know a lot of it. At this point, that's the least of my worries,” Jim said. “Let's put it this way, Simon, if the extraction team had been any slower, you would’ve been picking out my funeral music.”

“Christ.”

“Pretty much. I think Blair is more freaked out than I am.”

“I'm not comfortable with the kid being in the middle of this mess. You and I are military men; we understand the way this works. I’m not sure Blair should be there.”

Part of Jim agreed, but Blair had been part of this for longer than he had. “Blair's holding his own,” Jim said, “and right now, I couldn't do this without him.”

There was a long pause before Simon answered. “Things are really bad with the senses?”

“Things are really weird with the senses,” Jim said honestly. “And I’m pretty sure he’s in as much danger as I am, so I’d rather keep him close. At least this way, anyone who comes for us is going to have to get through some pretty impressive security.”

“So when do you think you might be coming home?” Simon asked. He didn’t sound happy, but he was buying the cover story.

“I wish I had an answer for that. Honestly, I don't know. Until I can say for sure that I'm not a target, I don't think it's safe for me to bring this trouble back home.”

“So you plan on staying in LA forever?” Simon demanded.

“The Army has me set up in a hotel. For right now, this is a lot safer than me coming back to Cascade. I've got a team here that has some rather extraordinary skills.” In the silence that followed that, Jim could hear Simon’s worry. Simon was probably wondering whether the Army had given Jim a choice in all this. There was no way he would guess the truth.

“Do you feel safe?” Simon asked softly.

Jim took a moment to truly think about that. “You know, I think I do. I'll tell you one thing; I sure as hell wouldn't fuck with these people.”

“And you feel safe from these people?” Simon always was good at cutting through the bullshit.

“That's the question, isn't it, Simon? I can't say for sure one way or another, but my gut says that they're good people.” Jim figured he was stretching the truth by calling them people but he was starting to think they might be good. At the very least, they weren’t bad.
Jim was drinking a beer Xander had offered him when a thin man walked in. "Could you please hold this for a moment?" he asked in a British accent. He shoved something at Jim.

Without much thought, Jim took the glowing orb. "Why? And who are you?"

The orb's light turned dull yellow. "Oh, how interesting. I'm Wesley Wyndam-Pryce. I head up the research and translation department. How many shamans have you known in your life?"

"Excuse me?" Jim pushed the orb back toward Wesley. Wait. This was the man that Xander had called a slave. Jim looked over at Xander, but he was still reading his plumbing book and drinking his beer, so clearly this wasn't unusual.

"Shamans," Wesley said. "How many have you known, and do you know which shamanic tradition they followed?"

"And why should I tell you this?"

"Oh man, I told you to let me handle this," Blair said as he hurried into the kitchen. "You do not just get in his face."

"I'm not asking for personal information."

"Oh, you totally are," Blair said. He pulled out the stool next to Jim and sat down. "We think we found a way to identify the spell, which includes a moon orb, which should react to any magical blocks."

Wesley held up the yellow orb.

"Oh, you already tested him," Blair said. He gave Jim an odd look.

"He shoved it in my hand without explaining what he was doing," Jim said drily. "If he'd told me what he wanted, I would have wanted a few answers first."

Angel walked through the door, and Jim fought the urge to stand. Angel wasn't a commanding officer, and Jim was not going to start thinking of him in those terms.

"Yeah, answers first would have been polite," Blair told Wesley. The man didn't seem overly impressed. "Basically, the orb will show us who might have locked up your powers, and yellow means shamanic powers, so a shaman did this, and from the color, it's probably someone pretty recently--like within the last ten years."

Jim took a deep breath. Incacha. Incacha had locked up his powers.

"This might have been for you own good," Blair rushed to say. "I mean, you were going back to another country, and maybe he worried that you wouldn't be able to control the powers. This doesn't mean that he was trying to do anything wrong. No way. I can think of a dozen reasons why he might have thought this was protecting you."

"Yes," Wesley said. "What did he have to say about your powers?"

"I don't remember much," Jim said. His months in the jungle never had been clear in his mind. He knew he'd held off the drug dealers who were trying to take the pass. He knew Incacha had worked
with him on his senses, and he had some faded memories of the extraction team showing up, but
the details had all vanished, leaving only the bare outline of life during that period.

Wesley leaned forward. "Really? That's concerning."

"Not necessarily," Blair said. "It was a traumatic period. It might not be related."

"What might not?" Jim asked.

Blair grimaced. "It could be that more than your magic is blocked, but think about it. If Incacha
was worried that you didn’t have anyone to help you or teach you, he might have wanted you to
forget some of what you did while you worked with him. This could be him trying to protect you."

"Or he could have hoped to ensure that he maintained control over Detective Ellison," Wesley said.

Jim looked at both men. "You think Incacha blocked my memories and my… powers?" Jim was
not going to say magic.

Blair cringed. "Maybe?"

Angel moved to Xander’s side. When he put his hand on Xander’s shoulder, Xander looked up
from his book and gave Angel the sappiest smile Jim had seen outside of a movie. "If ye canna
control your spirit animal, you’re not leaving this hotel, so I suggest you cooperate with Blair and
Wesley,” Angel said.

Xander’s smile grew a little more brittle. "Um, Angel, your demon’s showing."

Angel looked down at Xander, and his eyes began to turn yellow.

"Oh dear," Wesley said. "This is getting truly tiresome."

"Oh man. Um, Jim, go out to the counter and have Cordelia call Spike,” Blair said, but what really
worried Jim was that he had that calm voice he used with victims and drugged-out suspects. For
one second, Jim considered arguing, but Blair gave him a desperate look, and Jim decided that
maybe Blair understood these people better than he did. So he’d get Cordelia to make the call and
them come back.

“A’choi, I have neglected you of late,” Angel was saying, and he nuzzled the side of Xander’s
neck. That would scare the shit out of Jim, but whatever was happening, Xander wasn’t too
concerned. He groaned and tilted his head to give Angel more room, and that’s when Jim turned
and headed out to the front desk.

“Cordelia?” he called when he reached the empty front desk. An older woman came out of one of
the back room.

“May I help you?” She smiled, and Jim figured she was someone’s mother or grandmother. She
was a slight woman, but she still carried herself well, and she had long white hair that curled a
little. And then he noticed that she didn’t have a heartbeat.

“You’re a vampire.” Jim’s preconceived notions about vampires were taking some serious hits.

“I’m Amber.”

“Amber?” She definitely didn’t look like an Amber.

She smiled. “I was Amarante; however, Harmony began to call me Amber, and the name is good
enough for me. Can I help you with something? Do you need something?”

“Blair said to have Cordelia recall Spike.”

“Oh?” She drew herself up a little and glanced toward the kitchen door. “Why?”

“Apparently Angel’s demon is showing.”

Amber cursed in French and headed for the phone. She called, and Jim knew someone picked up the other end when she flinched. “Master Spike, Blair and Xander ask that you come home. Master Angel is under attack again.” This time Jim could hear the yelling on the other end. Amber endured it with a brittle smile until the phone went dead. Then she hung up the phone. “He will be here as soon as he can,” she promised.

“What sort of attack is this?” Jim asked. He found that sometimes the people who were low on the totem pole had better answers than the higher-ups. At the very least, they were less careful about what they said.

“I know very little. I only came to the Hyperion after the woman stole his soul the first time, so I know little of the feud before then.”

“She stole his soul?” Jim had seen a lot of horrors in his life, but nothing could compare to that.

Amber nodded. “Master Angelus was far more brutal than Master Angel. Apparently she wanted him to commit atrocities so that when her masters cursed him with a soul again, the guilt would cause him to submit and serve.”

“Christ,” Jim said softly. That trumped the sort of fucked up political games that he hated.

“She failed her masters,” Amber said, “and she blames this clan. Now I do not know what she hopes to do. If Angel prevails, perhaps she hopes he will be weak enough to defeat. If Angelus prevails, that might end the alliance the Hyperion has with the government and the slayer.”

“So she’s a woman out for revenge.”

“She is,” Amber agreed.

Jim didn’t know demons, but he knew criminals, and he knew revenge. Most of the murders he worked came down to one form of revenge or another. And people who wanted revenge liked to watch the chaos caused by their actions. This Jenny woman might not be standing on the other side of a police barricade watching the coroner pick up the bodies, but she was doing something to keep close.

“Do you have the keys to these?” he asked Amber. She didn’t answer, but her eyes got big, and he could read the fear in her expression.

“Hey, that’s okay. Get Cordelia. Are Faith and Graham still in the hotel?”

Amber nodded. “In their room.”

“Call ‘em,” Jim said. If he could figure out how Jenny was watching, he’d have a lead on how to find her. Amber gave him a nod, and then she darted back into the rooms behind the counter. The problem was that Jim didn’t know what magical surveillance would look like. However, he suspected someone else in this house probably did.
Jim headed into the kitchen. He walked in, and Angel was standing behind Wesley, pinning him to the prep table. That startled Jim, but neither Xander nor Blair seemed particularly concerned. “Um, not to interrupt,” Jim said. Angel looked up slowly, and some little part of Jim’s brain began to whisper about prey and running and what it had felt like when Angel’s teeth has sunk into Jim’s neck.

“Ah, our Sentinel returns,” Angel said, his voice silky. Jim took a step back before his brain made any conscious decision to retreat.

Blair darted to Jim’s side and caught him by his arm, so Jim took that as a suggestion that he not run. “Jim, this is Angelus, which is the demonic side.”

“Is the soul gone?” Jim asked.

“No way, just temporarily set aside,” Blair said.

Angelus smiled, and Jim definitely felt like prey. He disliked the feeling, but he stood his ground when Angelus started to move toward him. “I can still hear the soul whispering, but for now, the witch’s spell has banished it.”

“For a while,” Blair said. “I mean, you two have a really good working relationship, and you wouldn’t want to damage it.”

Angelus stopped and raised his hand to cup Blair’s cheek. Jim could smell the fear, but he could also smell desire. Blair had commented that he hoped that people in the house would want to reconnect, but Jim’s heart broke just a little more at the visible evidence of Blair’s interest in everyone except him. Angelus shifted his attention to Jim.

“If the witch cast the spell, she’d going to be watching the hotel to see if anything happens because of it,” he said firmly.

“She wouldn’a dare come near me,” Angelus said.

“Seconding that,” Xander said. He walked around the table and jumped up onto one of the stools. “Jenny is manipulative and hugely with the poor judgment, but no way is she that stupid.”

Jim focused on Xander because he really didn’t want to stare into Angelus’ predator eyes for too long. “I know perps. She might have an accomplice out there or she might have some magical way to watch the hotel, but she is watching.”

Xander looked at Angel, and Angel looked to Blair. Blair started nodding. “It makes sense. It totally makes sense, and I’m kicking myself for not thinking about it.” Blair smiled at Jim. “We could track her if we could figure out how she’s watching.”

Jim nodded. “It’s a person, some technology, or some spell. I know how to backtrack an accomplice or technology, and I assume you can track a spell, but we need to move fast. If nothing happens right away, she’s going to assume the attack failed.”

“What would she gain from watching?” Angelus asked. Jim wondered why the demon had a thick Irish accent when Angel didn’t. He didn’t understand how the demon-soul thing worked, and he really did not want to meet a witch that could steal a soul. It made Jim want to grab Blair and run like hell, but that wasn’t an option.

“The pleasure of seeing that she can affect you,” Jim explained. “Criminals... they feel helpless. They want attention, they want to hurt someone, and they want to feel like they had the power. I
know criminals."

"I trust you do," Angelus said.

The kitchen door banged open. "What's up?" Faith demanded. She looked around the room, and Graham came in right after her.

Angelus tilted his head to the side, and Jim had the feeling he was listening to something. "Detective Ellison believes Jenny is watching. I want to know how," Angelus said after a short pause. "Blair, you will look for any suspicious people. Wesley, check for magical surveillance. Graham, check for cameras or other electronic means of watching us. Faith, you will guard them all."

"Five by five," Faith agreed, but Blair was holding onto Jim's arm even harder.

"Jim should come with us," Blair said. "He has more experience than any of us, and he could use his senses."

"No," Angelus said firmly.

"But--"

Angelus stepped right into Blair's personal space, and Jim could sense the aggression. Considering that Blair had told Jim to not argue with Angel, this was feeling dangerous.

"Chief, you have your orders," Jim said firmly.

Blair looked up, barely disguised panic on his face, so Jim was guessing that this situation was slightly more perilous than if the soul were in charge. But Jim would not have Blair standing between him and danger.

"Go, Chief," Jim ordered. He pushed Blair toward Graham and nodded at him.

Graham nodded back and caught Blair by the arm. "Come on, Sandman. If Jenny has some eyes on us, we need to spot them fast."

"But..." Blair was still protesting as Graham pulled him out the door, but Jim ignored him. He turned his attention to Angelus.

Angelus watched, clearly amused as everyone else hurried out. Only once they were alone did Angelus move forward into Jim's personal space. He wrapped his hand around the chain between Jim's wrist, and a shiver went through Jim.

"What is your goal in sending Blair away?"

"I don't want him getting between us," Jim said. He fought his urge to free himself.

"Is that it? Do you want more of my attention?" Angelus leaned close and sniffed at Jim's neck.

"No, no, I really don't."

Angelus loudly sniffed and then he stepped back without letting go of Jim's wrist chain. "Perhaps more than your senses are blocked. So much of what you could be is missing. I will have you freed from this spell."

"I'd prefer to have control over myself, so I would appreciate that."

"Would you?" Angelus gave Jim a honeyed smile. "Perhaps once you are a full Sentinel you will
seek the attention of your clan leader." From the tone, Angelus would not mind giving Jim some personal attention, and Jim couldn’t control the flare of disgust that rolled through him. Jim had taken plenty of men into his bed, but sex wasn’t power, not for him. Clearly it was for Angelus.

"Blair says that Sentinels are solitary," Jim said carefully. He didn’t know how violent this version of Angelus might be, but Blair’s reticence had certainly set him on edge.

"Blair does not know everything," Angelus said. The kitchen door came open again.

"Peaches, you feeling alright?" Spike asked as he strode right up to Angelus.

Angelus immediately turned his attention to Spike. "The soul has been in control too much lately. I have neglected you, childe." He turned away from Jim and focused on Spike.

Spike lifted one eyebrow. "Seems like you've been too busy moping about all the idiots that hate ya."

"The soul cares about that, I do not. What have you done to free Ellison from the spell?"

Spike glanced over, and Jim kept still. He had the feeling that he really did not want any more attention from these vampires. "Can’t say I’ve done much at all. Jenny Giles is first on my priority list. I hear she’s attacked again,” Spike said.

“And every time, I’m stronger,” Angelus said. “Which would be fine, except each time the soul then retakes control for longer. I am tired of this bitch and her games. Ellison has suggested that she’s watching, so I have the others out searching for how she might be doing that.”

Spike glanced Jim’s direction again. “Bully for him. Being that he’s a detective, he should have a few skills.”

“He’s valuable,” Angelus said, and Jim felt a chill go up his back. That was not a comforting statement.

Angelus chuckled. “Secure the Sentinel, and then come find me in the training room, childe. It’s time for you to show me if you’ve learned anything since the last time we fought.” Angelus strode out of the room.

After a second, Spike sighed. “Mate, I don’t bloody care what you think about being locked up, you’re going in your bedroom and I’m putting a padlock on the door to keep you there. Ya don’t want to be wandering the hotel right now.”

“Promise you’ll send Blair up to the room the second he comes in, and you won’t need the padlock because I don’t want to leave the room,” Jim said.

Spike gave him a wry smile. “Smart man.”
Jim was staring out the sealed window when he heard someone with a heartbeat stop outside his door. He headed for the front sitting room, half expecting someone to just come in the room. Privacy was in short supply, and it was hard to feel charitable when he still wore chains. However, the person in the hall knocked.

When Jim opened the door, he found Major Miller standing on the other side. “Detective Ellison.”

“Did you find the surveillance?”

Graham nodded. “Yeah. There were cameras. If she’d used magic, someone would have spotted it earlier, but we really aren’t set up to notice something as mundane as cameras. And as the military liaison and mundane member of the family, I’m taking some of the blame for that.”

“Don’t,” Jim said. In this family, he didn’t want to even think about what sorts of punishments got handed out. From Graham’s grimace, they weren’t pleasant. “You aren’t trained for investigations. If you could get someone to unchain me, I am trained for this.”

Graham gave him a searching look. “Really? Because Blair said that you would call in a technical unit to try and trace the signal.”

“I would,” Jim said through gritted teeth. Every time he gathered one more piece of evidence that Blair was not on his side, it was like a knife digging into him a little harder. “However, I would also start trying to track down who sold the camera, I would have a crime scene tech check for fingerprints, and I would smell and visually search the cameras for any clues. Suspects can transfer evidence from their primary scene to their equipment.” Of course Jim still had no intentions of helping these people track Jenny Giles because their idea of justice was killing her. Jim would never go along with that. He’d been part of executive action in the past, and his conscience still tortured him with those memories.

“I’ve called Lieutenant Colonel Finn and he’s sending three of his best four computer techs to help us with the legwork on this, but until you have your magic under your own control, Spike and Angel will veto any plan that includes you leaving this hotel.”

“And when can I expect the house arrest to end?” Jim held up his chained hands, and Graham winced.

“Angelus has made it clear that getting your magic going is a top priority—right up there with finding Jenny, but I can’t give you any timelines. Researching the spells might take a week or a month.”

“Or longer?” Jim asked.

Graham nodded. “Or longer. I can tell you that no one is intentionally delaying because Angelus does not have a sense of humor about that sort of thing. He wants you online magically, and every magic user in the house is going to be on that.”

Jim turned and headed for the couch. He’d been in hostage situations—more than he really wanted to remember—but this was feeling so much more hopeless. He had no allies and the other side had too much going for them, both in terms of skills and information. “Great,” he said tonelessly.

“Whatever I can do to help, I will,” Graham said.
Jim nodded. He got the feeling Graham meant it, but his loyalty was to this screwed up family. “I appreciate you doing what you can.”

Graham took a piece of a broken lamp out of the chair and set it on the floor before sitting down. “This is awkward, but I really think we need to talk about Angelus.”

“Oh?” Jim thought he had the broad strokes. Angelus was the demon—more aggressive and dangerous. Angel was the soul—more likely to let Spike handle things.

“Every time Jenny Giles casts this spell to unbalance the two of them, Angelus gets more freedom from the soul and the soul then has longer and longer periods of time when he can’t hear the demon. If this attack follows the pattern, Angelus is going to be around for three to four days, but it might be longer.”

Jim could smell the nervousness drifting off Graham, but even without the senses, he would have noticed the way he sat unnaturally still. “Is this a problem?”

Graham slowly looked up at him. “Potentially,” he agreed. “How much can you feel instinctively?”

“Regarding?” The fact was that Jim’s only instincts were as a detective, and he wasn’t having much luck. The whole business where he’d felt instinctively driven to bare his neck to Spike was going to be repressed as deeply as possible for as long as possible.

“Angelus is on edge around you.”

Jim snorted.

“Yeah, it’s hard to tell at first because he’s not exactly fun-loving under any circumstances.” Graham sighed and rubbed a hand over his face. “If you were a demon, Blair would do the demonic version of this, but as the only card-carrying member of humanity around here, I think I need to tell this from a human point of view.”

“I thought Cordelia was human.”

“Technically, maybe. But honestly, she was frightening vampires into running away before she graduated from high school. I’m pretty sure most of the demonic community assumes she’s some sort of demon that just looks human. And I’m only partially sure they’re wrong. Angelus doesn’t mind Cordelia being around though because she has a very well-established relationship with Spike.”

Jim narrowed his eyes as he heard the inflection on the word ‘relationship.’ “I think we’re both old enough to use the word sex.”

Graham laughed, but it was a strained and awkward sound. “Yeah, probably. So Cordelia has a lot of sex with Spike and no one else. Angelus doesn’t feel threatened because he and Spike go back a hundred or two hundred years—it depends on who you ask and how much they’re exaggerating on that day. As long as Angelus has sex with Spike and keeps him close, that makes Cordelia part of the package deal.”

“So he doesn’t worry about her loyalty,” Jim said drily. He studied Graham. “So, what does that mean for you?” The more relevant question was what that meant for Jim, but he wasn’t sure he wanted to ask that question.

“Right to the heart of it.” Graham’s smile faltered a little.
Jim had always had an instinct for victims, and that sense was tingling now. “You don’t have to say anything,” Jim said softly.

“Yeah, I do. You need the intel. Faith and I sometimes include Harmony in our bed, so the first couple of times Angelus showed up, he made sure to dominate Harmony. A lot.”

“Sex?”

“Amongst other things,” Graham said, “and Harmony was in heaven. Then I noticed that he was getting more and more aggravated with me and with Faith. He started asking her to take bigger risks, to get intelligence on enemies we could just as easily magically spy on.”

“He gave her loyalty tests,” Jim guessed.

Graham sighed. “I’m almost sure of it. I’m not going to go telling tales, but I’m pretty sure you’ve heard about Angel’s Catholic guilt phase.”

“Yeah, something about he tried to convince Xander not to be gay.”

“And you can see how well that worked,” Graham said with a chuckle that lightened the mood some, but then the smile faded. “If you look up Angelus in any of the research books, they will tell you he is known for playing head games with his victims and eating nuns.”

“Nuns?” Horror washed through Jim as he thought of that monster preying on helpless nuns. And if Angelus was Catholic, that spoke of self-hate and psychopathy in terrifying quantities.

“Yeah,” Graham said softly. “Human kids throw the terrible two tantrums; young vampires work out all their hosts’ mental disorders. He’s a lot different now, but he still wants power and validation. He wants proof that his people are his and that we aren’t going to turn on him. Angel is just as insecure, but he’s more likely to get depressed.”

“You offered yourself,” Jim guessed. It was the only logical outcome. Graham had feared that Angelus was becoming too demanding of Faith; he knew one of them needed a stronger tie to the Capo, so he offered himself.

Graham nodded. “Faith sees him as a father. Angel took her in when she was fifteen and alone and struggling to even figure out who she was with her powers. When she had a friendly fire accident, this group of assholes who tries to control magic wanted to lock her in a cage for the rest of her life. He protected her, trained her, sent her to Blair to get her out of the way. She didn’t need to mix up her feelings for him with sex. I could have sex with him without tripping on my own feelings and committing emotional incest.”

“But you didn’t want sex.”

“Not exactly,” Graham said slowly. “I wasn’t sexually attracted to Angel or Angelus and I told him that up front. I also told him that I wanted to show him that Faith and I were both loyal—that he didn’t have to worry.”

Jim couldn’t avoid the disgust he felt. Graham had traded his body away, and as much as Jim understood the reasons, he hated this whole fucking house for putting the man in that situation. No one should ever feel trapped into having sex, but Graham had not only felt trapped, but the danger had been very real. Loyalty tests rarely ended well.

Graham gave Jim a wry smile. “For vampires, a body is no different from a house. What you see Angel and Spike walking around in—when you see those bodies—they aren’t the original owners.
The owners moved out, and they moved in. If you have a friend who refused to let you in his house, you’d start to resent it. Vampires will feel that way about the body. Angel understands why he can’t have sex with Faith, and Angelus honors that because he believes Xander and Blair when they say it will damage Faith. However, if he can’t come to either of our houses, he’s going to start wondering whether we have his interests at heart.”

“And you’re telling me this because? I’m pretty sure Blair plans to have sex with him.” Jim realized too late that he sounded bitter about that.

“Blair, yes. He’s a very open person in part because he understands that instinct urge to form bonds. However you’re still here pulling him away from the family. Angelus is going to feel uncomfortable around you and now with three humans from Finn’s unit coming to help us, I don’t know what his mood will be like.”

“Are you suggesting I sleep with him?” Jim asked coldly.

“No. I’m giving you intel, Detective. Blair can sleep with Angelus, but every time you walk in the room, Blair looks to you, not Angelus. He’s so in love with you that he can’t turn that off when Angelus is around, and you’re going to have to deal with some jealousy because of it.”

“Love?” Jim stood up. “I don’t know where you got your psychology degree, but trust me, Darwin would hump a tree before starting anything with me. He doesn’t appreciate old and square—not in the bedroom. I think you need to leave.” A burning pain filled Jim’s chest. He wished Blair would look at him with desire just once, but he never had. The worst part of being a Sentinel was knowing how many people disliked him. Jim could smell the lack of interest and hear the whispers. It was turning him into a misanthropist, and he didn’t need Graham coming in and stirring this particular pot.

Graham stood. “Fair enough, but you should know that Blair went mad with fear when he thought those guys were going to kill you.”

“We’re partners—work partners. We look out for each other.”

“I’ve worked with plenty of men; none of them every looked at me with the longing Blair has in his face when he looks at you. Talk to him.”

“Stay the hell out of my business,” Jim snapped back.

Graham held up both hands in surrender before he headed to the door. “Oh, I thought I should warn you that the three techs might start calling you Major Ellison.”

“Wrong rank, and I’m retired,” Jim said. The second Jim saw Graham’s expression, he knew what the Army had done. One more bit of freedom had been stripped away.

Graham continued. “I told them that you were higher than me in the hierarchy. Rather than contradict the power structure here, they back dated your promotion so you would have time in rank even if we’re both majors. They promise they’ll process you out again as soon as the clan is done.”

Jim sank down onto the couch. If he ran now he would be AWOL—he wouldn’t be able to go to Simon for help because Simon would be legally obligated to turn him in. “Get out,” Jim said quietly.

“Detective,” Graham said softly.
“This is me pulling rank. Get the hell out of my quarters, Major Miller.” Jim kept his gaze focused on the wall, refusing to even look at Graham. After a minute, Graham exited.

And Jim was left with even more pieces of his life shattered around him. They’d called him back to active duty, and apparently they’d assigned him to stay with his kidnappers as long as they wanted him. And there was nothing—absolutely nothing—he could do. Jim wasn’t sure if he wanted to cry or break something. He compromised by staring off into space and plotting creative ways to kill Angelus.
Jim was flipping through Spanish speaking news stations when Spike slammed the door open. "Right, it's time for you to start training."

Jim waited a second as his heart rate dropped again. For a creature that made so much noise, Spike could move pretty damn silently when he wanted. Jim hadn't heard him coming at all. "Training?" he finally asked. He wasn't much in the mood for sparring, and he suspected that Spike was more interested in beating up on him.

"Yep. If you're going to keeping an eye on Sandburg, you'd better be able to fight because he's a menace in a brawl. Let someone show a tooth or a sword, and he starts talking about peace and all that rot."

Jim snorted. "On that, we agree. He'll try and negotiate with anyone, but on the up side, he will shoot at the bad guys once they start shooting at us."

Spike stood a little straighter. "Yeah? Does he hit any of 'em?"

"He doesn't even try," Jim admitted, and Spike looked much less excited about that. "But at least he'll distract them."

"If I had my way, I'd lock him in a room and never let him out."

"Yeah, but then you'd have to listen to him complain," Jim said. He'd had that thought once or twice, but he couldn't get Sandburg to even stay in the truck. Ever since Blair had taken a fire hose to bank robbers carrying automatic weapons from Carasco, he had been addicted to the adrenaline.

"With Harris around, I've gotten good at tuning out the humans when the start nattering on about morality." Spike sniffed as he held out a key for Jim's chains.

Jim eyed Spike suspiciously before he moved forward and let Spike unlock the shackles. "So what sort of training are we doing?"

"Unarmed. If you want to practice weapons, you've got to prove you can handle yourself in hand to hand."

"I'm a Ranger," Jim pointed out.

That made Spike laugh. "Mate, Miller tried that on me, and trust me, he couldn't fight for shite before he got here. What humans consider fighting isn't even violent enough to be called foreplay by most demons.

"Does this have anything to do with the fact that three humans from another unit are coming here?" Jim asked. Spike went unnaturally still for a moment. The tension grew thick, but then Spike seemed to shrug it all off.

"I see Miller's kept you up on what's going on. Finn is sending us a few techs."

"Which makes you nervous," Jim guessed.

Spike raised an eyebrow. "Which makes me want to know whether or not you can handle yourself in a fight. Now shift your arse." Spike whirled around and headed into the hall.
"References to foreplay are off limits," Jim said as he followed.

Spike gave him a wicked grin. "You don't know what you're missing, mate."

"I'll pass."

With a shrug, Spike headed downstairs. "Xander's the same. He used to get his bloody knickers in a twist about sex. 'Course he was smart enough to bed me before settling down with Peaches."

"Peaches?"

Spike reached the bottom and leaned on the banister. "If ya want to keep all your original teeth, I'd suggest you not call him that."

"Angelus," Jim said flatly. These two must have a lot of history if Spike got away with calling him such an emasculating name.

"Peaches is more Angel," Spike said, "but close enough. Right then, try to hit me." Spike backed up, his hands at his side and his body language loose and casual. He didn't look like he was ready to counter an attack, but Jim suspected the rules changed when you were sparring with a demon.

Jim brought his hands up and eased forward.

"Bloody hell, not you too." Spike rolled his eyes. "Why don't you just take an advert out in the paper and warn people that you plan to attack?"

Jim gritted his teeth before answering. "You told me to attack, so I assumed you already knew."

"Yeah, but you don't need to get in the habit of signaling every move." Spike gestured toward Jim's raised hands.

Jim let his hands fall to his sides. "The problem is that you can move faster than me, so how am I supposed to block your first attack?"

Spike smirked. "Smart man. First week here Miller was surprised every time I ambushed him."

"He shouldn't have been. I assume vampires attack without warning, sort of like a lion... or a rabid dog." Jim raised his eyebrows in challenge. He needed to know how far he could push these people, and Spike seemed like a safer person to push than Angelus. He as much as admitted that he answered to not only Angelus but also Xander and Cordelia. For him to curb his superior strength and listen to those who were physically weaker, he needed self control.

Spike gave him a thoughtful look. "You're full of surprises."

"I'm just repaying the favor." Jim circled.

"I'm trying to decide if you have brass balls or if you're just stupid."

"Let me know if you figure it out," Jim said as he moved warily toward the center of the room. He kept his senses open so he could keep track of the perimeter. Cordelia was typing behind the front counter, two people were walking on the second story. Both were paired with soft dragging sounds, so Jim assumed they were cleaning the second floor.

Jim realized there was another person only when he heard the heartbeat. When he focused, he realized that someone was crouched down behind the front counter, his or her breathing was soft and even, and the heartbeat was slow and steady. Under normal circumstances Jim would dismiss
the person as irrelevant. Certainly nothing suggested that they were lying in ambush. However, these were not normal circumstances.

Keeping his hands loose and at his sides, Jim circled Spike, watching him. When Jim approached the front desk, he kept his body angled for an attack from either direction.

Spike twitched his eyebrow, which could mean surprise that Jim had spotted the trap or it could mean that Spike was wondering why Jim was so concerned about a maid under the desk. Then again, around this place, the maids didn't have heart beats.

Just about the time Jim thought he was being paranoid, the guy behind the counter launched himself forward. Jim whirled to the right, shoving the attacker off to the side while moving farther from Spike. It put him near the front door, and there was a huge, ugly couch threatening to trip him, but Jim moved forward, launching his own counterattack before he even realized his sparring partner was Xander.

Jim feigned an attack, but Xander's muscles didn't brace, and his gaze flicked to the right, searching for a surprise attack. At the last second, Jim followed through with his feigned punch, landing a hard right upside Xander's head.

Xander staggered to the side, and Jim aimed a kick at his knee. It connected, but Xander was already falling back so the kick did no harm. After falling to the floor, Xander did a quick roll and came back up onto his feet, but Jim had already expected the quick recovery, and he pressed forward, attacking in a series of quick strikes.

After years of military service and police training, Jim had gone up against some tough opponents, and Xander was up there with the best. He blocked Jim’s attacks and had some pretty unconventional attacks that left Jim retreating, but Jim had his senses. He could see each muscle twitch, smell the aggression a half second before Xander attacked. Eventually Xander’s defenses started to falter.

Experience and Sentinel senses gave Jim the edge, and he knocked Xander on his ass just before Spike moved in. Jim immediately shifted to counter Spike’s flurry of kicks. He was hard-pressed to stay on his feet, but Jim circled around and blocked hit after hit until Spike’s first punch got through his defenses.

Once Jim was off balance, he couldn’t get his balance back again. He stumbled back, struggling to keep his balance until he finally fell hard. Then Spike was on top of him, Spike’s forearm cutting off Jim’s air.

“Say uncle,” Spike said in an annoyingly cheerful voice.

Jim croaked out something that might have been ‘thank you’ or ‘fuck you’ or anything in between, but with Spike cutting off his air, it was the best Jim could do. Luckily, it was enough for Spike. He leapt up and bounced on his toes.

“You’ll do better once you get your mojo back and can call on that spirit guide of yours, but you could take lower level demons now. You got your arse kicked, but you didn’t do half bad before you lost your balance.”

Cordelia spoke from behind the counter. “He did better than you’re going to do if something out here gets broken,” she warned.

“Now luv,” Spike said with a lascivious look in her direction. Jim took that as permission to pick
himself up off the floor. His hip was going to bruise. Sparring on hard tile floor seemed foolishly dangerous, but he didn’t have any illusions about Spike changing his training regimen based on Jim’s opinions.

“You okay?” Xander asked.

“I should ask you that,” Jim said. “Where did you train?”

“Um… pretty much everywhere. Spike and ambush… they go together like peanut butter and chocolate.”

“Because enemies could come from anywhere,” Spike said in a distracted voice before he went over and leaned against the counter. He had a soft and intense conversation with Cordelia, but Jim tuned out when he realized that she was going through finances and asking Spike to track down some people who owed them money. Jim didn’t want to hear how Spike planned to break knee caps or how a human woman accepted a vampire’s version of debt collection.

“Yeah, that’s Spike’s favorite argument, and the worst part is that he’s right,” Xander said with a shrug. “He’s really impressed with you, though.”

“I got my ass kicked,” Jim said.

“Well, yeah. This whole thing would be easier if Angel and Angelus were more balanced. They normally are, but with the attacks, everyone is on edge. We aren’t normally this…” Xander let his voice trail off.

“Mobbish?” Jim suggested.

A sheepish grin appeared on Xander’s face. “Yeah, a little. And that’s not normally us, but Spike is in full overprotective overdrive, and you didn’t see how completely freaked Blair was. Blair is normally the one who calms everyone down, so when he freaked, I think the whole house pretty much went on red alert.”

Jim walked over and leaned against the railing. “So, when does everyone come off red alert? I left a life back in Cascade. I’d like to get back to it.”

Xander glanced over toward Spike, but when Jim looked that direction, Spike was back to talking finances with Cordelia. “I don’t know,” Xander admitted. “Spike called for Blair to come down here because when the family is under attack, he gets twitchy if he can’t keep an eye on everyone, but now that you’re family—”

“He wants me here too. Did he arrange for the army to reactivate my commission?”

Xander looked shocked at that news. “No. Trust me, Spike and the military are unmixlike. When we lived in Sunnydale, he sort of used the local army unit like chew toys.”

“He ate them?” A cold shiver went up Jim’s spine.

“No, no, no. But he broke a few. And he tied up a few, and the head of the unit might have spent a
little time in a jail cell Angel had.” Xander cringed. “Yeah, it sounds bad when I try to explain it. But he was tough on them because they were fighting around his family, and Spike felt like he had to make sure they understood that if they screwed up, he was going to get even more unreasonable. And I just made him sound like a complete psychopath, didn’t I?”

“Yeah, Sport, you did,” Jim agreed. “But you’re trying to say that as long as Spike sees me as family, he’s not going to let me leave.” Part of Jim resented the hell out of Spike’s urge to protect him. Jim had been on his own a damn long time without needing protection. However, there was another part of him that was grateful he didn’t have to deal with magical enemies without some assistance. He didn’t even want to think about what would have happened if Jenny Giles had come up to Cascade and targeted Blair when Jim was still in the dark.

“Not when there’s danger out there, and Jenny Giles is huge with the danger. Last time she came after us she tried to end the world. We generally don’t approve of world ending.”

Jim snorted.

“But being family is way better than being not-family, especially when Spike has his hackles all up. He gets weird and sort of cutely possessive with family.”

Spike didn’t look over, but he did make an obscene gesture in Xander’s direction. However, Jim noticed that Spike didn’t actually object to the characterization.

“If it makes you feel any better, I’m totally going to have to redo this whole semester because Spike threatened to sit on me if I tried to go to class. I had to get a friend to fake a doctor’s note saying I got adult chicken pox.” Xander sighed unhappily.

“What are you going to school for?”

“Architecture.”

“Really?”

Xander sat up. “Hey, I’m smart enough to do the math, even if it takes me a little longer.”

Okay, clearly Xander was nursing a few insecurity issues. “I never even questioned your ability to do the job,” Jim said. “I just don’t think of mob families as having architects.”

“We aren’t a mob family.”

Jim gave Xander an incredulous look.

“Okay, we aren’t always a mob family. Unless you talk to Anya. She’s a little weirdly mobbish and interested in learning extortion, but that’s just her ex-demony side coming out. Ignore her.”

“Ignore the ex-demon with dreams of becoming a mob extortion expert. Right.” This was going down as one of the strangest conversations Jim had ever had, and given that he talked to Blair on a regular basis, that was saying something.

Xander shrugged.

Jim was going to ask about the other members of the family and how many of them had dreams of becoming criminal masterminds, but Spike was striding toward them. Jim straightened up and mentally braced himself. Whether Spike wanted to kick his ass or chain him up, Jim didn’t have any choices here, and he had to keep his head in this for the long game.
Spike tossed a manila envelope at Jim. “Miller wanted you to have these. Bloody hell, I'm delivering reports. When did my unlife turn into reports and listening to presentations about investments and capital return? It makes me question what I've done wrong to deserve this.”

Jim started to open the envelope, but Spike loped up the stairs, calling over his shoulder, “Get your arse in gear before I drag you up here, Sentinel.”

Xander said softly, “That’s not actually a threat as much as something he enjoys doing.”

“Thanks for the warning.” Jim headed up the stairs after Spike. Whatever was in Miller’s report would have to wait until after Spike was finished with him.
Realizations

Jim woke quickly. As he stared at the dark ceiling, he listened for danger. Instead he heard Blair's familiar heart beat out in the main room. Fabric rustled, and Jim figured Blair was getting undressed. Quietly, Jim sat up and waited as Blair settled down on the couch. It was late and there was no moon in the sky, but the lights of LA shone in through the window so Jim could easily navigate the room. He wrapped his fists around the wrist chains to keep them from clinking and eased out into the main room.

Sure enough, Blair was on the couch, his breath just starting to even out. Jim planted himself between Blair and the door before he turned on the overhead lights.

"Wha--" Blair bolted up and looked around wildly before he spotted Jim. "Oh. Hey. Wow, I totally thought you'd be asleep by now."

"Obviously," Jim said drily.

"I hope I didn't wake you up. I could get Cordelia to give me the keys to another room." Blair looked toward the door hopefully.

"We've bunked together before, and that's a king sized bed. So I figure you're avoiding me," Jim said.

Blair looked everywhere except at Jim. “Okay,” he said, drawing the word out. “Maybe I am avoiding you because this whole conversation, yeah, I totally don’t want to have that. Especially not when you’re wearing pajama bottoms and chains.” Blair grimaced, but the gesture was too broad. The hairs on the back of Jim’s neck stood up. However, he knew better than to try and get a direct answer out of Blair.

“So, who are the three techie guys who are coming into town?”

That shocked Blair. “Whoa. Okay, you are seriously more in the know than I expected."

“So you thought I was sitting up here ignorant?”

“Well, no.” Blair sighed. “Oh man, I don’t know what I thought. This is why I wanted to keep you far, far from LA, not that my plan worked out all that well.”

“Better here than dead.”

Blair threw his hands up. “That’s what I mean! You aren’t supposed to be this calm. You aren’t supposed to accept that Spike is a vampire and go do some soldier bonding thing.”

“So, I should be more closed minded?” Jim asked.

Blair glared, but Jim still got the impression that the answer was yes. “Sandburg, let’s start somewhere simple. I’m am trying my best to deal with this, so why are you avoiding me?”

“Because I promised to not come back smelling like…” Blair engaged in an elaborate handwaving ceremony that either mimicked very bad sex or the inner workings of a gasoline engine. Jim drew in a deep breath and searched the air. Under the soap and deodorant, he could smell sex and the heavy scent of Angelus.
“You were with him,” Jim said as calmly as he could. Jealous was gnawing at him, but he was a grown man and he wasn’t going to throw a fit like a child. Blair could choose anyone he wanted, and if he didn’t want Jim… well that was probably for the best because Jim didn’t share well.

“Well, yeah.” Blair’s musk deepened as his body made it clear how attracted he was to Angelus.

“And it doesn’t bother you that this is a demon? A creature who spent a hundred years killing innocent people?” Miller’s file had been very thorough about both Jenny Calendar Giles’s sins as well as Angelus’s. She wanted to turn loose a monster so she could deliver a leashed champion to her masters.

“Hey, everyone has a past,” Blair said brightly. Any other day, Jim would have taken that comment at face value, especially since Blair smelled of desire, but Jim saw the small twitch of disgust, the almost invisible flinch when Jim reminded Blair about Angelus’s past as a killer.

“Yes, but does everyone kill nuns?” Jim focused his sight on the skin around Blair’s eyes. It contracted, the invisible hairs standing up in an involuntary show of distress, but Blair’s lust filled the air.

“Oh man, that was forever ago. Besides, he has a soul now, even if Jenny’s spell is making that soul a little slippery right now.”

“So, you enjoy sex with a serial killer who considers you a food group?”

Blair leapt to his feet. “No way. Seriously, you are so out of bounds that it’s not even funny.” Jim could hear the truth in Blair’s words this time, not like before when scent said one thing and body language another. “Angel or Angelus—we are family to him. Even when Angelus had no soul, he wanted us back. He didn’t eat Graham when the evil lawyers brought him back to this hotel, and he didn’t kill Faith even though she’s a slayer.” Blair ended with poking a finger into Jim’s chest.

“No,” Jim said calmly, “but Angelus has sex with Graham, even though Graham doesn’t actually want sex.”

Blair jerked back like he’d been burnt. “What?”

Clearly he hadn’t known that. “Graham was afraid that he and Faith were too disconnected. He didn’t want Faith to feel pressured into building that connection with Angelus, so he did.”

Blair sank down onto the couch. “Oh crap.”

“Yeah, nice family you have here, Chief.”

Blair glared. “Hey, things are different with family.”

“Is that why you’re sleeping with Angelus?”

“Hey, I happen to be a connoisseur of good sex, and two hundred years of experience had led to some pretty impressive technique,” Blair said. Again, his microexpressions whispered of discomfort while his scent screamed his lust. Jim remembered when Blair had dated that doctor in Forensics. When Blair talked about her, he would smell of such lust that Jim had wanted to sneeze. But when she was around him, she showed little more than a hint of interest. At the time, Jim’s petty jealousy had led him to gleefully conclude that Blair wasn’t all that good in bed. However, he was working on a different hypothesis now.

“Is that why you sleep with Spike?” Jim asked.
Again, Blair threw his hands up, but every tiny muscle in his face relaxed. So the idea of Spike and sex didn’t upset him. “Man, do you want my history with every member of this house? That is going to take a while.” Blair dropped down onto the sofa.

“Considering you’ve even slept with Harmony…” Jim let his voice trail off as he studied Blair, ignoring the scents that tried to distract him.

“Hey, she might be a little shallow, but she is very enthusiastic.”

Jim could see the truth in that. “So, is there much difference between Angel and Angelus when it comes to sex?”

Bingo. Lines appeared below Blair’s eyes for a brief second before the disgust vanished. Meanwhile, the heady smell of sexual satisfaction filled the air. Apparently Blair had a few talents that made his lies particularly effective. “Man, they are both seriously good in bed,” Blair said in a voice that sounded happy.

“I wonder if Major Miller wishes he had slept with Angel instead of waiting until it was Angelus.”

Blair’s lower lid twitched upward. Jim couldn’t tell if that was disgust or fear, but either way, it wasn’t good. However, Blair’s voice was as even as ever. “Man, what is it with you and wanting to talk about sex. If you want a primer on which member of the family is most proficient with particular sex acts or positions, let me know. I mean, Spike is limber in ways that…” Blair let his voice trail off before whistling in appreciation.

Jim nodded as he considered his possible lines of attack. Blair’s obfuscations were the stuff of legend in the precinct, but this was a whole new level. Leaning back against the door and only escape route, Jim went straight for the jugular. “So, can all eudemon control the scents they emit or is that something unique to your family tree?”

Blair’s eyes got large. “What?”

Jim just stared at Blair.

“Oh no. No, no, no. You are doing that thing where you assume the world is a certain way because that’s how you want it. You and denial are like this!” Blair held up two fingers pressed close together.

“Tell me, did you sleep with Angelus for the same reason as Miller?”

“Hey, I like sex with Angelus.” Again, Blair couldn’t control his microexpressions, and now that Jim knew to ignore scent, Blair couldn’t lie to him.

“You like sex with Angel. You’re disturbed by sex with Angelus, although you still do sleep with him, so I’m assuming this is a clan thing.”

“You have not known about demons long enough to make any assumptions,” Blair said firmly.

“You used smell to make me believe you were sleeping with a number of women in Cascade, but it’s pretty obvious now that you couldn’t have slept with any of them. What did you tell me, Chief? Sex stays inside the clan.”

“Oh no.” Blair shook his head continuously, but Jim could read the truth in his barely submerged panic. Blair had tried so hard to hide all this, and Jim was starting to think it was all about Blair’s attempt to protect him. Blair had tried and was still trying to shield Jim from this crazy family of
“That’s why you never looked at me twice. If you have sex with me, that puts me in the clan. So tell me, did you ever want me? Were you even a little interested?”

Blair didn’t answer, but his pupils dilated. That was enough for Jim to know the truth. Blair wanted a relationship and he’d sacrificed any chance of having one to give Jim a way to avoid getting sucked into his world.

Jim shook his head. “I really thought you saw me as some washed up old cop, or maybe that you were so hard-core heterosexual that you never looked at me twice. You had me fooled. You’re good, Sandburg.”

“Man, this is… this is so very dangerous territory. This is so not the time for any of this.”

“Because Angelus is here?” Jim guessed. Blair closed his eyes and just sort of wilted. Jim had worked thousands of interrogations over the years, and he knew when someone was about to finally break. Blair had that hopeless expression now. Part of Jim wanted to step in and reassure Blair, shelter him. However, Jim needed reliable information and the time for Blair’s obfuscations was over. “The closer we get, the more Angelus worries about your loyalty.” It was a guess, but Jim was fairly sure he was right. That was confirmed when Blair practically curled in on himself.

“And an insecure Angelus is so not what we need right now,” Blair said softly. “Man, the military guys who are coming, they are not family. Worse, Angelus and Angel and Spike and most of the family blame their unit for letting Jenny get out of hand. Graham was in their unit and he tried to go to his commander and tell Colonel Finn that Jenny was not only outside any ethical boundaries but that she was corrupting other members of the unit. They ignored him. He was given a choice of coming here or transferring out of any unit with supernatural connections.”

Jim rubbed a hand over his face. This complicated matters.

“So Angelus is going to want to circle the wagons. Does Angel feel that same need?”

“Totally,” Blair agreed. “But he is not going to push things as much. Just let the spell wear off a little so Angel has more control, and I can totally talk him around to accepting you. Angelus is just…” Blair didn’t finish his thought, but Jim could guess.

The problem was that the longer Blair ran interference and kept Jim away from Angelus, the more on edge Angelus was going to get. Blair might know demons, but Jim knew alpha personalities. From the military to the police force to his time undercover in vice, he’d moved from one alpha male’s territory to another. Jim knew how to deflect the aggression with a joke. He knew how to get things done without hitting that alpha instinct to force an opponent into a corner. The military had taught him how to take his own alpha instincts and stuff them into the back corner of his psyche so he could follow his damn orders.

“Is Angelus still awake?” It was three in the morning, but Jim had to assume vampires were pretty nocturnal.

Blair jumped up. “Oh no. No way. That is not happening.”

“Didn’t ask your opinion,” Jim said. “Is he awake?”

Blair shook his head and remained mute. The problem was that Blair was going to keep trying to protect Jim, even when Jim didn’t need protection. Jim walked out of the room and toward the stairs. If Cordelia or one of the others were around, they could point him in the direction of
Angelus room.

“Seriously, Jim. You do not want to do this!” Blair said as he chased after Jim.

When Jim reached the top of the steps, Spike appeared from around a corner.

He lifted an eyebrow at Jim and Blair. “Right then, did you finally figure out what he’s been doing?” Spike poked a thumb in Blair’s direction.

“Traitor!” Blair snapped.

Jim ignored Blair and answered. “He can control his scent. He’s been trying to keep me away and convince me he had no interest in me sexually so Angelus doesn’t feel a need to come in and reclaim his territory.” Jim looked to Spike to see if he was right. Spike’s smirk confirmed it all.

“Don’t go trusting your senses over your common sense,” Spike said. “Once we get your mojo freed up, don’t put all your faith in that, either. Common sense will get you out of more trouble than magic.”

“Good advice. Right now my common sense is saying that I need to have a private conversation with Angelus.”

“Oh man, your common sense has lost its mind,” Blair interrupted. “Completely lost. You are delusional if you think this is a good idea.”

Spike answered for Jim. “It’s a fucking great idea. Come on, then. I’ll get Peaches and have him meet you downstairs in the library.”

“Spike!” Blair snapped.

Spike’s eyes yellowed. “One more word and you’ll spend the rest of the night in a cell.”

Blair had his mouth open, probably ready for some rant, but he closed it.

“Blair, go back to the room,” Jim said.

Blair moved closer to Jim, his voice little more than a desperate whisper. “You do not have to sacrifice yourself. No way. Do you have any idea what that sort of emotion turmoil could do to your senses? This is so not the time for creating more problems.”

Jim rested his hand on Blair’s shoulder. “I’m not going to sacrifice myself, but I need to do this. Now, I really don’t want to get in a pissing match with Spike over whether you’re going to sleep in a cell tonight, so please don’t put me in a position where I have to go up against him to protect you.”

Blair frowned and for a second Jim thought he might argue. However, after one last unhappy look at Spike, Blair turned and headed back down the hall. Now Jim just had to deal with Angelus.
Jim felt the hairs on the back of his neck stand up, so he wasn't surprised when Angelus appeared in the library door. "I hear my Sentinel wanted time with his clan leader." Angelus' voice had a silky sexuality to it that scared the shit out of Jim and he didn't even try to hide that reaction. Angelus chuckled.

"I wanted to clear the air between us before these new Army people show up." Jim's words made Angelus draw back. The suspicion and danger lurked there just under the surface. Jim might not be prepared to offer up his body sexually, but he did understand that Angelus needed a way to be part of his life--part of his chain of command. "The army reactivated my commission," Jim said, and Angelus narrowed his eyes.

"Did they? I'll have to speak to Major Miller about that."

Jim didn't want to aim trouble Miller's way. "I get the feeling it wasn't his choice and it sure as hell isn't mine. You should know I have issues with the military."

Angelus smirked. "And you want me to know this?"

"I want you to understand that I am a hell of a lot more comfortable with you than with them. My commanding officer set up my unit. We were all supposed to die, but I got to survive and bury all of my friends. The fact that the Rangers gave Miller a choice between joining you or getting transferred away from the fight doesn't even surprise me. Those who don't toe the line are pushed to one side, and sometimes their line is rather stupid."

"It is," Angelus agreed easily. "However, I suspect your motives in telling me this."

Jim took a deep breath. He'd played games with alpha males before--more times than he could remember. He'd looked mafia bosses right in the eye and conned them into trusting him. He'd gone under cover in prison and lived to walk away. But this felt more dangerous than any of those situations. Angelus knew that Jim was placating him, but the attempt was so inadequate that the vampire found it amusing. That was better than him being offended.

Jim decided to go with brutal honesty. His ego would take a hit, but at this point that was inevitable. "I'm telling you this because I don't know how to navigate this terrain. Blair has always avoided having any sort of relationship with me, to the point that he used my senses against me to convince me that he found me sexually unattractive, so when I see evidence that he's sleeping with half the members of this house, I'm irrationally jealous. And I'm angry with him that he has apparently been lying to me this whole time. And I sure as hell don't want the military mixed up in my life again."

"And did you believe these lies Blair told?" Angelus asked. Jim had really hoped that the information about the military would distract him. However, Angelus was smarter than the average mob boss.

"Yes."

"Don't rely on your senses too much."

"Yeah, I got that speech from Spike." Jim sat down, and Angelus pursed his lips and studied him. Jim said wryly, "If Sandburg weren't more loyal to you than me, he wouldn't have lied or kept me in the dark about the fact he had a psychotic woman after him. Again."
Angelus sat on the couch and leaned back. "He kept the family away to preserve your independence. But then a Sentinel has demonic blood so perhaps you need a clan more than he knows." Just the sexual way Angelus said that made it clear that he equated clan with fucking.

"I have enough human in me that if you rape me you'd better never let me go because I won't forgive that. I don't see sex the way a demon would."

Angelus raised his eyebrow. "Graham certain enjoyed himself and he has no demon blood at all."

Jim doubted if the word 'enjoy' captured Miller's attitude--or Blair's either. While he had no doubt that both men came and Angelus could make a body feel good, both had a lot of ambivalence about the act. "I'm not Miller."

"Perhaps you're less loyal," Angelus suggested, but oddly he seemed more relaxed now than any time since Jim had arrived. Honesty seemed to work with him, so Jim went with his strength.

"You haven't yet proven that you're worth being loyal to."

Angelus' eyes yellowed, and Jim figured he'd taken that one step too far. He backed off a little.

"I know that you're loyal to your clan and they have reason to return the loyalty, and I include Blair in that. However, just because this unit works for him doesn't mean that I fit in here or that you'll want me around long term."

Angelus cocked his head. "A Sentinel is a valuable piece, or at least you will be if you can get your spirit animal under your control. I willna trade away a valuable piece."

Jim leaned forward. "And I won't give my loyalty to someone who sees me as a piece rather than as Jim Ellison I've had too many people who only saw my value betray me."

Angelus stood and stalked closer, and Jim fought an instinct to get on his feet and brace himself. Whatever Angelus planned to do, Jim didn't have the ability to fight him over it. Angelus walked to the side of the chair and ran his finger down Jim's neck.

"You carry demonic blood. You will never feel connected to a clan without a bond to your clan leader."

A shudder ran up Jim's spine. "Bonds are not all sexual. Men who serve together in a front line unit form very strong bonds without any sex."

"They aren't demons."

"And you and Spike are the only full demons around this place," Jim said, and he was including Harmony and Amber in that. Those ladies might be vampires, but they were more human than not. He certainly couldn't see either of them terrorizing villages or feasting on the blood of innocents.

"I won't allow you to leave the clan," Angelus said harshly.

"I don't want you to," Jim said. Angelus' fingers wrapped around his neck in a clear warning, but Jim hadn't lied, and he trusted Angelus could read his body language well enough to know that. "I don't understand supernatural threats, and I cannot have Blair hiding things from me. Since he's made it clear that the clan comes first, if I want to be able to protect him, that means I need to be in the clan. And you have intel on threats I wouldn't even recognize. If Jenny Giles had come to Cascade, I wouldn't have recognized the danger until after Blair was dead, and then I would have followed him to the next world and killed him again." Jim could feel his anger rising as he thought
about the risk Blair had taken. After reading all Miller's files on Jenny Giles, he had far fewer qualms about this clan hunting her. The military had tried her in abestintia, and the testimony was damning.

She had advocated for genocidal weapons and when the local commander, a Major Finn, had shot her down, she'd developed them in secret. She had used unstable weapons, or in this case magic books, confiscated from the enemy and altered them in ways that were inherently dangerous. She had lied to the local commander before taking that untested weapon and deploying it in a live combat situation. And because of the indiscriminate nature of the weapon, both Angel's unit and Finn's had taken friendly fire casualties. Hell, according to Miller's reports, Spike and Angel would both be dead if Miller hadn't told them about his suspicions that Giles had continued her work after being ordered to stand down. As it was, two civilian fathers who had volunteered to help Angel's unit had died in horrible pain, all because she had ignored every safety protocol and direct order. And all that came on the heels of some Dr. Walsh in the same unit experimenting on her own men.

It was a clusterfuck that made Jim's time in the service look happy. It also explained why Major Miller considered it acceptable to have semi-consensual sex with a vampire. Given what the Army had put him through, it probably looked reasonable. However, Jim was older, crankier and less likely to make accommodations for the demonic nature of Blair's adopted family.

Angelus eased his grip on Jim's neck and returned to stroking it. Maybe Jim did have a few demonic bits of DNA because the possessive gesture didn't bother him nearly as much as he would have expected. "Blair would keep you separate from the clan, connected only through him."

Jim considered that. "He sometimes expects me to react worse than I will. He tried to keep me from talking to you."

"He is generally a good judge of character, so why would he misunderstand you so badly?"

Jim wished he had an answer for that. No doubt some of it came from the fact that Blair saw him at his worst. When they'd met, the senses had pushed Jim to the very edge. He'd seriously considered hospitalizing himself. And that had set a pattern of sorts. When he lost his temper, Blair was there. And he tried to make up for that by also including Blair when he was at his best. He would goof around and bring home pizza and include Blair in poker night, even when Simon made it clear that he wasn't happy. Jim wondered if he hadn't managed to convince Blair that he had a personality disorder with all the shifts.

Angelus rested his hand on Jim's shoulder. "When this spell that binds you is finally off, you may find you require stronger bonds to the clan."

Jim nodded. It was possible. "I'll make sure I tell Spike."

"Spike? Not me?"

Jim looked up at Angelus. "No offense, but between the amount of power you seem to have running under your skin and this personality problem you've developed because of Jenny Giles, I'm nervous sitting too close to you."

Angelus laughed. "You should teach Blair some of that caution."

"Trust me, I've tried. Mostly the lessons roll off his back."

Angelus pulled back. "Even with demons, not all bonds are sexual."

"I figured," Jim said. Faith seemed pretty demonic and pretty loyal to Angelus, and he knew they
weren't having sex. "Fighting?" Jim guessed.

Angelus sat down on the couch and stared at Jim long enough that he knew his answer wasn't correct, or at least not completely correct.

"But then if fighting caused a bond, you'd bond to every enemy, and that doesn't make sense. Is it the fighting or the submitting?"

"Demons are about hierarchy. If you submit and take my instruction, they you are putting yourself under my authority. The same is true if you offer your blood." Angelus studied Jim, and Jim could see the challenge in the expression.

Jim imagined that Angel could teach him a few things, probably more than Spike. However it sounded like the more he sparred with them, the stronger his ties would become. Jim already felt emotionally compromised. "And if I have strong ties to you and Spike, how likely are you to trade my life away? Because that's exactly what the Army did. My commander gave my helicopter position away in exchange for a part of the drug money."

"For money? I would never give up part of my clan for money," Angelus said. "The soul would never give up of you--he would die for any of you." Angelus' disgusted snort made it clear he didn't agree, and Jim found the honesty reassuring. For a time, the room was silent, only the ticking of a grandfather clock marking the time as they sat in the dim light. "I have a different calculation than the soul. I would trade your life away, but only if it saved the life of Xander or Spike." He paused for a moment. "Perhaps Cordelia," he finally added, but he sounded reluctant to do so.

"So, you'd gut me to save your favorites," Jim summarized. He noticed Blair was not on that list.

"I would sacrifice Wesley or Harmony to protect your position, and I would burn the entire world before I willingly give up any of you."

"And the soul?" Jim asked.

Angelus' expression darkened. "He will put himself at risk before anyone else, but if that allows us to die, then William would be the head of this clan, and the human members would find that far less pleasant."

Jim couldn't imagine Spike running the hotel much different, especially since he seemed to defer to Cordelia in most things, but he didn't challenge Angelus on it. He did want one compromise. "Add Blair to that list of people you would sacrifice me to save."

The pure disbelief on Angelus' face was almost comical.

"The senses are more difficult to control than I've let Blair believe. I don't want... " Jim hesitated. He wasn't being honest. "I don't think I can survive long-term without him."

"There are others who know how to work with Sentinels," Angelus said. "Lorne might be a good match."

Jim shivered at the idea of that green demon talking him out of a zone, his green hands resting on Jim's arm or those red eyes staring at him. Jim had never thought of himself as being overly focused on looks, but when someone looked like that, it was hard to ignore. "It might be more complicated than that," Jim said.

Angelus narrowed his eyes.
"Did Blair tell you that another Sentinel came to town?"

Angelus' forehead rippled and his eyes turned yellow.

"I'm suspicious of my feelings here because her presence compromised me. I wanted to protect Sandburg, but I threw him out of my house. I knew he was my partner, but when this other Sentinel was in danger." Jim stopped. He definitely didn't want to get into the shame of that moment. He had allowed his sexual attraction for a beautiful woman to compromise his ethics. He'd allowed Blair--a civilian and his friend--to kneel in the dirt while tied up, and he fussed over a psychotic woman who had tried to kill Blair. The fact that Megan had witnessed that lapse in judgment just made it all so much worse.

Angelus didn't hide his emotions the way Angel did. His fury showed in every ridge, every demonic feature and in the way he gripped the arm of the couch.

"I was out of control," Jim finished.

"So you rejected Blair and you believe that makes him more necessary or your place in my clan more secure?"

Jim figured he was pretty close to an exit strategy right now. With a little more aggravating, Angelus would kick him out and keep Blair out of his reach, probably by keeping Blair in the hotel. And Blair would probably be safer, but that didn't solve Jim's problem.

"She killed Blair," Jim said.

Angelus bolted to his feet, but Jim kept talking. "The other Sentinel drowned him, and he came back to life after our spirit guides joined. I don't think I can exist without him."

"Harmony!" Angelus bellowed. Immediately the young, blonde vampire appeared at the doorway.

"Boss?" Her cheerful, vacuous nature would have annoyed Jim, but Angelus ignored it.

"Get Sandburg down here now!"

Harmony squeaked and vanished.

Jim stood. "If you have something to say, you can say it to me."

"I will say it to both of you," Angelus said. He pointed at the chair. "Sit."

For a second Jim considered disobeying and attracting that anger toward himself and away from Blair. However, he was fairly sure that Angelus had enough bad attitude to spread around. So he sat.
Not only Blair but also Spike and Xander showed up.

"Right then, what's got your dander up?" Spike asked, but he glared at Jim, making it very clear he blamed him for Angelus's foul mood. Xander didn't say anything. He sat next to Angelus on the couch, leaning into his side. While the gesture was affectionate, it would also make it hard for Angelus to launch an attack. Angelus gave him an exasperated look, but then he draped his arm over Xander's shoulders.

"Subtle as ever there, pet," Spike said as he leaned against the door frame. "So what's so bloody important that we have to deal with it now?"

It was late, but Spike still had on jeans and a t-shirt, so Jim suspected he hadn't gone to bed. Xander, on the other hand, wore gray pajamas and had a serious case of bed head. Curls stuck out in every direction and his eyes were half-closed.

"Blair is going to tell us how he died," Angelus said in a dangerously calm voice.

Blair whirled around to glare at Jim, and Xander sat up. "Blair what?" Xander asked in a high voice.

"Okay, it was a near-death experience, but man, I am not dead, and I don't know what Jim has been saying, but keep in mind this last week has been madly stressful. There is only just so much stress a person can take before their head explodes. Totally. I'm not even kidding, although the exploding is more about blood vessel exploding when the blood pressure gets to high."

Blair was all set to go off on an epic rant.

Jim could practically smell it coming, but then Angelus pulled away from Xander and moved to a spot right in front of Blair. He glared down, and the flow of words dried up as Blair looked up at him.

"How did you die?" Angelus leaned so far into Blair's personal space that Jim twitched with a need to get up and deflect some of that anger, but that would only make the situation worse.

Blair gave Jim a desperate look, either hoping for rescue or trying to psychically intuit how much Jim had told them.

Angelus rested his palm against the side of Blair's neck, and Blair flinched. "I'll not have ye throwing yer life away," Angelus said darkly, his Irish accent so thick it was hard to understand.

"I wouldn't!" Blair said. "It was just so fast, and I didn't know anything was wrong until she was holding me face down in the fountain, and by then it was way too late to call you. If I had thought...

Blair's voice trailed off, and Jim could see Angelus tightening his fingers. Jim did stand then.

"Blair underestimated how emotionally compromised Sentinels can become."

"Meaning?" Spike asked. His yellow eyes left little doubt about his feelings. If he didn't like Jim's answer, he was going to ask for permission to snap Jim's neck. Either that or he'd do it without permission and ask forgiveness afterward. And Jim had enough guilt about how he'd handled the Alex Barnes affair that part of him thought there was some justice in that.

"Meaning I almost let one kill Blair a second time because I couldn't control an instinctive need to follow her," Jim said. He believed in pulling the bandage off fast. However, he wasn't surprised when Spike leaped across the room, grabbed him by the shirt and slammed him back into the
fireplace. Jim hit his head on the brick so hard that he had spots in his vision, and then Xander was there, pushing Spike away.

Xander grabbed Spike's arm, although he couldn't pull him off. "Hey! We're friends here, and that is unfriendlike. And yeah, throwing Blair to the wolves or the random evil Sentinel is wrong, but as the person who sometimes goes all growly and threatens friends because of demon instincts, I say let he who has not screwed over a friend cast the first stone, and in this room, no one passes that test. Well, except for maybe Blair."

Blair sighed. "Man, I totally don't. I've just lost about a ton of idiosyncratic credit just today because of the many ways I've screwed over friends, but it was never intentional." Blair rested his hand on Angelus's shoulder. "And I know my need to keep Jim out of the middle probably influenced me more than it should have, but the second I thought there was real danger, I told you. I told you about those guys burying Jim alive. If I had thought Alex Barnes was a real threat, I would have called you, and then I would have argued with Spike about why we should capture her and turn her over to the police instead of eating her. But I never thought the danger was real."

"Start from the beginning," Spike said, his demonic features still front and center.

Blair appeared to lose the ability to talk, so Jim told the story, from the time he'd first seen the spotted jaguar spirit guide, to his fear that he would kill Blair and throwing him out, to Alex Barnes finding Blair in his office at Rainier and taking him out at gunpoint and drowning him in the fountain. By the time Jim described using his spirit guide to bring Blair back to life, Spike was pacing like a caged tiger. Jim stayed close to the fireplace because the room suddenly felt much smaller. Jim couldn't even figure out who Spike was more angry at, him or Blair. When Jim described his out of control feelings, Spike glared at Jim. When Jim described kicking Blair out, Spike's yellow glare turned to him. Weirdly when Jim talked about Blair dying, Spike glared at Blair. And then as Jim described running to Sierra Verde after Alex, Spike started growling and Jim was the target of his baleful expression from that point on.

And Jim deserved it. Blair had nearly died because of him.

"I'm going to fucking rip your bollocks off and make ya eat 'em," Spike snarled around his fangs.

Angelus had retreated to a couch, but at the threat, both Xander and Blair jumped between them.

"Oh no. No bollocks ripping!" Xander said firmly.

Blair added to that, "You do not know how much guilting Jim did after that. No way are you getting in his face after he got in his own face as much as he did. I just now got him straightened out."

Jim thought about that. "But for a long time I vacillated between irrational anger at you and a desperate fear that you'd leave. I went to that conference because I needed to get some space and get my head together." Part of that had been Jim's unrequited lust, which might not be all that unrequited. But another part was that he couldn't catch his emotional balance around Blair, not since Sierra Verde. His emotions cycled so fast that the best he could do was lock them down and show nothing. At worst, he had verbally lashed out at Blair.

Blair turned toward him. "Seriously? You wanted to go to the conference?"

"Want is too strong a verb," Jim said dryly. "But I needed to understand why I couldn't stop wanting you and being angry with you at the same time. And then when I was at the conference, my senses started acting up. That's how those assholes got the drop on me."
"Doesn't excuse what you did," Spike said in a dangerous voice.

"No, it doesn't." Jim wasn't even going to try and defend himself on that front.

"Angel?" Xander asked. Jim turned and Angelus watched with an almost amused expression.

"Want to share with the rest of the class?" Spike asked.

Angelus chucked as he stood up. Spike's scarred eyebrow went up, but he backed up to the doorway. Jim wasn't sure if he was getting out of the larger vampire's way or blocking Jim's escape path. "Ye have more demon in you than I thought," Angelus said.

Jim wasn't sure how to answer that, so he remained silent. When Angelus headed toward him, Blair tried to get in the middle, but Angelus pushed to the side.

"Blair, back off," Jim said when Blair tried to squirm his way back in between them. Not that he could. Angelus was chest to chest with Jim, and with Jim's back to the fireplace, he was trapped. Angelus put his hands on either side Jim's head.

"If ye lay down for me, you won't ever be able to get free of those instincts, and you know it."

Jim raised his chin. His jaw ached from clenching it so tightly, but he couldn't deny Angelus's words. He didn't know if they were true, but he couldn't escape the fear that they might be.

"Oh man. You have no idea what emotional turmoil does to his senses. It is not pretty. Totally not pretty. And you know how weird humans are with sexuality. You watched Xander turn himself inside out over the whole gay thing," Blair said.

Xander interrupted. "Hey, I did not. Angel did. That was during his Father Peter phase, and can I say now that I am glad that phase is over. I mean, I am fine with you being Catholic, but I am glad you're not that Catholic anymore."

"I'm a little more interested in the fact that the wanker threw Blair out when he knew there was danger." Spike narrowed his eyes, and Jim got the feeling that Spike planned to make his displeasure felt in the very near future.

"I'm starting to see a pattern in his actions," Angelus said. "He reminds me of a va'nuss."

Blair clearly understood the reference. "What? No! Just no!" Xander looked around the room in confusion, but Spike's fury faded to something more thoughtful.

"Ya think?"

Angelus tilted his head to the side and considered Jim. He backed off a few steps to really study Jim's whole body, which was disturbing on several levels.

Blair was not as quick to accept whatever verdict Angelus was passing on Jim's behavior. "Okay, you guys are seriously off base. No way. No fucking way. I've lived with him for three years. Do you seriously think I wouldn't notice? And if he were, there's no way Mexico would have happened. But it did. And I'm past my Alex issues, but Alex issues and va'nuss issues are mutually exclusive issues."

Luckily Xander asked the obvious question before Jim had to. "Can someone explain what va'nuss issues might include?"
"They're the guard dogs of the demon world," Spike said, "and not likely to ever consort with vampires."

"And the vampire who could lay claim to a va'nuss or even a half-breed va'nuss would command considerable respect," Angelus said in a creepy and fond voice that suggested that Jim's last chance to escape the clan had just left the building.

"That might be why the other shaman bottled up his powers," Spike said.

"Seriously, explaining would be good!" Xander said loudly.

Blair crossed his arms over his chest. "No fucking way. Nope. You guys are so far off base that you lost the stadium."

Angelus spared him a warning look. "Watch yourself boyo."

Jim stepped to the side and put a hand on Blair's arm to stop him from getting in the middle. "Would someone explain to me what a va'nuss is in terms more helpful than demonic dog."

"They're warriors." Spike said.

"And they don't live in this dimension. Ever," Blair jumped in to add. "They live in warrior clans, where they pledge themselves to either an individual or a family, but in this dimension, they are way more likely to slaughter people than act as protectors."

"That's because humans are an unloyal lot," Spike said. "They get testy about demons who break their word, and they tend to break demons in return. I wouldn't go within a thousand miles of one of those gits."

Blair added, "And they don't bond to humans at all. They aren't even sure humans are sentient, so the fact that you're comparing them to dogs is hugely ironic. But if Sentinels are related to va'nuss, there is no way Jim would would take me back in after I hid Alex from him. I mean, I had to for ethical reasons because as an anthropologist, I have an obligation to my subjects, and Alex had agreed to be a subject. However, a va'nuss would have taken that as a betrayal."

"He did, pet," Spike said. "He tossed you out because he was so angry he thought he might kill ya."

"That is Jim being cranky and interpreting the dream in exactly the wrong way," Blair rushed to say. "And if a va'nuss felt betrayed, he would never stop until the subject of that betrayal was not only dead put ripped out of the world in the more horrific, painful way possible. Man, there is a reason why sane demons stay far, far away from va'nuss. Their ethical code is like..." Blair whistled at the idea.

"He may not be a full va'nuss, but I believe he has some connection to one or perhaps Sentinels are a separate demonic species related to va'nuss," Angelus said. "He's given you his loyalty, so any sign you are less than loyal is emotionally damaging him."

"I wouldn't go that far," Jim said.

Angelus gave him a skeptical look, Spike snorted, and Xander said softly, "Oh I would. I would go that far and way, way farther. Way farther." He grimaced.

Jim crossed his arms.

"Jim was married, and that ended in recriminations and awkward conversations, not evisceration."
Trust me, that would not happen with a va'nuss."

Spike threw himself at one of the couches. "It could be why the other shaman blocked up his powers."

"If the other shaman worked with him, how could Jim leave him?" Angelus asked, but he looked to Spike for answers.

"I'm guessing the missing memories has something to do with that."

"If he wanted the Sentinel to leave, he may not have had a choice," Angelus said.

"Would someone like to include me in this conversation?" Jim asked.

"No," both vampires said at the same time.

Xander sighed and then came over and grabbed Jim's arm. "When they get like this, it's best to just leave them alone and let them wake up everyone else in the house to research some weird demon of the week, not that I'm calling you weird... Or a demon." Xander sighed. "It is too damn late to make sense, and those of us with human blood are going to bed."

Xander pulled him toward the exit. Jim looked to Angelus to see if he was going to object, but Angel and Spike were deep in discussions of every bit of lore they knew about va'nuss and talking about whether it was worth it to call Lorne. Jim hoped the man got to sleep through the night before having to deal with these two. However, since they were busy, Jim let Xander usher him out of the room, and Blair trailed behind.
Once they were safely in their room, Jim parked himself in front of the door so Blair couldn't escape. "Tell me everything you know about va'nuss."

Blair gave him a dirty look. "That would include going back to my lecture on the origins of the world and the competing theories of eudeamon and kakodeamon, and someone specifically told me he didn't want to hear it.

"I don't," Jim said. "I want you to tell me what I should expect if I meet a va'nuss today."

"Death," Blair said with a snort.

"Sandburg," Jim growled.

Blair held up his hands in surrender. "Oh man, I am not kidding. They are uncompromising bastards, and they do not have any time or patience for humans. A va'nuss would squish you like a bug just for being too close and contaminating him with human cooties."

"And Angelus thinks that describes me?" Jim kept his voice toneless and flat because he knew that wasn't the whole truth. For a minute, Blair tried to hold out. He crossed his arms and pressed his lips together and glared right back. However, when Jim didn't budge, he eventually fell back on the couch and started talking.

"Fine. If a va'nuss were to meet another demon, he would largely ignore him unless that demon took action against him. If a va'nuss respected a demon or if he owed him a favor, he might pledge himself to that demon or clan. And that's where the real fun begins. A pledged va'nuss will do anything, and I do mean anything, to either protect or avenge his charge. A human might think of giving his own life as the ultimate sacrifice, but va'nuss do not give their own lives unless they are backed into a corner. They take everyone else's. There's even one story that says that a va'nuss destroyed an entire dimension and all the sentient life in it because he couldn't find the demon who had killed his charge and he was determined to get his revenge. I can't even imagine the karma you get for destroying a universe. So not cool. Totally not cool." Blair grimaced.

That sounded more honest, but Jim still couldn't see himself in the description. "So Angelus thinks I'm a walking time bomb?"

Blair sighed. "Probably not, although you can get a little intense when someone offends your sense of justice."

Jim ignored the aside. "So what is Angelus talking about?"

"If you have even a little va'nuss in you, Angel is going to sigh me to death and Angelus is going to sit on me. But there is not one reference book, human or demon, that ever associates Sentinels with va'nuss. None. I mean, yeah, the books talk about a bond between the Sentinel and his chosen guide, but that is not described in terms of a va'nuss pledge. Not even close." Blair wrinkled his nose, and Jim got the feeling he was reassessing some of his former conclusions.

"So describe the va'nuss pledge."

Blair whistled. "Intense."

"Some details would be nice, Sandburg."
After scooting around on the couch, Blair pulled his legs up under him. "Okay, so a va'nuss only gives his or her loyalty to someone they feel is worthy."

"Worthy as in good?" Jim asked.

"No way. Worthy as in strong. Va'nuss are total chaotic neutrals. They admire strength and loyalty, and if that strength is rescuing damsels or slaughtering children, it doesn't matter much to them."

"Charming," Jim said in a flat voice.

Blair shrugged. "They are what they are. But once they pledge themselves to someone, their lives center on making sure the other person has everything he or she wants. They are fanatics. They'll destroy anyone and anything to protect their pledge, and if their pledge does end up getting killed, well, that's when entire universes can end up facing extinction because va'nuss and revenge... So not pretty."

"That still doesn't sound like me, Chief. I might go after murderers who have taken someone," Jim said as he thought of young Cho, killed in the line of duty, "but there's no way I would destroy innocent civilians along the way."

"No," Blair said softly, "but there's another part of that pledge. Sometimes the va'nuss pledges and then the demon betrays him. And then it is not pretty. The va'nuss becomes emotionally unstable. They'll threaten or even hurt their pledge one second, and then try to protect them the next. They vacillate between murderous and protective faster and faster, and their emotions become more and more unstable, which is usually a good time for the pledge to make a few amends and try and repair the relationship."

Sadly, that did describe Jim's feelings more than he wanted to admit. "And if the relationship isn't repaired?" Jim asked.

Blair just looked up at him, his expression blank.

Well shit. "I eventually would have killed you." Jim tried to stay calm about it, but the idea of hurting Sandburg made his gut clench, even as he had to admit that he had stood by while Alex had pointed a weapon at Blair. And during the Ventriss mess, he'd seen the perps take a baseball bat to Sandburg, and he hadn't done much to try and find them. He remembered being angry and dismissive of the whole affair, blaming Blair's love life for causing the attack, but he couldn't figure out why he'd felt that way.

"Oh no way, no. No, you wouldn't have. Angelus is making assumptions, and that is so not cool. There is no evidence that you have any va'nuss blood. Absolutely none." Blair jumped up and stood in front of Jim, his hand resting on Jim's chest.

"I have something like it," Jim confessed. "I fought it, and I kicked you out to try and protect you. I told you I couldn't go into the water with you because my gut said that if you were close to me, you were in danger. And you stuck close anyway."

"And I'm safe."

Jim grabbed Blair by the shoulders and pushed him back. "I nearly let Alex kill you. I had to fight my own instincts."

Blair frowned. It was like Blair had this image of Jim as an infallible Blessed Protector, and sometimes Jim just wanted to shake him until his teeth rattled and some of the damn hero worship fell out.
"When she pointed her gun at you, I didn't push down her arm right away because my instincts said to let her fire, and I am more ashamed of that than anything I've done in my life. You had stabbed me in the back, and I don't even know why I thought that. If I was so angry about you having a relationship with Alex, then why was I okay having one with her myself? Nothing made sense, and it was like I was trying to swim upstream in a river of insane instincts."

"Oh man." Blair slowly backed away. Maybe he understood now.

"Are you really sure that that person with three hundred years of life experience is wrong?" Right now, Jim hated the idea, but he thought it had a lot of merit.

"So it was all my fault," Blair said in a soft, mournful tone.

"What? How the hell did you get that?"

"I am the idiot who stepped all over your instinctive needs and responses."

"And I'm the idiot who didn't control my instincts," Jim shot back. No way would he let Blair take the blame for any of that disaster. He carried enough guilt already without Blair adding to it by emotionally beating up on himself.

"If you have va'nuss blood, there's no way--"

"If you suggest I can't control myself, that I don't have choices, I'm going to give you a swirly and dangle you off the balcony."

Blair took a step back. "If Sentinels are related to va'nuss, there is some serious biology involved."

"And I'm more human than demon," Jim said, and he fervently hoped that was true. "Besides, there's serious biology involved in vampirism, and I don't see Spike or Angel out hunting down victims." Jim didn't include Angelus in that assessment. If Miller's report could be trusted, Angelus had killed a number of humans, including the English slayer watchers who had come to town to watch him.

Blair retreated back to the couch. "You're supposed to be more freaked out about this."

When Jim moved forward, he watched Blair to see if the man was uncomfortable around him now, but Blair stared into space while Jim moved closer. Jim sat on the couch next to him. "I was freaked out when I couldn't control my emotions. And after we got back on the same page, I would think about what I had done, and I didn't understand it. If there were instinctive drives going, then I know to watch out for them and stop myself from acting on them next time."

"Next time?" Blair's voice rose. "Oh no. No, there will be no next time. Man, I am never hiding anything from you again. There are anthropological ethics, and then there are va'nuss pledges, and I know which one I am less likely to break."

"You shouldn't have to choose. I can control my emotions."

Blair laughed. "Man, my dissertation is so finished that it is a finished, finished thing. Done. Cooked. Over. Garbage."

Jim hadn't been sure what Blair meant until he got to the last word. "What?" Jim grabbed Blair's arm. "You can't give up on this now. You've worked on this for years."

"Exactly," Blair said with disgust in his tone. "I've worked for years to figure out how to find
enough human sources and human testing to be able to write something useful on the subject, but now you're telling me that you are way more demonic, and I should be going into demonic sources and looking for relationships to other species that have something similar to the va'nuuss pledge. And then I have the problem that the pledge puts me inside the study since I assume that's who you've pledged yourself to." Blair gave Jim a hopeful look.

Jim reached over and pulled Blair close. "Of course it is, idiot. I don't put up with vampires for just anyone." Sitting with Blair held close felt so damn right. When Maya had left, when Blair had gotten dosed with Golden, when Cho had died, and when Jim had found Blair lying dead on the campus grounds next to that fountain--each time had ended in one of them holding the other, and now Jim could admit that the rightness of it soothed his senses. Except one. He narrowed his eyes and took a deep breath. "Sandburg, are you screwing with your scent?"

"Sorry. Habit." Immediately Blair's scent shifted and the soft and warm notes of lust filled the air. It wasn't the hard and desperate smell that filled strip clubs and bars, but the softer form that Jim often caught around married couples. Jim buried his nose in Blair's hair and lost himself in the scent.

"Oh crap. The scent." Blair stopped.

"What about it?" Jim finally asked.

"I was using scent to lie, and I wonder if some part of you picked up on that. Oh man, nothing sets a va'nuuss off like lying. That's the cardinal sin, right up there with eating your own offspring in front of one."

Jim closed his eyes. He absolutely was not going to ask about cannibalistic demons that ate their children. It would ruin the mood. Instead he drew small circles against Blair's arm and soaked up his warmth.
Jim headed downstairs. He still had on his shirt from yesterday, but the wrist chains meant he couldn’t change. Another day that would have left him irritable. Today nothing could bother Jim too much. He hadn’t had sex with Blair, but he had slept with him. They hadn’t just been in the same bed, but Jim had put his arms around Blair and held him close. He’d soaked up all the pheromones Blair had put out, and Blair had allowed him to touch and kiss and explore, and he’d explored in return. One night of heavy petting and Jim was more sated than any sex he’d had during his ill-fated marriage.

He spotted Spike near the weapons cabinet and he headed that way. "Is Angelus around?"

"Wot? You think he's less brassed off than I am? You let Sandburg get killed."

"Yes, I did," Jim agreed. "And the next time we spar, I suspect you're going to leave a few more bruises for that, unless you plan on stringing me up and just taking a whip to my backside."

Jim held up his chained hands and looked at Spike. He didn't know what to expect, but Spike narrowed his eyes in a way that suggested a whipping wasn't out of the question. The danger built for long minutes, but then Spike poked his thumb toward the hallway that led to the kitchen.

"Before the kitchen, there's a door to the right that leads to the sparring rooms. Find 'em on your own." With that Spike strode across the lobby, his body tense and his movements jerky. He wanted to whip Jim, and part of Jim wanted some punishment for what he'd done to Blair. After they’d gotten back from Mexico, Jim had worked hard to put all that behind him, but now that the bandage had been ripped off the memory, the guilt returned. Blair might be willing to put it down to instinct, but Jim sure as hell wasn't willing to give himself that excuse.

He headed for the training rooms. The hall was long and a number of doors stood open. Jim gaped at what he found. The smaller rooms were stuffed full of weapons or books, all neatly lined up and waiting for use. It looked like a museum with all the ancient blades, except then Jim spotted a nice selection of rocket launchers and fully automatic weapons that definitely weren't legal for private ownership. Either the Army really liked them or the group was good at stealing. Really good. These were the sorts of weapons the military carefully tracked.

Jim kept going until the sounds of flesh hitting flesh told him where he would find the training room. He stopped in front of double doors, and immediately the sounds stopped. When Jim pushed the doors open, he found Angelus and Xander standing in the middle of a huge training mat in a room that most military bases would have envied. "I don't want to interrupt," Jim said.

Angelus considered him with yellow eyes for a moment before he turned back to Xander. "Again a'choi. Protect your legs." Rather than falling into a fighting stance, they both started circling each other with a sort of casualness Jim hadn't expected. They looked like they were out for a Sunday stroll as they paced the floor in a random pattern. Jim headed toward the end where a familiar woman sat on a bench painting her nails.

"Any, right?" Jim asked.

She looked up and studied him in ways that made Jim wonder if she was strange or attempting to sexually harass him. "And you’re the Sentinel."

"Are you planning to spar?" Jim sat on the side of the bench away from the vivid red nail polish
she had set out.

"I'm just here to watch sweaty men fight. I find it very satisfying."

Jim had no idea how to answer, so he watched Angelus and Xander. When they finally engaged, Angelus threw himself at Xander so violently that Jim bolted to his feet. A flurry of attacks and counter attacks followed. Jim had lived and breathed covert ops before leaving the Rangers, and he knew men who worshipped at the altar of hand-to-hand combat, but he'd never seen anything as vicious or brutal as the bout Angelus and Xander had going. Xander slammed his elbow into Angelus's nose so hard that Jim could hear the crunch and blood flowed over the mat.

"Ew," Anya complained. "I like sweat, not blood. Not unless I'm spilling the blood anyway."

Jim wondered if she was as ex-demon as everyone said because she seemed to still have rather demonic attitudes. Not that all demons were into bloodspill. Blair certainly wasn't. Jim still hadn't decided how much of his own violent nature traced back to potential demonic ancestors. He sat and watched the fight play out. He never doubted Angelus would win, but it took longer than Jim had expected. When Xander fought full out, he was one of the deadliest, most brutal fighters Jim had ever seen. It didn't fit his goofy, friendly persona. But eventually Angelus swept Xander's legs and then brought his fist down on Xander's chest hard enough that Jim flinched. He expected to see Xander call for a medic, but he just grunted and lay still as Angelus pinned him.

"Yeah, yeah," Xander said wearily. "I'm still not protecting my legs."

"You're doing better, a'choi." Angelus stood and pulled Xander up to his feet.

Jim stood. "I've never seen a special forces fighter who would be able to win against you," Jim said. Xander flashed him a brilliant smile. "But I suppose you don't spend much time fighting the military." At least Jim hoped that was true.

Angelus' yellow eyes made Jim feel uneasy, but he stood still under the gaze. Angelus and Xander came over, their workout clothes stained with blood and dark with sweat. Jim waited until they were close before he said, "I think you're right about my instincts. I could never explain how I felt to Blair because he kept calling me his Blessed Protector who would never hurt him."

"If he recognized the bond, then he should have been wary of the danger inherent in any bond."

"Not all bonds are dangerous," Xander said defensively.

Angelus gave him a look of fond exasperation. "And when I am in danger and the others try to keep you from the fight, what happens?"

"He turns psychotic," Anya answered.

Angelus's look turned far more deadly. "And we have you to thank for that, witch."

"Ex-demon," she corrected him, "and I just used the Watchers' lore. I didn't invent the bond myself. If I had, I would have created a far more inventive balance for all the benefits you get." She shrugged as if it meant nothing to her, but if Angelus were looking at Jim like that, Jim would be scrambling to placate him.

"Tell him what you know," Angelus ordered.

Jim turned to Anya. "Do you know something about Sentinels?"
"I have no idea," she said, "but I do know that another vengeance demon spent a lot of time bragging. He turned a whole family of va'nuss into humans to punish them for taking their own revenge too far. But this was back when humans were still proud of figuring out how to make fire."

"But if he turned them into humans, they wouldn't have the instincts anymore," Jim said. He understood her implication that he was descended from these cursed va'nuss, but it didn't make any sense.

"Demons like that have a lot of power," Anya said, "some people just aren't as good at making curses stick, especially when we're talking about generations going by. I build my curses to last, but not everyone who works for D'Hoffryn is that conscientious."

"D'Hoffryn?"

Xander answered Jim. "The grand poohbah of wish demons. That man has mojo in his mojo."

"Okay, but this is still just a theory," Jim pointed out. If this were a case he was working, he would not take it to a DA when all he had were coincidence and speculation.

Angelus caught the chain between Jim's hands. "The Army betrayed you, and last night you came to me specifically to tell me that. Why?"

Honesty worked so far, so Jim intentionally didn't edit his response. "To make it clear that I wasn't going to side with them, so that you would hopefully stop seeing me as the enemy."

"And is the Army your enemy?"

Jim's brain whited out. He wanted to say both yes and no. He understood that his commanders had made choices, and that not all military officers were to blame for a couple of greedy ones going rogue and taking jobs with the cartel. That wasn't any more logical than people hating all cops because some were dirty. However, his hate for all things military had made him walk away from his commission. He'd had to file an exception to get out early when he was career military, and he'd had so much attitude, that after a couple of therapy sessions the Rangers had been glad to see the backside of him.

Angelus jerked on the chain. "Exactly. Even now your instincts drive you, and you will not interfere with the alliances this clan makes." When Angelus turned and strode out, his grip on the wrist chains forced Jim to follow.

"I have no intention of attacking the tech guys Major Finn is sending," Jim said. Angelus simply pulled Jim down a set of steps into not a basement but a subterranean lair of some sort. The low ceilings and stone walls gave it a medieval vibe.

"Hey boss," Harmony said as she came out of a room. Angelus ignored her and pulled Jim through into the large space. Shit. Cells. Jim clenched his teeth as Angelus pulled him toward a large cage. He had a half wall separating him from the guy in the next cell, a man with dark floppy hair, a long face, and scruffy beard.

"I'll get him some bedding and stuff," Harmony said before she raced away. In the meantime, Angelus pulled a key out of his pocket. He was kind enough to unlock the wrist chains before he put Jim in a cell about the size of his living room back home. As cells went, it wasn't horrible. It was clean with a cot and toilet and sink. True, it wasn't done up like the guy in the next cell over. He had a large bed with a desk and a treadmill all shoved up against the walls.

"This isn't necessary. I've worked with the military without breaking anyone's necks."
"I willna take the chance," Angelus said before he strode out, leaving Jim in the locked cell.

"Well crap." Jim sank down onto the bunk.

"Welcome to the Twilight Zone," his neighbor said. "I'm Lindsey McDonald, the slave lawyer they keep in their basement." He sounded oddly cheerful about that.

Jim headed to the bars and offered his hand. "Jim Ellison."

"So I'm in here because I sold my soul to a law firm that traded me away to this clan. How about you?"

"Angelus believes I have va'nuss blood and I'll slaughter Major Finn's men if they come near me."

For a second, McDonald only blinked at Jim, his mouth open. "That's unexpected. Va'nuss blood? Really?"

Jim shrugged and went back to his bunk. "I didn't say he was right. I have no idea what sort of demonic ancestors would fall out of my family tree if you shook it. I don't plan to slaughter anyone, and I haven't wiped out any inhabited dimensions while seeking revenge, so the evidence is a little thin."

"Have you wiped out any uninhabited dimensions?" McDonald asked.

Jim stared at him blankly until McDonald swung his desk chair around and straddled it backward. "So va'nuss and a grudge against the Army. I take it you and the military did not end things on a happy note. Were you part of the Sunnydale Initiative?"

That was the group Miller came out of. If Jim had suffered the sorts of betrayals Miller had, vengeance might have been an option. "Nope. So are you the idiot who walked in here when Angelus had no soul as opposed to the soul-lite version that's running around now?"

McDonald grinned. "I am the idiot in question. But in my defense, saying no to Wolfram and Hart would have ended much worse. A little torture, a week or so hanging from chains, and then a transfer to this place is paradise compared to what Holland would have done to me. That is assuming Holland is still around. Angelus killed him."

"Wouldn't that imply he's not around?" Jim asked.

McDonald just smiled. Jim had a feeling he'd gotten a lot of things with that charming smile of his. "Darla killed Angelus, Drusilla killed Spike, and they're both still around. Harmony is endlessly frustrated that she was killed by a minion so low on the totem pole that no one knows his name, but she's still around."

"Yeah, I get your point," Jim said. In this crew dead didn't mean gone.

"Look what I brought," Harmony said as she carried in a load of fabric so high she couldn't see over it. "I'll get you a bed soon. Promise. Cordelia made me promise to clean out 409 and 411 first because we have paying customers coming in, but that won't take me long, and afterward I'll either see if we have a bed in storage or steal one out of one of the rooms. But you won't have to sleep on the bunk." She dropped the pile in front of the bars where Jim could reach it. "Do you need anything right now?"

Jim could have fought this unlawful imprisonment tooth and nail, but he suspected that Angelus wouldn't care about a hunger strike and the Army would cover for whatever the clan did. So it was
make the best of the situation or damage himself more than anyone else. "I haven't had any breakfast," Jim said.

Harmony smiled brightly. "I'm great with human food. What would you like? Pancakes? I can make them look like hearts."

"Bacon and eggs would be good, maybe some toast and orange juice on the side."

Harmony nodded so enthusiastically that her hair flopped around. "You got it. One big breakfast coming up. Oh, I need to get you a desk or table so you don't have to balance it on your knees. Okay, that may take a little time, but don't worry, I'm on it."

She hurried out. A vampire was making him breakfast and worried that he might have to balance food on his knees. McDonald was right about this being the Twilight Zone. Jim suddenly remembered something Blair had said.

"So, are you and Harmony together?"

McDonald grinned. "If you're interested in her...or me... I'm always up for a little variety."

"Not interested," Jim said in a flat tone.

"Your loss. So, Harmony hadn't said anything about Finn's guys coming down for a visit. Does this have something to do with Jenny Giles?"

"You sold your soul to an evil law firm. Do you really think I'm going to trust you with any information?"

"It can't hurt to try." McDonald grinned and leaned back in his chair, holding onto the wood to keep himself from falling backward on the floor. "Besides, I actually am a safe person to talk to or Spike would have shut down Harmony's visits. I doubt I'll ever leave this clan, at least not without encountering a permanent death first."

"You're rather cheerful about that."

McDonald shrugged. "Good sex, good bed." He gestured toward the computer. "Good porn and a variety of interesting legal cases to work on. Cordelia would be one hell of a lawyer if she ever stopped running Angelus's empire. Working for her certainly stretches my mental muscles enough to be a challenge. What else could a lawyer want?"

"Freedom."

McDonald snorted. "I used to be free. It involved a lot of poverty. Then Wolfram and Hart gave me a scholarship to law school, and I decided that freedom was a small price to pay."

"So you live in a cage?"

McDonald narrowed his eyes. "So are you, and yeah, they'll let you out of here after Finn's guys are gone, but you'll still be in a cage of sorts. You're clan."

Jim's gut clenched, but he couldn't argue the point. If he didn't fight his way free now, he would always have some tie to this clan. But then the military could still activate his commission at any time. Promoting him to major, a rank that he had dreamed about at one point, was just the salt in the wound. Knowing that he owed the same allegiance to the clan didn't bother him as much.

Maybe that was because he mentally put them in the same category as Naomi: Blair's family. When he'd married Caro, he'd put up with her father's snide comments about how a detective didn't make
as much money as a scientist. That had annoyed him more than all Angelus's veiled threats and posturing. While that wasn't logical, it was true. Ever since the fight where Spike had bested him, Jim couldn't come up with the same level of hate for the family.

Maybe some of that was the fact that Spike had showed restraint. He could have hurt Jim badly, and he'd chosen not to. He could have even crippled Jim and claimed it was an accident. During training, things happened. But as much as Jim wanted to dismiss his change in attitude to simple trust, he couldn't. He'd felt his instinct shift, and it wasn't the first time. Jim had devoted himself to Vice, but when his captain started making bad calls, putting Jim and others at risk all to protect his arrest rate while bringing down overtime costs, Jim had turned resentful. Yes, all the detectives had grumbled, but Jim had become so insubordinate and angry that he had nearly gotten fired. Simon's decision to bring him over to Major Crimes had saved him.

And then he'd kept that attitude until he decided Simon deserved respect, and after that, Jim had put all his trust in Simon. That had been one of the many factors that had ended his marriage with Caro. If Simon called, Jim would always put her needs aside to get the job done. He'd never put her first. He'd respected her, liked her... he'd even hoped to have kids with her one day, but he had relegated her to a less important part of his life that he'd labeled 'home'. He never dedicated himself to her the way he had to the military and then the police force. He'd never dedicated himself to her the way he had to Blair. But Blair rode with him, put his own life on the line for Jim. Blair was his partner in ways Caro had never been. She'd been second to Simon.

And how much of that was some demonic DNA in his genome?

He didn't like the idea, but he couldn't find the energy to condemn it. At least he didn’t blindly give his loyalty to the strongest leader. He had his ethics firmly in place, unlike Alex Barnes.

"Want to play a game of cards?" McDonald asked. He had turned the chair so the seat was between the end of his bed and the bars to Jim's cell. He sat on his bed and held the cards up.

Jim's first instinct was to refuse. He didn't want to accept this as normal. He wanted to rail against the fact that his new in-laws had locked him in a cell. However, looking back at some of his instinct-driven reactions, Jim couldn't blame Angelus. Hell, if Simon understood half of this maybe he'd have a better handle on why Jim always reacted badly to the FBI, since agents had screwed over his cases in the past. Every FBI agent carried the burden of that betrayal and Jim couldn't turn off his hatred for them any more than he could turn off his anger every time someone brought the Army up. He'd actually lied to federal agents to try to avoid working with them. Worse, he'd lied badly.

"Sure, why not," Jim said. He grabbed the end of his cot and dragged it over so he had somewhere to sit. He'd rail about unfair imprisonment later when there was someone around who might care. Maybe he could work on Miller. That man had enough apple pie in him to be offended by the injustice.
The Measure of a Man... or Woman

Blair stopped inside the door and stared. Jim could practically hear the man’s brain overheating. "Oh man. This is like hugely uncool." Blair said. He walked into the room, and Jim pushed back the TV tray table Harmony had brought with breakfast.

"At least the staff knows how to poach a decent egg," Jim said. The food was good although Harmony had clearly forgotten what a human meal looked like. He had enough food for three people. She'd brought three separate plates loaded with bacon, ham, poached eggs, scrambled eggs, fried eggs, and a variety of types of toast. Jim was just happy Blair was too pissed at the cell to go off on his cholesterol lecture.

"That's her form of comfort," McDonald said. "I gained twenty pounds before I talked her into making smaller meals and finding me a treadmill."

"Oh god." Blair seemed to have broken his brain. "I am finding Angel and killing him."

Jim reached through the bars and caught Blair's arm before he could run off and get himself in trouble. "You will not confront Angelus at all."

"Angelus? No way would I say anything to him. Angelus is like crazy scary. But Angel showed up this morning, and by now he should have his full on guilt going, and trust me, I know how to wrap Angel up into ethical knots." Blair narrowed his eyes. "By the time I’m done with him, he’s going to apologize for the next thirty years."

“Oh no he’s not,” Jim said firmly.

Blair narrowed his eyes. “Who are you and what have you done with Jim Ellison?”

“Har, har.” Jim played it off as a joke, but part of him really did wonder where the old human Jim Ellison was. Worse, he was starting to think he never had been as human as he had assumed. “Look, shorty, you and I are dangling on the edge of the family tree. Neither one of us is going to aggravate Angel, because Angelus is still in there. If you even think about getting on Angelus’s bad side, I’m going to put hair remover in your shampoo.”

“There is no way I’m leaving you in a frikken dungeon while the rest of the clan is upstairs researching va’nuss demons. It is totally not cool the way they are assuming that this is even possible.”

“Are you assuming it’s not?”

“Man, more like hoping.” From the way Blair grimaced, Jim got the feeling that Blair was on the va’nuss bus with everyone else. However then his expression turned fierce. “But I don’t care what they find. There is no way they are leaving you in here. And if you even try to defend this, I’m taking you home and hiring a de-programmer.”

The fact that Blair was making cult jokes amused Jim more than it should have. “Trust me, I am not thrilled with the situation. However, when Angelus asked me how I felt about the Army, I hesitated too long. That means he’s probably not going to take my word or your word when we promise that I don’t plan to eviscerate anyone.”

McDonald asked from the next cell, “Do you plan any ritual eviscerations?” The man sounded weirdly supportive of the idea. After giving McDonald a long incredulous stare, Jim turned his
attention back to Blair.

“Since this is about the Army, get Major Miller. Let’s see if we can’t get him to take up my case. So when does the Army arrive?”

“Um…”

Jim raised his eyebrows. For all of his loud protests about unfairness, apparently Blair was also a little concerned about Jim’s reactions. Jim crossed his arms. “I hate the FBI just as much as I hate the Army. In fact, pissing off the FBI is what got me assigned to that stupid conference. However, can you see me taking out my general hatred for all things federal on any individual agent?”

“Oh man, you might not want to ask that.”

“Sandburg!”

Blair held up both hands. “Hey, I get it. I do. But you are seriously assholish around anyone with the word ‘federal’ on the badge. The very first time I saw you work with a federal agent, you were ready to shoot her. You tried to lie and tell her that you weren’t Jim Ellison, which, may I point out, is the worst lie ever. Did you think that if you avoided her for 15 minutes that Simon would forget he had assigned you to work the case with her? The guys take bets on how long it’s going to take you to abandon the federal agent and make them walk back to the station. You are totally not on the same page with the whole inner agency cooperation that Simon keeps preaching. And if you don’t have Simon to rein you in…” Blair made a face.

“Do you seriously think I would kill one?” Jim didn’t even try to hide his angry.


“No one minds when Spike uses them for chew toys.” Jim’s expression dared Blair to contradict him on that.

McDonald laughed. “He’s got you there, Sandman.”

“Oh, shut up,” Blair said absent mindedly.

“Blair, I am not ever going to be thrilled with the Army, and I sure as hell don’t trust them. Considering that they reinstated my rank in order to keep better control over me, I don’t think that’s an unreasonable reaction. If I were 100% human with absolutely no instinctive reactions, I would still call them assholes.”

“Oh hell yes. That was hugely not okay. I get that.”

“And despite that, I don’t plan to kill any of them. So go get Major Miller so I can use this rank that I don’t want and order him to talk someone into letting me out.”

“I could—”

“No!” Jim cut Blair off before he could say more. The last thing Jim wanted was for Blair to fight his battles for him. He sighed. “Blair, I appreciate that you’re trying to help, but I have to figure out how to deal with your insane relatives on my own. So go get Major Miller.”

“Fine,” Blair said in an aggravated tone. “But if you get him in deep shit, I’m going to feed you tofu for a month.”
“Go.” Jim sat down on his bunk. Hopefully someone would spring him soon because he really didn’t want to sleep on sheets with little unicorns on them. Blair left, and Jim closed his eyes and groaned when McDonald turned up some stupid show with family members all blaming each other for a teenage daughter gone wild. He had enough family drama without watching more.

However since the cell was essentially McDonald’s home and Jim was just visiting, he locked down his aggravation and picked at the last of his breakfast. Going back to work was going to be a bitch after getting up around noon for however long he was here. Until Jenny Giles was neutralized and Jim had control over his spirit guide, he wasn’t going anywhere. And since he wanted both those goals met, maybe it was time to throw himself into making it happen.

He didn’t know anything about magical blockages, but Jim suspected that a few hours and the Army’s resources and he could track down Jenny Giles. No one in the family had spotted her cameras because they were used to relying on magic, and Jim suspected that Jenny Giles had the same flaw. She would have magically covered her tracks while leaving more mundane trace evidence. However, as long as he was locked in the basement, he wasn’t getting any closer to reclaiming his life.

He glanced over at McDonald. He did have an internet connection, but on the other hand, he was not only a lawyer, but one that admitted to selling his soul. Jim didn’t care what Angel thought of the man, Jim didn’t trust him for one second. He’d play gin with him, but that was as charitable as Jim would get.

By the time an hour had passed, Jim was starting to rethink his decision to shut McDonald out. He disliked inactivity under the best circumstances, and these didn’t come close to the best. He was saved from having to make that choice when a rather petite woman walked in the room, followed by Major Miller who stayed at the door.

Jim stood, and then he noticed that Miller had a tazer on his hip. So clearly there had been discussion about what to do if Jim decided to turn homicidal. Jim wasn’t sure if he should take that as a compliment or an insult. They saw him as a credible threat, but they sure didn’t have much faith in his self-control.

“Miller,” Jim said, and he let enough of his aggravation leech into his tone that Miller flinched.

“Sir,” he answered. “This is Willow Rosenberg from Sunnydale.”

Jim narrowed his eyes as he recognized her name from the reports. “You helped Jenny Giles attack Angel and the others.”

She blushed, but she also raised her chin. “Yes, I did. I didn’t intend for her to use the spell that day, but I did help her research it and I hadn’t set up defenses around my magic even when I knew Jenny sometimes borrowed power from me.”

It was a more honest answer than Jim had anticipated, and he looked at Major Miller to see how he was reacting. After all, it was a conflict over this spell that had led Finn to kick Miller out of his unit. Miller gave him a shrug that Jim couldn’t interpret.

“So, you came down here to gloat?” Jim guessed.

“What? Goddess, no!” Rosenberg’s eyes got large. “I just wanted to... okay, please don’t take this the wrong way, but the computer intelligence team that came down—they’re my friends—my team. And if you go all vengeancy on them, I will totally turn you into a rat. And yeah, I’ll probably unrat you later, but these are good people, and they don’t deserve to get the blame for
what other not so good people have done. And I know I was part of the not-so-good category for what I did with Jenny, and if you want me to leave, say the word and I will, but no going after the team.” She pressed her lips together and gave him a fierce look that was a little out of place on a petite redhead. Jim was fairly sure he had shoes older than her, so her intimidation factor, magic or not, was a little low.

“So, are you a Ranger?” Jim asked. She didn’t look the sort but then in covert operations having an innocent look could open a lot of doors.

“Me? Heavens no. I’m more like Army adjacent.”

“Civilian contractor?”

Miller answered for her. “Ms. Rosenberg handles any magics that go with the computer, and a fair bit of magic that isn’t related to technology. She actually doesn’t have a reputation for turning people into rats, but she probably could.”

“A chip off the old Jenny?” Jim said with a fair bit of malice. She had once been Jenny Giles’ ally, and Jim was painfully aware of the possibility she was a double agent now. If he were Giles, he would want to have an inside man, and none of the Hyperion crew looked vulnerable. The Sunnydale crew would be the most logical weakness. So he needed to see how she would react.

Again, Rosenberg blushed. “Okay, I deserved that. I know I was big with the wrong, but I would never help Jenny now. Her spell almost killed my best friend in the world.”

That rubbed Jim the wrong way. “It did kill two fathers.” He spat the words out, and Rosenberg dropped her gaze to the floor before straightening back up and looking him in the eye.

“Yes, it did. And I will always feel guilty for that because I made it possible for Jenny to cast that spell. But you have to keep in mind that I was eighteen, and she was my teacher, and I had a case of teacher worship that kept me from really thinking about what she was doing.” Her gaze darted to the side, and he could see the hairs of her eyebrows rise as they arched minutely. Her shoulders even came up a fraction of an inch. She felt shame, defensiveness, and from the bitter scent she put off, any number of other negative emotions, but he couldn’t smell or see any sign of deceit.

“And now?”

Rosenberg gave him a crooked smile. “I’m not eighteen. And I am a teacher now, so I don’t have a lot of teacher worship going. I happen to know that when they go into the faculty lounge, they can be really bitter and sometimes creepy. Not all of them! But teachers are way less pedestaly than I thought when I was a teenager. And more than that, I’m careful about what I do with my power now. And that’s good because as powerful as I was back then, I’m way more powerful now. Like way more. Scary more.” She smiled at him sweetly, but Jim got a cold shiver up his spine.

“Somehow I don’t doubt that.”

“Luckily when you work for the Army, power comes with ethics classes and therapy, so the only way I’ll use my power against you is if you try to touch my team. None of them had anything to do with the things that went wrong when you were in the Rangers, and none of them were part of the whole Jenny mess. We’re here because Xander said that Jenny is using computers and cameras and things we can trace. We’re not here to get in a blood feud with a va’nuss. Not even if you’re only a little bit va’nuss.” Rosenberg held up her finger and thumb an inch apart.

“I thought you were a teacher.”
She smiled brightly. “I am. I teach computers at the community college. My therapist says it’s
good for me to be interested in different things because I have a habit of getting a little obsessive.
Besides it’s a lot easier to keep the secret identity as a fighter of things that go bump in the night
when I have a paycheck that I can actually admit to having. I haven’t actually told my parents that
the government pays me for defending the Hellmouth from demons. I’m pretty sure it wouldn’t go
over well. So do you promise there will be no vengeance?“

“I’ve no intention of liking your guys, but there are a lot of people in this world I don’t like, and I
haven’t taken vengeance yet. So you have my word.” Jim put his hand through the bars. Rosenberg
moved closer, and after a second, she put her hand in his and shook solemnly.

“You’re going to try and talk them into sparring so you can kick their asses, aren’t you?”

“Yep,” Jim agreed.

She rolled her eyes. “Soldiers. So predictable. Just keep in mind that if you break them, I’m going
to get mad and rats will be in your future.” With that, she seemed to think the conversation was
over. She turned around and headed out of the room.

“That went well,” Major Miller commented.

“Are you being serious or sarcastic?”

“No blood was spilled, so I think I’m serious.” Miller took keys out of his pocket. “Sir, I promised
that I would keep you in the hotel, so if you decide to take off since you’re not cuffed, it is going to
land on my head. I would appreciate some reassurance that I’m not about to screw myself.”
Despite his caution he moved to unlock the cell door.

“Have they found a solution for why I can’t control my spirit guide?”

“No.” Miller looked at him oddly.

Jim pursed his lips for a second. “Soldier, I have a malfunctioning weapon that is capable of doing
great damage, a weapon which I am also inadequately trained to handle. What do you think the
odds are that I’m going to walk into the middle of Los Angeles?”

“Good point.” Miller turned and headed for the door, leaving Jim free to follow.
Jim looked up when at the sound of a heartbeat. He still had not gotten used to the fact that many members of the family lacked them, but he was getting there. Xander stood in the doorway of the office Jim and Blair had claimed, and Angel stood right behind him. Jim could immediately tell the difference in how Angel held himself and his facial expressions. The idea of having to share a body with someone who had such different values was a horror to Jim, yet most of these people acted like Anya had done the vampire a favor. Jim was starting to think that Xander's comment that demons were just weird had some validity.

"How's it going?" Xander asked.

Blair looked up from his computer, a highlighter smudge on one cheek and his glasses perched on his nose. "We're making progress."

"As long as a judge doesn't ask how we got these records," Jim said. Rupert Giles hadn't offered much when Jim had asked about his ex-wife. Either he knew very little about Jenny Giles' personal preferences or he had no intention of helping them stop her. Jim didn't actually care which was true, because either meant he lacked the information he needed. So Rosenberg had taken it on herself to hack all the Giles' financials. He knew every debit charge, every purchase, every debt the couple ever had. Rosenberg had been convinced that Rupert Giles had simply been too busy to pay attention to his wife, and considering that she was friends with the man, Jim had decided to not call her on the bullshit.

"The military judges are pretty good about not getting too picky," Xander said.

"So they don't care about civil liberties and privacy," Jim translated.

Xander's eyes got large. "Wow. You know, I never thought about it like that. That makes it sound definitely uncool." Angel looked down at Xander with concern in his expression, but then Xander shrugged. "I might care about that when we aren't up against someone who declared war on us."

Jim had to admit that Xander had a point. The Giles woman was playing with fire. However, he was still uncomfortable with how easily everyone in the group dismissed the rights of suspects. Maybe that wasn't an issue when he wasn't involved or when they didn't have Rosenberg and the weight of the Army on their side. Private individuals didn't have an obligation to protect others' civil liberties. But Jim was a police officer, and Rosenberg had a secret FISA court in her corner.

"I would be more comfortable if illegally obtained evidence didn't go back to the government where it might be allowed into court against all the rules of evidence," Jim said.

Xander looked up at Angel. "That's seems fair, right?"

After a second, Angel nodded, and Xander gave him a huge smile.

"Thank you." Jim couldn't believe that he was stuck defending the rights of the accused, but someone had to. Justice wasn't just about chasing down the criminal any way he could. He pushed his chair back from his own computer. "We are making progress here. I have a number of preferences that are specific enough that we should be able to start hitting the streets and seeing if the vendors have seen her. Once we figure out which stores she's using, we can start doing geographical profiling and pin her down to an area."

"And then vampire senses can take over," Blair finished for him. "No way does she get to fuck
with this family."

"Huge with the not waying," Xander agreed. "And Wesley has progress too. He has a spell that will check for va’nuss, and if it’s positive, he thinks he knows how to remove any magical blocks."

Jim wasn't sure how he felt about that. Suspicions were one thing, but he didn't need to have a confirmation that he was part berserker demon. "What if the test is negative?"

"Ahn is going to be hugely disappointed," Xander said in a conspiratorial tone. "Apparently the demon who cursed the va’nuss is a big muckety-muck who has made fun of her for getting undemonified, so if it turns out his curse didn't hold and the human rubbed off after a few hundred generations, she is going to be huge with the making fun of him. Now I would not make fun of a vengeance demon, but apparently Anya is still familiish with D'Hoffryn's group because she gets away with it."

"Oh man, she is playing with fire," Blair said softly.

"Trust me, we have all warned her. Warned her, threatened her, begged her." Xander shrugged. "Apparently you can take the demon out of the girl, but you can't take the girl out of the demonic way of seeing the world. At least we've made progress. ‘I'm almost sure she has given up on the goal of castrating any local politicians. She was really into it there for a while.'"

"Castrating?" Jim might be bending his sense of justice a little, but no way would he allow one of these people to target innocent humans.

"Infidelity is her hot button," Xander said. "Every time some politician gets caught cheating, she gets nostalgic for her good old vengeance days. Once or twice she tried to get us to help with a little castration, but surprisingly, the rest of the clan is not really thrilled with the idea of making someone eat their own balls. So, are you ready to give Wesley a little blood?"

Jim looked over at Blair. If this test came up positive, it impacted both their lives. He wanted to know how Blair felt about it, but the man wasn't putting out any signals. His body language, his facial expression, and even his scent was devoid of any emotion. If they'd been alone, Jim probably would have confronted Blair about that, but instead he stood. "Let's get it over with."

Angel stepped back and since he had his hand on Xander's shoulder, he pulled Xander back with him. Angel was a hell of a lot quieter than Angelus, and Jim wasn't sure he liked that change. He wasn't sure what Angel was thinking, and that was uncomfortable. He followed them out into the hall, and Blair trailed behind.

"Chief, you okay?" Jim asked softly.

"Yeah. Totally. I'm just thinking about all the times I made comments about your Blessed Protector syndrome."

Jim's guts tangled a little. "And now you think it might be more of a psychopathic syndrome?"

Sadly that matched Jim's behavior during the Alex affair, and it definitely matched Alex herself.

"Whoa, no way!" Blair caught Jim's arm. "You are still my great protector. I'm making fun of my own cluelessness because man, I know better."

Jim raised an eyebrow. "Because I'm a demon?"

"Hey! So am I. And both of us are human more than demon, so don't poke that button," Blair's scent shifted toward aggravation, which was much better than the dull nothingness of earlier. "And
you're stuck with me no matter what this test shows." Blair moved to Jim's side and leaned close.

A cold knot of ice thawed in Jim's heart and he slung his arm over Blair's shoulders. "I guess my drains will have to learn to deal with the hair."

"Asshole," Blair whispered, but Jim steered him down the hallway where Angel and Xander had vanished. He was guessing that they'd headed to Wesley's main office. When they reached the lobby, Jim stopped dead. A whole troupe of dog-faced demons stood in front of the counter. Amber was checking them in while Cordelia occasionally glanced over at the drama as they all tried to crowd closer to the counter.

"Cool. I don't know that type of demon. I wonder if they're the sort to swap stories," Blair said.

Jim steered him toward the corridor that led to Wesley's office. "Forget it, short stuff. We have our hands full without you staring a feud with Fido."

Blair snorted. "And calling them Fido wouldn't cause a feud?"

"I didn't say it to their faces," Jim said. A half second later he realized the flaw in his logic. If Angelus was right, Jim's senses came from having demonic blood. If other people had demonic blood, their senses might be just as well developed. He asked Blair, "If demons have better senses, why didn't you ever assume I might have some demonic ancestors?"

"Because the whole thing with Sentinels is that they didn't have a demonic background. They arose spontaneously in a part of the world that was definitely demon-lite. And demons tend to track all their lines. My uncle knew he was my uncle because he could smell my father's genes. And even though my father didn't want a kid, he told his family that he'd sired a son. Demons are big about tracking that stuff. At least some are. Vampires sometimes get a bit of a reputation because they reproduce a little indiscriminately."

"Do they?"

"Well, not in this family, but the typical vampire? Sure. Man, if you need someone to hold open a door, just take your next meal and turn them into a vampire. So not cool."

They walked into Wesley's office. He sat behind a pile of books higher than his head. Angel and Xander were on his couch, and everywhere Jim could smell Harmony. She had even left a little glass unicorn on one of Wesley's shelves. Clearly she had more than one sexual partner, but given the way Blair had talked about this group when they'd been back in Cascade, Wesley and McDonald might be sleeping together too. No wonder they kept it in the family. One STD could take out the whole clan.

"Right. There you are." Wesley stood up. "This is a rather straightforward potion, but if you have no va'nuss blood, you might experience some discomfort and a temporary change of skin color."

"Skin color?" Jim hadn't expected that. "And how much discomfort?"

Wesley kept his gaze on the book. "The discomfort is described as a sunburn, and there could be an after effect that causes some blue staining of the skin, but the records are clear that it is temporary."

Jim had seen the devastating effects of a serious sunburn, so that wasn't all that reassuring. However, he couldn't live with ignorance. If he had to suffer a little to get a real answer—an answer about who he was and why he had turned on Blair—an answer about where his powers came from—then he would.
“Let’s do it.” Jim took a step forward.

“Whoa, hold on. What a demon calls discomfort can be fucking terrifying for a human,” Blair interrupted. “Demons are the archetype of the macho guy saying ‘that didn’t hurt’ when you hit him with a two-by-four. I think we should get a little clarification on the whole discomfort part.”

Wesley looked up. “I assure you there is nothing that would indicate that a human couldn’t bear the pain.”

Xander spoke up. “Yeah, but remember what happened after Wolfram and Hart’s covert ops team broke Graham? A human could handle the healing spell, and maybe he’s lucky enough to not remember that night, but the rest of us can’t forget the screaming and the shrieking and the blood-curling screaming.”

Jim was starting to wonder if Xander had actually managed to pass English class or if someone had cast a spell on his senior English teacher back in high school. “Listen, Chief, I don’t care if I end up screaming. We need to know the truth, and if that means some pain, it won’t be the first time I’ve endured a little.”

Blair rolled his eyes. “And now you do your macho impression. Testosterone poisoning… man, it’s not a pretty way to go.”

“My choice,” Jim said sharply. Blair frowned, but he didn’t voice any more objections. If this spell worked, Xander had said they might be able to get Jim’s spirit guide unblocked. That was step one in his quest to earn his freedom back. As much as he was starting to respect this family, he didn’t like being forced to stay. And if reaching his goal required pain, Jim would pay that price. Every damn time he’d pay that price. Jim focused on Wesley. “What do I need to do.”

Wesley looked over at Angel, and Jim turned that direction as well. After a second, Angel nodded without saying a word. He had the mime impersonation down well. Wesley pulled open one of his desk drawers. “I prepared a vial. The spell requires only that you drink it at once, and given what it smells like, that might be a difficult task. However, once you have imbibed, we should know within the hour. A va’nuss’s biology will shrug off the herbs within the potion. A human will turn a shade of blue, much like a human might react to ingesting silver or silver dust.”


Wesley blinked at him, but Jim’s brain was stuck on werewolf. Werewolves were real? His brain could not handle any more rearranging, but Blair’s family did seem determined to destroy any illusions Jim might still cling to.

Wesley cleared his throat. “I suspected humans suffering from argyria are mine workers who are exposed to unhealthy air due to unethical and dangerous working conditions.”

“Oh, that makes sense.” Xander nodded. “One of the guys I go to school with asked us to help out with remodeling his house, but when I got there, it was a 1950s cottage with original finishes, and when I asked for an asbestos test, he outright refused. God forbid that my desire for intact lungs interfere with his money.” Xander snorted in disgust.

“He put you at risk?” Angel growled the words, and it was the first emotion Jim had seen since the soul had returned.

Xander patted him on the arm. “Stand down, big guy. He did not put me at risk because I told him to bite me. My lungs are worth way more than his house. I walked. But other guys—guys that
needed the money—they were totally in there ripping out linoleum like morons.”

“As much as I enjoy getting completely off-topic,” Wesley said in a tone that sounded suspiciously like an unhappy school teacher, “this potion might create the appearance of argyria in a pure human, but the similarity is pure coincidence. It will not cause any long term harm.”

“So I won’t stay blue, and we have a good cover story if I’m blue longer than you assume,” Jim summarized. He held his hand out for the vial.

“That would be accurate.” Wesley surrendered it.

“You so don’t have to do this,” Blair said in a sing-song voice.

Jim ignored him and took the top off the vial. The smell was a cross between durian fruit and a sour kitchen washcloth that was left wadded up in the bottom of the sink to grow a new generation of killer bacteria. Jim had to grab his dial for smell and brutally crank it down. Even Angel looked fairly ill, and he pulled Xander toward the exit. Rather than expose all of them to the noxious brew for too long, Jim upended the vial and drank as fast as he could.

And then he waited.
“Are you okay?” Blair asked.

Jim glared at him. “For the thousandth time, I’m fine.”

After grimacing, Blair clarified his question, “I was actually asking if you’re okay with being okay. I mean, you’re not—”

“Human?” Jim finished, his voice dark.

Blair narrowed his eyes. “Your enlightenment is tiny and shrinking by the minute.” Blair held up a finger and thumb. “Blue. You’re not blue. And you’re way more human than I am.”

“And what are the odds that I could be some demon other than va’nuss?” Jim asked.

“Not good,” Blair said in a flat tone. “Do you remember when Naomi made the whole loft smell like sage.”

“It’s hard to forget.”

“She might have used the sage to hide the smell of a reveal spell. She hit most of the major demonic families that could pass for human.”

“So, I’m va’nuss.” Jim gritted his teeth.

“Seriously. Get over yourself. The closest Anya can pin it down, the whole va’nuss curse happened back in the twelfth century. I still have full blood demonic family walking around, so if you even start in on this humancentric world view again, I’m going to start plotting ways to make you fucking miserable. Got it?” Blair crossed his arms over his chest and turned his glare up to about a thousand.

Jim recognized defeat when he was staring it in the eyes. He held his hand out. “Come here.”

While Blair’s expression was unhappy, he moved off the chair and moved toward Jim on the couch. Jim and Blair had been moved to a new room so Xander could repair the damage from Jim’s fight with Faith, but the new room was even nicer, so Jim suspected Cordelia wasn’t too upset, even if she had threatened him in low tones that definitely reminded him of a mob enforcer. Blair sat next to Jim on the overstuffed couch, and Jim draped his arm around Blair’s shoulders. “I’m going to be weird about this for a while. I can’t help that.”

“You could try.”

“I could,” Jim said. “And I’m trying. But none of this is easy.”

“Oh man, understatement of the year,” Blair said quietly. “And Angelus is going to be giddy. I’m not sure I want to be around for that floor show.”

“I would rather stop Giles before she plays her game again.”

“Wow that sounds weird.”

Jim tensed at the idea that Blair was afraid of Jim’s temper now. After all, unless Wesley had screwed up the potion, there was a very good chance he had some serious mental instability and
obsession in the DNA. “What sounds weird?” Jim asked in the blandest tone of voice he could manage.

“Giles,” Blair said with a huff, which didn’t actually make sense. “Giles is the tweedy library guy who accidentally gutted Faith emotionally, but he always tried his best. From her stories, I get the feeling that he has a good heart under a few loose screws.”

“And Jenny Giles has screws that have fallen out altogether.”

“Totally.” Blair leaned into Jim, and the shared body heat soothed Jim’s nerves. “Jenny just came later. I still think of her as Jenny Calendar. Xander used to call me and tell me how much it freaked him out that she used to tell him how smart he was and offer to tutor him in computers.”

“Please tell me that wasn’t some creepy attempt to have sex with a minor.”

“Whoa. No way. No, she is Roma, and it was her family that cursed Angelus in the first place. I think she was trying to make friends with Xander to get closer to Angel. Apparently her family sent her there to keep an eye on Angel in case the soul decided to fly off.”

“So she was evil from the beginning and Mr. Giles fell for it.”

Blair was silent for a long time, so Jim assumed he disagreed and was marshalling his arguments. “My cousin Whistler tried to convince Angel that his soul was in danger of falling off and that he had to get away from his friends and family.”

“And?” If a person’s soul was slippery, that seemed reasonable. Part of Jim worried that if Incacha had bound Jim’s Sentinel powers, it was because there was some threat there. If Jim turned into another Alex, he would be a danger to everyone around. However, Jim trusted that Spike and Angel would kill him if that’s what it took to protect Blair and the others. Without them, Jim would not only take off, but he’d set up in the most distance corner of the woods he could find and tell others to stay the hell away.

“And? Man, since when does running away solve anything?” Blair jabbed Jim in the stomach.

“Prison is about removing people from society because they aren’t safe. I’m telling you right now that if I am not safe to be around, either find me a nice deserted island or let Spike take care of it fast.”

Blair pulled away and sat staring at Jim for an uncomfortably long time. Finally he hauled off and punched Jim in the arm. Hard. “You are the same fucking thoughtless ass you were before we knew you had demon blood. You are not fucking dying, and if you try, I’m fucking following you. Got it?” Blair punctuated his point with another punch to Jim’s arm.

“Hey! Domestic abuse.” Jim caught Blair’s arm when he threw a third punch.

“Don’t even go there,” Blair warned darkly. “Whistler wanted Angel away from this family so he could be a champion in the war between cacodeamon and eudeamon and their crazy versions of end of the world. Whistler is very into eudeamon philosophy, and I respect that he has a right to follow his religious beliefs, but Whistler and Jenny Giles are into trying to end all evil. So I already have too many idiots obsessed with perfection in my life. I don’t need any more. You are too cranky to be perfect, and you’re still going to do dumb shit that hurts me, and I’m going to do stupid shit that hurts you and we’ll figure this out together. So if you even think about looking for a desert island, I will kick your ass.”

The threat was a little amusing, but the fear that had sunk into his heart eased.
“You will, huh?” Jim asked.

Blair huffed and flopped down so he pressed into Jim’s side. “I will, even if I have to ask Spike to hold you. Unless you’re jumping on the ending-the-world bandwagon with Jenny and Whistler. I happen to like this world too much to trade it in for a bland happy-happy, joy-joy version of Armageddon. So if you are looking to end the world, we’ll find a desert island together, somewhere far from any world-ending portals.”

“Is this related to that weirdness when Angelus lost his soul for real?” When Jim had read that part of Miller’s report, he felt his hair turning gray.

“Oh hell yeah. That was the last time I came down. I really should visit without the potential world-ending disasters, but it does seem like I only find time for the clan when Xander is getting cursed by wish demons and having a sexual crisis at the same time or when Jenny is trying to end the world. Although Jenny’s world ending would be more pleasant than some other versions.”

Jim had read that report too. Jenny had tried to end the world before Jim had met Blair. Back then, Blair had still been in the warehouse that Angel had bought so Blair would have a space large enough for Faith to train. The drug lab and explosion and the move from the warehouse into Jim’s loft had all happened later. “Jenny was backing the happy demon version of hell.”

“First, not hell—home. It would be a very happy home. A happy, bland, home with no opinions or diversity or stress or unhappiness or choice. And yeah, that sounds a little like hell, but eudeamon like The Powers that Be are doing their version of helping. I just choose to believe they’re full of shit.”

“Because they are.”

“Hell, yes,” Blair agreed. “But the point I was trying to make before all that detouring was that Jenny Giles is actually trying to do her version of good. I think. At least she started trying to do good, although she’s lost so much she may just be going for revenge at this point.”

“Her intent doesn’t matter, not if the result is putting not only the family but the entire world at risk. I can’t believe the world almost ended, and I didn’t even know the battle was going on.”

“Yeah, but the good news is that you wouldn’t have noticed it if The Powers that Be got their version of world ending. One day you would have been a vice cop and the next you would have wondered why anyone bothered carrying weapons and you would have started smiling at everyone and walking through life like you were stoned. It would have been very peaceful.”

“No one wants peace for peace’s sake,” Jim said firmly. “Some demon would have benefited.”

“Probably,” Blair said. “Which is still better than the last world-ending they had up on the hellmouth. They had a goddess who wanted to suck Earth into a chaos dimension where people would have been tortured and hunted to extinction.”

Jim pressed his eyes closed. He hadn’t heard about that. “Look, Chief, I’m not sure my brain can take much more, so let’s stick with Jenny Giles and her happy demons. Right now I don’t care if she’s still trying to get Angel back into the Armageddon game or seeking revenge—we need to stop her. I would prefer by arresting her. So we need to get back on track and see if Rosenberg was able to use any of those hacking skills to find where Jenny is shopping.” He went to stand, but Blair was still wrapped around his side like a hippy octopus, so Jim couldn’t.

“This is a new world, man. And every world has its rules. Arresting people is not a really a
vampire thing to do.”

“They can learn,” Jim said dryly.

“Okay, let’s talk demon communities. LA is like the safest major US city outside of the northwest, which is like a demonic no-go zone.”

“I read Miller’s report,” Jim said. “Angel’s crew is effective. Hell, Angelus was just as effective, but I doubt he actually cared that he was saving humans.”

“Yeah, probably not.” Blair admitted. “But as long as Angel is like the big boss, other demons are going to stay on his good side. But if it gets out that Angel needs the hellmouth crew to clean up his mess, that is going to cause all sorts of trouble. So if Angel and Spike, or just Spike, decide to take a more fatal approach, just don’t get all weirdly legal about it.”

“Weirdly legal?” Jim was fairly sure that avoiding premeditated murder was not weird.

“Demons are about status, man. It’s all about who’s stronger, and Angel and Spike can’t afford to be seen as turning to weak humans for answers.”

“They turn to Cordelia and Xander.”

Blair snorted. “Man, no one thinks those two are weak. Absolutely no one.”

There was a flaw in that logic. “I know Xander is a damn good hand-to-hand fighter, but if I could use my spirit guide, I could beat him.” And while Jim had no intention of fighting an untrained woman, he was sure he could take Cordelia even without his cat.

“Don’t bet on it,” Blair said. “Man, Maat is one of the old ones. She’s a fucking god, and when she tried to trick Xander into helping bring about the happy-happy world ending, he out-thought her by going to Angelus and giving him the soul spell. Anya is famous for making wishes backfire so everyone is miserable, and he managed to get a happily ever after with the man he loves, and a cure for his short human lifespan. Hell, Xander outmaneuvered Whistler when he was only sixteen or seventeen. Whistler is right in the middle of scaring the shit out of Angel about how his soul comes off if he has a moment of perfect happiness, and Xander sails in and points out that the stick up Angel’s ass is way too big for him to ever be perfectly happy. Xander has this weird common sense genius thing that makes him poke the center of someone’s big plot and let all the hot air out of it. Demons do not fuck with him.

“And Cordelia? Oh man, that woman knows people in a dozen different dimensions. She is like a therapist what with knowing all the family secrets and who doesn’t get along and who owes who money or blood debts or spawn. Clans would die to fight for her. Hell, when they rescued Fred—she’s off at university right now, but you’ll meet her eventually—there was this demon who had too much human in him and had always been sort of shunned until he became this champion. Anyway, long story, but she ripped him such a new asshole that he fell in love with her and followed her back to this dimension. Spike had to drive him away, and Groo still does the worship from afar thing. Again, demons do not fuck with her.”

“You’re kidding.”

“Oh, hell no. Those two are like icons. Demons in LA have a way easier time marrying humans now because they point to Cordelia and Xander and point out that humans can be just as fucking terrifying as demons. It’s broken down some serious cultural barriers. It’s totally amazing the way the belief systems around humans have shifted.”
“But it would be different if Rosenberg and her soldiers arrested Jenny?” Personally Jim had been more wary of Rosenberg than Cordelia. Power clung to her in ways that made the hairs on Jim’s arm stand up.

“Totally different. I’m not telling tales, but Willow has made some major-ass errors. She lost some idiosyncratic credit with demons, especially after her participation in the demonic genocide spell. She lost more when she submitted to human arrest and trial.”

Jim sighed. “Sport, I can’t set out to kill someone.”

“I get it. I do. And I would never ask you to, only maybe don’t stand in the middle if Spike makes a different choice.”

Jim frowned. He didn’t like the direction this was taking. Murder was murder, and having the law or righteous vengeance or even justice on your side didn’t change that. “I’ll talk to him about why I believe killing is wrong.”

“Yeah, good luck with that. Spike’s morality is a little limited by his lack of a soul,” Blair said. He stood up and headed for the door. “But you’re right that Willow has probably found something. So if we don’t get down there, we aren’t going to have any say in what happens next. Coming?” Blair stopped at the door and looked back.

Jim stood. “What if I appealed to Angel and not Spike?”

“Your chances of success go way up, but fair warning—Angel’s soul is a little rusty, so when you give him moral rules he tends to get stuck in overdrive and take things badly.”

“Going into overdrive about avoiding murder would be a good thing.”

“Yeah, I used to think that about Angel going to church, too. Time proved I was a moron,” Blair warned, and then he headed for the stairs.
When Jim came down the stairs, Graham was leaning against the counter, watching. Jim imagined that he was still twitchy considering that Spike had threatened to take it out of Graham’s hide if Jim took off. That wouldn’t have stopped Jim, but the fact that he couldn’t control his power or his spirit animal did. This hotel was full of crazy people, but all of them seemed to believe that va’nuss were dangerous, and Jim had no intention of going outside until he understood any potential danger.

Cordelia leaned against the desk. “The others want to see you in the large practice room.”

“The others?” Blair asked. He had followed Jim down and now he made a beeline for her. “Has someone spotted Jenny?”

“I don’t get involved in these dramas. I have enough work keeping up with this hotel. If I stopped every time there was some world-ending disaster, this business would fail inside a month. So go. Shoo. Ask Spike and Angel.”

Jim raised his eyebrows. The woman did invest a lot of energy in coming off as uncaring, but then she was always down here keeping track of the comings and goings. And after Blair’s discussion of how Cordelia and Xander had as much power as demons, Jim wasn’t sure why she worked so hard to look like she didn’t care about anything. This family. Jim figured a battalion of therapists wouldn’t be able to make sense out of them.

“Come on, Chief,” Jim said as he headed for the room where he’s seen Angelus and Xander spar. They headed through the kitchen where Xander had his head in the fridge.

“Wow. If they found Jenny, I’m really not sure how I feel about that,” Blair said with a frown. “I would argue that they should let you arrest her, only I’m not sure how I feel about the military taking custody. I don’t have a whole lot of faith in them.”

Jim snorted, but honestly he didn’t know how to handle this. After closing the refrigerator, Xander followed. “I know what you mean. Any time I am on the side of the Daleks, I feel a little morally shaky, but exterminate might be the best solution here. I’ve already been around for her first attempt to end the world, and I would like to avoid a third round of this. Seriously, there should be a one-Armageddon per bad guy rule, and she way over her limit.”

“It does seem like we’re having more world-ending than we should,” Blair said. His tone sent a shiver up Jim’s back.

“Meaning?” Jim asked.

Xander pushed open the door to the practice room. “That we have been running a little close to the edge lately.”

“Oi. What happened now?” Spike asked. He had been leaning back against the wall, but now he pushed off and stretched his head from one side to the other. His body was inhuman and all predator.

“Other than Jenny?” Xander asked. “Oh, I don’t know. We had Ma’at and the Powers that Be and then the Hellmouth has nearly come open two or three times with the Master and Glorificus. That is a lot of world ending badness.”
“Too much,” Blair said. “I mean, when Xander lays it all out, doesn’t that seem a little heavy on the world ending?”

“Bloody hell. Do you lot not have enough to worry about that you have to go digging up problems?” Spike immediately lost interest and went back to leaning against the wall. Now Jim noticed that Wesley was kneeling on the floor in front of a pentagram drawn on the wood floor with a huge brass bowl sitting at one of the points.

Angel stood off to the side, and now he spoke. “They’re right. It’s been since the 1780s or 1790s since the forces that wanted to end the world have been this strong.”

Jim frowned. That didn’t make sense unless something was pushing all these forces to act. “Why? What’s making it happen now?”

 Spike snorted. “Mate, the universe doesn’t explain itself. We just wait for the world ending to start, and we bloody shut it down. And if we can’t, then we pack up and find another dimension.”

Jim stared at the vampire. It had never occurred to him that the clan had plans to move to another dimension, but it made sense. Jim usually did have backup plans in case a plan failed. He had secret identities and hidden accounts he could use to vanish. But none of his contingencies included abandoning the planet.

“Why the hell do you think we need Sandburg close when the shite starts hitting the fan?” Spike asked. If some hell dimension spills out, I don’t want to be fighting through dragons and hordes of demons to bloody get to him. Or you for that matter.”

Jim draped an arm over Blair’s shoulders. Spike might be a vampire, but Jim had no doubt he would fight through any obstacle to get to a family member. It was a heady feeling, the idea that someone would put their immortality at risk because they wouldn’t leave him behind. “If something did happen, I’d drag Blair down here one way or another.”

Wesley cleared his throat. “Yes, well if we can’t unbind your powers, the chances of you surviving a demon horde are abominably low. However, this spell should solve that. It might be uncomfortable, but it should remove any blocks that have been placed on your memory or powers.” Wesley stood and brushed chalk off his hands and pants.

“Are there side effects?” Jim asked.

“Not at all, not unless you wish to count the exorbitant amount of money some of these ingredient cost. This is not a spell for the casual caster, not unless they have twenty or thirty thousand dollars to burn.”

Jim frowned. He disliked the idea of Angel spending that much money, and he hated the sense of obligation.

Blair leaned closer. “If it makes you feel any better, they steal the money.”

Jim eyed Blair. “That’s not better.”

Blair had the balls to grin at him before he headed over to Spike’s side.

“Are we ready for the spell?” Wesley asked.

Jim realized he was. The world had come close to ending multiple times, and if it had, Jim didn’t have the ability to protect Blair or his friends in Cascade. If Jim had powers from some va’nuss
ancestor, he needed to tap into it. “Let’s do this.”

Wesley glanced over at Angel before stepping to the center of the pentagram. “I have the spell written here. You may stand inside any of the triangles formed by the points of the star and everyone else should stand back.”

Jim moved into position. “Here?”

“That will do.” Wesley started chanting, reading from a scroll. The brass pot began to boil, and a gray fog rolled over the edge and started to fill the room. Jim could hear Blair’s heartbeat pounding steadily, but the gray erased the world. Darkness rose around Jim like smoke, and then Wesley was there. Jim felt his jaguar appear behind him, and the cat growled as it started to slide toward Wesley.

“Stop,” Jim said as he felt the world tilt. Ignoring him, Wesley continued to chant, the smoke swirling around him. The jaguar let out a scream and some force took the spirit animal by the neck and began to drag it. Jim could see something pulling on the cat, forcing it toward Wesley even as the cat twisted and fought. Horror and dread filled Jim.

“Stop!” Jim bellowed as he moved to get between Wesley and his cat. The man kept chanting, and fear drove Jim to action. He drove his fist into Wesley’s face. He’d expected the specter to vanish, but instead Wesley became more real and flew backward while clutching his nose. And then Jim was back in the training room. Smoke still drifted up from the metal bowl, but Wesley sat several feet back, blood staining his face and hands.

Blair crouched next to him.

Spike sauntered over and looked down. “Seems like that didn’t go as planned.”

“I’ll get a towel,” Xander said as he ran for the lockers that lined the far side.

“What did you do that for?” Blair demanded. His tone cut through Jim’s anger, and now guilt started to seep in.

“The spell was pulling on me.”

“That was the point, to pull up your powers,” Wesley said in a nasally voice. Drops of blood sprayed across the floor and Wesley’s legs. Jim winced at the evidence that he had caused real damage. That hadn’t been his intent—he had just felt the need to protect his cat.

Xander ran back and slid into place next to Wesley, offering a towel. “Tilt your head back,” he suggested. That was horrible advice, but Jim didn’t intend to correct him.

Angel studied Jim. “What scared you?” he asked.

Jim wanted to deny any fear, but if he did, that would mean he had punched Wesley for no reason. “I don’t know for sure, but I knew Wesley couldn’t touch my spirit animal.”

“I have to touch it to release it,” Wesley complained.

Jim narrowed his eyes. “You could have told me that before we started.”

Wesley started to push himself up, but Angel spoke. “Blair, you complete the spell.”

“What?” Blair yelped.
“Doing magic requires skill and training.” Wesley got to his feet, the towel still pressed to his face.

Angel moved to Wesley’s side and pulled the towel away to see the damage. Even from a few feet away, Jim could see he’d broken Wesley’s nose. “You will need to do a healing spell for yourself.”

Blair jumped in. “Hey, it’s fine if Wesley doesn’t want to do the spell because I wouldn’t want to be in the same room if Jim cold cocked me with no warning.” He turned to glare at Jim before turning his attention back to Angel. “But I am not comfortable with the magic. I avoid magic. Science is my thing.”

Angel picked the scroll up off the floor. “You will finish the spell and finish it now.” He handed Blair the spell.

“But…”

“Chief,” Jim said. “We need this block off my abilities. I am not going to live in this hotel forever.” Jim didn’t mention his far more pressing concern that the world might end and he might need every weapon he possessed.

Blair grabbed the scroll out of Angel’s hand. “If you punch me, I’ll kick your balls so hard that they’ll be internal organs,” Blair threatened.

“Fair enough.” Jim didn’t doubt that for a second.

“Well, get on with it,” Spike said after Jim and Blair had stared at each other for a long minute. With a bit of a growl, Blair moved to the center of the pentagram still muttering about alpha personalities and putting Nair in shampoo bottles. Spike quirked an eyebrow, but he didn’t say anything.

Blair started chanting, and the fog started rolling out of the brass bowl again. Again, the world began to turn to gray, and Jim felt his spirit animal behind him. However, this time there was no pull.

Jim turned to where Wesley had appeared before, to the place where he knew Blair was standing. A shadowy figure began to form, and Jim waited to see Blair. Instead, a ghost from another time appeared.

“Incatha.” Jim whispered the name as the man appeared out of the darkness and mist.

“Hush, Enquiri. You must listen.”
In perfect dream logic, Jim was now lying in a hut in South America. Jim’s limbs felt heavy, and Incatcha’s order to remain silent stole his voice.

“If you remember this conversation, then you have reclaimed your powers. I hope my spell has not failed, but if I die before you, my magic may not hold. You are a Sentinel, a guardian. I saw this in you, and I called forth your spirit and with it your gifts. The people needed you to fight the greed and evil that had invaded our land. But in holding your gifts, I hold you captive. I may not do that without damaging my own soul, so I have banished your gifts and your memory. If you choose another and they call up your gifts, know that I relinquish any right to your protection or loyalty. Go. Be with your people. Find your own path.” Incatcha touched Jim’s arm, and his sorrow and guilt stained Jim’s skin.

Jim found himself standing, even if he couldn’t remember getting up. Incatcha stood in front of him, and memories assaulted him—running through the jungle, snapping the necks of the drug runners, the fury and the power flowing under his skin. The panther ran next to Jim, and he took corporeal form before he leaped from a tree and sank his teeth into a gunman. Jim didn’t even stop. He leaped over the body to grab the next enemy.

Around him, poison darts flew through the air, and Jim could track their movements through the air, moving between them.

When Jim moved forward, Blair appeared. “Oh man, okay, this is wild.”

Jim looked around. “Incatcha was here.”

“Oh yeah, but that was a memory, not a ghost. Holy shit. He blocked you up to keep you from running back to him.”

The second Blair said the words, Jim remembered the feeling, the draw to return to Incatcha after he’d killed the enemy. Jim hadn’t wanted to go home—he hadn’t cared about his mission or missed the United States. There were enemies on the territory, and the fury that lived in Jim’s heart had driven him. The only break in the anger was sitting at Incatcha’s side.

Blair moved to Jim’s side, and touched the exact same spot dream Incatcha had. Blair’s confusion and wonder washed away Incatcha’s sadness. “Whoa. Okay, that might be a little too demony. Holy shit. Oh man, can we maybe avoid going all out vengeance and wrath here?” Blair asked.

“As a child, I had the senses and I never felt that way,” Jim said. He felt like the ground slid under him and then Jim stood on the baseball field from his youth. He felt the desire to win, to defeat his enemies in the game. His eyesight sharpened, but none of the rage followed. His jaguar lay on the lower branch of a nearby tree, only the tip of his tail twitching. Jim suddenly realized that someone had intentionally stripped away his humanity by turning the spirit of the Sentinel loose on the world. “Incatcha needed more,” he said softly.

Again, reality slipped, and Jim saw himself, injured and sick beside a fire, and Incatcha chanted over his body.

“Oh boy. He called forth the primal jaguar. He brought you all the way on line. That was way too close to va’nuss for comfort. Considering that you have to be under one percent demon, that is like…” Blair whistled.

Jim turned to study Blair. Incatcha’s spell had been failing in Cascade, but Jim had no control over
his senses, no ability to focus or call his spirit animal. “You saw me as human, so you only called those gifts.”

“Me? I did not call anything,” Blair objected. Reality skipped, and Jim watched a ghostly Blair talking Jim through piggybacking his senses. The magic swirled around them. “Oh shit,” Blair said softly. “Okay, in my defense, I didn’t know I was drawing out your gifts. And hey, they go all unstable every time you get upset.”

Jim frowned. Jim had lost his senses after he had accidentally shot a civilian, but he understood friendly fire accidents happened. He felt guilty and he regretted the mistake, but he hadn’t been emotionally distraught. Blair had. “I lose my senses when you get upset,” Jim said, and he knew it was right. A guide was someone who connected the Sentinel to the human world and prevented the senses and the power from erasing all that was human. “You call my powers, and you banish them. That’s the purpose of the guide or my anger would overwhelm everything.” As he spoke the words, Jim could hear the truth of them.

Blair turned deathly white and started backing up. “Oh no. I am not in control. This is all you. It’s your life, man.”

Jim leaped forward and grabbed Blair, shaking him. “Are you rejecting this?”

Blair’s head flopped, his curls flying around his face before he grabbed Jim’s shirtfront and yelled, “Hey!” Jim paused and Blair verbally counterattacked. “Listen Mr. Control Freak. You’re the one who doesn’t let me put my fruit in the same drawer as yours in the fucking refrigerator. This is not me rejecting as much as it is me knowing that you are never going to be okay with this. But I see what Incatcha did. We can make you human again.”

Jim pushed Blair away, and he fell to the ground. “Fuck you.”

“Oh nice, Ellison. Real nice. I don’t give you the answer you want, so you get physical. Great. That’s just like you.” Blair got up and advanced on Jim, his finger poking the air. “You do not get to push me around just because you don’t like my fucking answers.”

“They aren’t answers. You’re lying.” Jim snarled the words, and the fury grew under his ribs until his chest ached.

“What am I lying about?” Blair demanded. “Everything I said was true.”

Jim screamed, and reality flew around them, fragments and images swirling. Blair refusing to stay in the truck, Blair wielding a fire hose, challenging Bracket, going under cover. Blair dragging Jim to the monetary, to the mountain, to a vegetarian food truck. Blair talking Jim through a sensory spike, testing him, recording his data even after Jim told him not to. Truth. Truth swirled around them. Blair’s hair swirled around his face, and Blair tried madly to push it back.

“Enough!” Blair yelled. “I’m not Whistler. I’m not my fucking father. I’m not going to set your fate and screw with people’s heads. That’s not me. I chose to be human!” Blair screamed the last word and then the images fell like autumn leaves and there was silence.

Jim moved closer, cautiously this time. The truth was too close to the surface. “You are not your father,” Jim said. “He deceived your mother—he left you. He never gave other people the right to choose. You can choose, Blair. Do you want to be fully human? Do you want to reject this? This is the space to make a vow or to end one.” Jim’s whispered words echoed through the silence. If Blair chose human, Jim knew he would as well. He would lose the senses, the spirit animal, the power. The only alternative would be to find another guide, and while Angelus might consider that
an option, Jim didn’t.

“I want you to choose for yourself,” Blair said.

Jim reached up and touched Blair’s cheek. “I already did. When I refused to take the trip with you before, I knew we weren’t ready—that I wasn’t ready. Now we understand.”

Blair looked off to the side. “Oh man, if I get mixed up in my eudemon side, I have my own glitches.”

“Like?” Jim asked.

Blair sighed. “Like Whistler is never going to let me forget this and D’fatum demons tend to land in the center of drama. It’s like a gift. If you see three unrelated D’fatum in one place, run because all hell is about to break loose.”

Jim smiled. “How is that different from now?”

That made Blair hesitate. Jim could feel the memories pressing close, but no visions appeared. All remained quiet. Blair said softly, “I have been drawing your powers out. I think that pulls the D’fatum to the surface. Shit. I got through twenty years without having anything interesting happen to me. Now, I can’t walk across the street without running into a bank robber. Man, I have been in so much denial.”

Jim opened his arms, and Blair walked into them. They stood, clinging to each other. “You still can’t put those damn cempejak near my apples,” Jim said.

“Control freak,” Blair said with a huff. “And as much as you are a demonic powerhouse with your Sentinel pulled all the way to the surface, I don’t think that’s a good idea.”

Jim shivered as he remembered his inability to manage his own emotions. The fury had nearly blinded him. If that’s what Angelus and Spike felt when challenged, Jim had a hell of a lot of respect for their ability to live with humans without breaking them. Every time Jim saw someone invade his territory, the need to kill had nearly overwhelmed him. He couldn’t focus his senses on anything except the enemy, and his cat had been so real that when the jaguar curled up next to him, his flank was hot where it pressed against Jim’s leg. Jim could take Spike. Hands down, Jim could rip Spike to pieces. He didn’t know about Angel, but Jim suspected he could take the older vampire as well. He just didn’t want to. They had hundreds of years of learning to repress these feelings, and if something went wrong and Jim went feral, he wanted them around.

“How about we settle for giving me the same senses, but loosening up my control over my cat. If I get jumped at the next sensitivity training, I really want to let my jaguar loose on the assholes.”

“No joke,” Blair said. “Those jackasses would deserve it.”

Instead they’d been killed by vampires. Intellectually Jim still disagreed. He knew how often the justice system or mobs or vigilantes made mistakes. They killed innocent people or sometimes those who were guilty but who had extenuating circumstances. Jim never wanted to become that personification of vengeance again. However, he couldn’t find the same visceral disgust of killing. They had planned to bury Jim alive. Spike and Angel had taken the most logical action, and Jim could see that killing Jenny Giles was logical.

“Okay, one spirit animal coming up,” Blair said. He closed his eyes and concentrated, and Jim felt the shifting like air pressure against his skin. The cat appeared at Jim’s feet, his tail slowly twitching. Blair reached out slowly and touched his head. In the distance, a wolf howled, and the
cat leapt to his feet and raced away into the fog. “Try that,” Blair said.

Jim blinked and they were back in the training room. Wesley was gone, but Angel, Spike and Xander watched curiously.

“Right then, are you sorted?” Spike asked.

Jim closed his eyes, and when he opened them, his jaguar stood next to him. He wasn’t physical, but a sense of power emanated from his ghostly form. Spike and Angel both watched with a caution far greater than they’d ever shown around Jim.

Jim reached over and rested his hand on Blair’s shoulder, and Blair smiled. “Did we get it right?” Incatcha never would have done that—he never would have used the ‘we’ or asked Jim’s input on how to handle the difficult balance between the powers and the loss of humanity.

“Yeah, Chief. We got it right.” Jim turned to Spike and walked slowly over. “I remember South America now, and it might be best if we toned it down when we sparred. I’m tempted to quote the Hulk.” Spike understood the reference, because his eyes grew large, but then he gave a sly smile and shrug.

“You might say that, mate, but I’ve killed beasties with bigger wrinklies than you.”

“Yeah, well Anya’s vengeance demon friend sucks at making curses stick. If you decide to kill me, do it from behind and quickly.” Jim warned. He got the feeling Spike would take that warning very seriously. But then Jim tilted his head to the side. Spike hadn’t forced it or demanded it, but this was a creature over a hundred years old who had navigated these demonic feeling and found a humanity he supposedly didn’t possess. He’d found love and family in a place at odds with his every instinct. That was strength, and Jim respected it.

After a second, Spike caught Jim around the waist and dug his fangs into Jim’s neck. In the past, the vampires had taken very little, but this time Spike drank for nearly a minute before he backed up. His eyes were yellow and Jim’s blood stained his lips and teeth. “Bloody hell. You do have a bit of power in there.”

“Yep,” Jim agreed. In South America he had killed hundreds of men armed with machine guns and military equipment. And for the most part, he’d used his knife. Jim understood why Incatcha had asked that of him, but he never wanted to lose himself like that again.

Jim turned to Angel. “Angel and Angelus have different strengths, but I see both as my clan leader,” Jim said. They had given Xander the freedom to go to the university and Blair to live in another state. Jim knew they wouldn’t hold too tightly. More importantly, he knew that if something happened to push Jim too far into the demonic blood, this clan would be the only ones who might be able to contain him.

Angel held out a hand. “If you’re a danger to Blair or others, I will kill you.”

Jim put his hand in Angel’s. “That’s why I’m willing to give you my loyalty.” Angel pulled him close, and when he sank his fangs in, Jim was lost in the flood of memories. He remembered the gypsy girl, the hundred years of self-hatred, the blood lust when he’d been freed from the soul, and the demon’s desire to have what the soul had—unwavering loyalty. Jim had no doubt that Angel had seen just as much of Jim’s past, and when Jim finally stepped back, Angel had a pensive expression.

Angel warned, “If Angelus is ever free of the soul, he will claim you.”
“But in trying to claim me, he’ll destroy my vow to you, and you don’t want to know what will happen if I feel betrayed by the family,” Jim warned right back. Angelus was strong, but not strong enough to fight Jim in a head-on fight.

“Right then, if you lot are through mucking about, can we get on with hunting the Giles woman?” Spike asked.

Angel studied Jim for a second. “You’re the detective. You find her.”

Jim smiled. He liked the challenge in that, and the implied freedom. Angel was giving Jim the space to finally do his damn job. Jim turned to Blair, “Are you ready to hit a few stores and start schmoozing people into giving us some information?”

Blair nodded. “You got it.”

Jim felt like he was finally free of a weight he’d carried for too long. Now it was time to kick some ass and hopefully try to talk the rest of the clan into respecting civil rights and the rule of law. Jim knew he didn’t have good odds, but that wasn’t a reason to give up.
Jim held out his hand for Blair. Touching his guide was so much different now. He could feel the magic between them, flowing in a way it never had with Incatcha. After a second, he let go and turned back to Spike and Angel. “Okay, who has the list of stores that carry Jenny Giles’ products?” Jim asked.

“Cordelia has that,” Spike said. “If she’s not done calling around, don’t give her any shite. She was up half the night checking websites, and she started calling the second stores opened this morning.”

Of course she had. Jim wasn’t actually surprised, but he did wonder why the woman kept up her indifferent act. “I’ll see where she is on the list.” Jim headed back out to the lobby. Blair was at his side, and Jim smiled. It felt right. While he never would have admitted it, there were times in the past when Blair’s presence had annoyed him. Not always, but recently the feeling had gotten worse. It was like Blair stood too close or too far away. Jim could smell his soap or his lunch or his breath. There was rarely anything obviously wrong, but Blair had sometimes felt like an itch Jim couldn’t reach. Now it felt right, the way it did on their best days.

When they reached the lobby, Jim went over to Cordelia. She was just finishing up on the phone. “Well, you really should carry the brand.” She hung up and made a mark on a map.

Jim looked down and saw she had marked off most of the southern half of LA. “Geographical search?” Jim asked. She gave him a dirty look and ignored the question. It had been an unnecessary question since Jim could see she had small stars with arrows to the margins where she’d written “I have six stores that carry her brand of anti-aging cream. It’s a specialty item, and given how long she’s been using it, she is not going to switch.” Cordelia pushed a list toward Jim.

“Do you need help calling?”

“Oh please. A woman can call about cosmetics without raising any flags, but if you start calling these places, someone is going to get suspicious, and there is no way Willow is getting near my phones. She’ll give them cooties. I’ll be done in a day or two.” Cordelia turned back to the open yellow pages and crossed an entry off. “Now go away.” She waved a hand at him.

Jim turned and Blair was smirking. “Keep it up, short stuff. I’ll make you use a falsetto and help her.”

“Har har,” Blair said. Jim focused on Graham, striding across the room to where the major was cleaning a weapon.

“Major, what is your area of specialization and training?” Jim asked.

Graham stood and put the sword he’d been cleaning to one side. “I have top scores and SERE, Special Operations, UW, and I specialized in Latin American Spanish.”

“Was that English?” Blair asked softly.

Jim translated. “Survival, Evasion, Resistance, and Escape training, Unconventional Warfare training, and if he has advanced language training with combat training, that implies he’s a Green Beret.”

“I am,” Graham said. Jim had to admit he was impressed. That training was some of the most
difficult in the world. “But the best training I’ve received has been in this clan. Spike has a certain flair for teaching.”

“That’s actually the problem,” Jim said. Graham frowned, and his gaze flicked over to the side. Jim suspected Spike was back there listening, and he needed to hear this as well. “Everyone in this clan is focused on the supernatural. That’s why Jenny Giles was able to use cameras. Blair and I are going to start our search for Jenny Giles, but while I trust this clan to counter any magical threats, my question is whether you can go back to thinking like a human enough to look for mundane threats.”

Graham shifted into a position that came close to standing at ease. “Such as?”

“If I were going to attack this clan, I wouldn’t just use cameras, I would also hire private detectives and possibly snipers. Can you watch our back for those sorts of threats?”

Slowly, Graham nodded. “I can.”

He sounded less sure than Jim would have preferred. “Major?”

“When I went out in search of mundane threats, I always had a team. I can watch your back, but probably not while still covering my own. I’d prefer to partner with Faith or Xander.”

Jim turned and looked at Spike. He didn’t know the strengths and weaknesses of the various players to know who would be most logical. Spike said, “Take Faith. You know how Peaches gets twitchy whenever Xander’s anywhere near a baddie.”

“Okay. When are we leaving?”

“That’s the other problem,” Jim said. “My Cascade credentials aren’t going to help much. I need some identification, but I don’t want to have fake badges from a local agency. How long would it take you to get the Army to part with some CID credentials?”

“I could get them in ten or twelve hours if I called now. Do you want identification for yourself or you and Blair?”

“Whoa. I could have actual credentials? No having to explain why an anthropologist is riding along? No ordering me to stay in the truck?” Blair had a little too much bounce in his step, and Jim glared at him.

“You’re still going to stay in the truck if the danger is serious.”

“Dream on, Ellison,” Blair said with a snort.

Jim knew when he had lost, so he turned his attention back to Graham. “We could probably get local forgeries faster, but for the Army, that’s faster than I expected.” They didn’t have a full list and he hadn’t talked to Willow about the magic end of this, so they had the time to wait. Besides, Jim wasn’t about to start spending Angel’s money when it wasn’t necessary.

“Twelve hours is blindingly fast, and Blair, I’m going to need you to fill out some paperwork so we can get it faxed over to them. They’ll have to fake the rest of the employment package, but they’ll want the basic employment information.”

“They’ll… what?” Blair asked.

Graham looked from Blair to Jim, his confusion evident. “It takes time to file paperwork. Major
Ellison can be transferred to the Criminal Investigation Command and get new paperwork here inside four hours, but getting you into the system is going to take a little longer.”

Jim finally understood what Graham was saying. “I don’t want the Army anywhere near Sandburg.” Jim was surprised at the strength of his anger.

Graham held his hands up. “I misunderstood. I’m sorry.”

“No way am I joining the Army,” Blair said.

“I actually figured they’d put you in as a civilian 1811. You would have more leniency off-base, so it would make sense to have a civilian take the lead on civilian interviews, but if you don’t want that, I’ll have them rush Major Ellison’s paperwork.”

Spike sauntered over, but Jim was too busy trying to control his own surging temper. While it was a shadow of the overwhelming rage he’d felt in South America, Jim hadn’t dealt with the demonic feelings for years. Thank God his senses had been totally suppressed during his divorce from Caro.

“What’s an 1811?” Spike asked.

Graham was quick to answer. “A criminal investigator. With Blair’s master and his years working with Cascade, it would be a good cover, but like I said, it was only an offer.”

“Sandburg is ours,” Spike growled.

“So am I,” Graham pointed out, “and so is Major Ellison, but the Army is going to deposit paychecks into both our accounts. They wouldn’t care if they were paying Blair.”

“They wouldn’t have any say in what he did,” Spike said.

“Oh, they know that. They still think of me as being an actual Army officer, and they wouldn’t dream of telling me what to do. They won’t even try with Jim or Blair.”

Spike sniffed and seemed to think about that for a time. “Right then, sign Sandburg up.”

“What?” Blair yelped at the same time that Jim turned to face off against Spike. Jim wouldn’t challenge Spike’s leadership, but he sure as hell wasn’t going to be quiet.

“No.”

Spike quirked an eyebrow. “You telling me how to run the clan?”

“No, but I’m not putting Sandburg anywhere that those bastards can get to him.” It was bad enough that they could call Jim back to active duty. He would burn the fucking government to the ground before they’d touch Blair.

“Right then, come on,” Spike said before he walked off toward the small library. Jim looked at Blair and then Graham, but they were both amazingly silent. Blair wasn’t even making eye contact. Jim was in an even fouler mood when he followed Spike. When he got to the room, Spike kicked the door shut behind Jim.

“What?” Jim demanded.

Both Spike’s eyebrows went up. “You having a problem, mate?”

“Other than you putting Blair in danger, no.” Jim crossed his arms. The part of his brain in charge
of self-preservation warned him to tone down the rhetoric, but Jim couldn’t rein in the anger.

“Alright, let’s play your game. What danger would Sandburg be in if he took the Army’s money?”

“They’d want something in return for that money.”

“Yeah, they’d want him to stop any world-ending that the soldier boys can’t handle. Seems like he does that already. Bloody hell, when push comes to shove, Sandburg and Harris are about the same—throwing themselves in the deep end of the pool without checking to see if it’s boiling first.”

“And I won’t have the Army taking advantage of that.”

“So,” Spike sniffed, “ya figure Peaches and I will just chuck Sandburg to the side and let the Army gather him up?”

“What? I never said that.” Jim frowned. He had implied it because the Army would have to go through the clan if they wanted to get to Blair. They’d have to go through him too, but they probably didn’t understand how dangerous that would be.

Spike leaned back against the wall. “What’s Sandburg’s biggest fear, mate?”

“World ending has to be fairly high on the list.”

“Yeah, but not the highest,” Spike said.

Jim’s mind immediately turned to Blair’s rejection of his demon half. He didn’t want to ruin other people’s lives the way his father had ruined Naomi’s and his. If Jim ever found Blair’s father, that was going to be one seriously dead demon.

“He doesn’t want to be a burden,” Spike said.

Jim was fairly sure that was the second item on his list, but he didn’t correct Spike.

“This would give him dosh of his own, and there’s no downside because the Army understands that any resources that come to this clan don’t come back out. We don’t account for shite, and we handle things the way we want. Blair’s salary would be one more way they can pay tribute to the clan, but it wouldn’t be any more than that. The more interesting thing is how you’re handling this.”

Jim gritted his teeth. “I don’t like the idea of the Army getting claws into Blair.” Logically Spike was right. The Army already knew Blair’s name and understood that he was a part of the clan. Graham’s reports made it clear that the Army considered him a clan researcher—a valuable academic placed high in the ruling structure. Angel had approved that report going to the Army. If they wanted Blair, they’d had time to take him before Jim had ever realized demons were real. But despite all that logic, Jim loathed the idea of the Army having anything to do with Blair’s life.

“They won’t touch him,” Spike said. “But I’m not sure logic has a lot to do with your thinking right now. Those demon instincts are pushing you hard, aren’t they?”

Jim whirled around and faced the fireplace. “How can you handle being anywhere near people you hate?” Jim finally asked.

“Mostly I avoid ‘em,” Spike said. “I’ve been known to eat a few that got on my nerves, and that caused a row with Cordelia. It’s not bloody worth it.”
Jim leaned on the mantle and tried to control his emotions. Instinct told him that Blair could get back on an even keel, but Jim needed to prove that he could handle this himself, or he needed to talk to Blair about backing the Sentinel instincts down.

“If it makes you feel better, it gets easier,” Spike said.

“This is easier,” Jim said with a rough laugh. He turned around. “In South America, I was either sitting by my guide feeling nothing, or I was out hunting—killing anyone who crossed my path. That’s why Incatcha blocked my memories.”

“Had a few years like that myself,” Spike said. “When you’re around Drusilla and Angelus, mass slaughter is inevitable. Are you planning to slaughter anyone here?” Spike sounded curious rather than condemning.

Feeling like he’d overreacted, Jim sat in the nearest chair. “No. I still hate the Army.”

“Not going to argue with you about that. The gits aren’t good for much, but at least they babysit the hellmouth and call if something gets out of hand.”

“If they pay Blair, someone is going to want something in return,” Jim said.

Spike smiled. The expression was terrifying. “And then we teach them how much we care about what they think. But they’re more likely to come after you.”

Jim shook his head. “I don’t think that would end well.”

“I’m half tempted to let them try something because it would be a treat to see you tear through the morons,” Spike said in a wistful voice. “But the fact is that we keep track of Sandburg, and we’ll do the same with you. If someone takes you out of the area, they’ll have the whole fucking clan coming down on their heads before you have time to slaughter them all.”

“So my reaction is completely illogical,” Jim summarized.

“Do you have a logical reason why this would put Blair in more danger?” Spike dropped down onto the loveseat and watched Jim.

Jim tried to come up with one. If the Army wanted to do something shitty, they had all the information they needed. Jim still believed the Army would try some bullshit eventually, but they’d do that whether or not Blair took the paycheck. Some general would decide they needed a researcher and go for Blair or he would decide the Army needed a pet Sentinel and come after him. Money wouldn’t change that.

“Eventually, someone is going to try something with us. Cascade is too far away, and neither of us is willing to move to LA.”

Spike nodded. “We already have portals set up to get us to Cascade at the first sign of danger. We weren’t about to let Blair live up there if we couldn’t get to him quicklike. Just don’t tell him that because he does throw a wobbly about us hovering over him too much.”

“And what if he gets kidnapped inside Cascade?”

“Why would some local nab him?” Spike asked.

“You might be surprised.” Jim didn’t elaborate. Spike didn’t need to worry about Blair’s reputation as a trouble magnet because Jim intended to be much better at playing the role of blessed protector.
The next time a serial killer took Blair, Jim intended to use his spirit animal to gut the bastard. “And you’re right that I was being illogical. It’s going to take time to get used to having the powers unlocked, even partially.”

“It’s not like I’ve never been around young demons,” Spike said. “Most are a good sight worse than you. They don’t require a conversation as much as they need weeks hanging from chains.”

“I’ll skip that,” Jim said. “But seriously, how do you control the demon’s instincts? How did you stop yourself from killing people?”

Spike grinned. “Love.”

“Cordelia.” Jim didn’t understand the relationship, but he could see the depths of Spike’s love every time he looked at her.

“That came later,” Spike said. “I mostly tell people that respect for my sire inspired my reform, but the fact is that Angel and I had a rough time of it back then. It was really Xander. He needed me to help pull Angel’s head out of his arse and keep the Hellmouth in line, but he was fun to be around. He and I would team up on Angel to make the ponce live a little and then Angel and I would gang up to harass Xander into training. I liked it. I liked having a family and I knew if I kept killing, I couldn’t have that.”

“And if I let my anger get the best of me, I can’t have my family,” Jim said quietly.

“Sure you can mate.” Spike stood. “We’d just lock you in the basement with the lawyer and visit ya on Tuesdays.” With that, Spike got up and headed out of the room. Jim wasn’t even sure if Spike saw Jim flipping him the bird.
Jim walked back into the lobby feeling a more balanced. He had barely walked into the room before Blair blocked him. “Don’t blow up.”

If there was a phrase designed to upset Jim, that was it. “What happened?”

“I told him to call his general, but I told him. You don’t get to take out your crankiness on him.”

“Okay,” Jim said.

Blair frowned. “Wait. That’s it?”

Jim sighed. He suspected Incatcha’s block had been failing for a while because Blair had grown increasingly afraid of Jim’s temper. It was time to start repairing their relationship, and since Jim had damaged it, the bulk of that repair was his obligation. “Chief, first of all, it’s your life. If you want credentials, you have every right to get them.”

Blair narrowed his eyes.

“And yes, I’m struggling to control my temper but when I step over the line, you need to tell me to get my demon in check. Now that we know why I’m being illogical, it’s time for me to stop this shit.” Jim took a deep breath. “Now where is Graham?”

Blair’s expression was pure suspicion. “Are you going to yell at him about disobeying your orders?”

“Spike outranks me, so I expected Graham to follow his orders, unless you changed your mind. If you don’t want the Army credentials, then I’ll put my foot down.”

“Do you not want me to want them?” Blair asked. The insecurity irritated Jim, and he had to take a deep breath and push that aside.

“I want you to tell me what you want. If I have genuine concerns, I’ll talk to you about them. Realistically, if you have credentials, it will make investigating much easier. But I’m more interested in what you’re comfortable with.”

Blair was still suspicious, and Jim caught his hand. He hoped that their bond would allow Blair to feel his sincerity because there was too much water under this bridge for Blair to forget all Jim’s flaws. Slowly Blair nodded. “I would like the badge. Man, sometimes I get dismissed, and I know you tried to stop that by introducing me as your partner, but…”

After a few seconds of silence, Jim nodded. “Then we get you credentials, but I still need to know where Major Miller went.”

“This way.” Blair led them back into the hall that led to the library, but this time he walked to the end of the hall and knocked on a door.

“Come in.” Graham called.

Blair opened the door to a small office, and Graham was there on the phone while the fax machine spit out paper. He stood when Jim came in, but Jim dropped into one of the visitor’s chairs and waited.
“Thank you, lieutenant. I have the paperwork now,” Graham said. “I’ll get it back as soon as possible, so please stay near the fax.” He paused. “Thank you,” he said before he hung up the phone. He considered Jim with a cautious eye, and Jim had flashbacks to all the times he’d been stuck reporting to some asshole superior officer.

“I apologize,” Jim said.

Graham hid his shock well, but Jim could still see it in the slight widening of his eyes. Sooner or later, Graham was going to hear some version of what had happened in the training room, so shoving aside his kneejerk reaction to keep everything private, Jim braced himself to tell a small part of the truth.

“The spell that freed my Sentinel powers also sharpened some of my instincts. That’s why the Chopec’s shaman turned them off in the first place. Because of my history with the Army, I will never be comfortable with them. My commanding officer sold my unit out to drug runners and then tried to kill me to keep his secret.”

“That’s horrible,” Graham said.

“Yes, and the Army never figured it out, never stopped Colonel Oliver. I have a huge problem with them, and that problem is aggravated by the fact that my newly unblocked demonic instincts make me want to kill them. I won’t, but if you’re the military liaison, I have a mission for you, and I really need you to take this job very seriously.”

“Of course,” Graham said earnestly.

Jim leaned forward. “Keep the military away from. Keep them away from Blair. Keep them out of Cascade. Make it clear to them that if I had one ounce more demonic blood, that I would kill everyone involved in the Oliver’s chain of command because they should have known what he was up to.”

Graham nodded. “I will let the general know. I can’t make any promises, but I will impress on him that if they contact you for anything, Spike and Angel will be pissed. That’s generally enough to get them to stay hands off.”

That was the best answer Jim could get under the circumstances. Hopefully the clan’s work in LA was important enough that the generals would back off. Jim had been relying on secrecy—keeping his Sentinel abilities hidden from anyone in power, but from the time Lee Bracket had shown up, Jim knew that strategy had been ultimately doomed to fail. “And get copies of both military and civilian regulations for CID so we know what the legal guidelines are.”

“I’m on it,” Graham said. “Blair, I have the papers they need you to fill out.”

Jim patted Blair on the shoulder. “You’re on your own with the paperwork, Squirt. I’m going to go check to see where everyone else is on the investigation.”

Blair sat in the other visitor chair. “You probably want to go apologize to Wesley.”

“Yeah,” Jim said with a sigh. “I probably should.” He still resented the hell out of Wesley for trying to touch his spirit animal without permission, but he probably hadn’t deserved to get his nose broken.

“I mean it. That was an asshole move,” Blair said.

“Yeah. I got it!” Jim held up his hands in surrender. “I’ll find Wesley.” Before Blair could decide
to beat that dead horse, Jim turned and fled. The clan might say he was higher in the hierarchy than Blair, but Jim knew the truth. But first he headed for the area where the Army techs had set up. Everyone had carefully avoided talking about them around Jim, but it was hard to ignore the constant whine and hum of computers. That sound hadn’t been in the hotel before, but Jim followed his ears to a back hallway. A sign announcing “Pool: No Lifeguard” pointed to a staircase heading into the basement. That seemed a little wonky, but Jim headed for the office.

He knocked briefly before opening it. The second Willow turned to see who had come in, she shot to her feet. A lieutenant sitting at a computer reacted to her alarm, putting his hand on his sidearm as he scrambled to his feet.

“Major! I didn’t expect to see you.”

Jim leaned back against the wall and crossed his arms. A half second after he did it, he realized he was mirroring Spike’s body language. Jim usually took this pose to reassure people that he was harmless, but that probably wouldn’t work if Spike was a habitual leaner. Not wanting to look uncomfortable in his own skin, Jim chose to stay put. “I thought I’d get an update on where you are.”

Willow put her hand on the lieutenant’s arm, clearly telling him to stand down. He slowly sat, but he looked as twitchy as ever.

“We haven’t found much more in the Giles’ records, and there’s no record of Jenny anywhere on the Internet. I keep looking, but I’m starting to think she’s avoiding computers.”

“I would if I were her,” Jim said. “I’m taking lead on this investigation, and I need to know if you’re as good as you claim.”

Willow straightened up a bit. “Better. I don’t like to brag, so I avoid saying things like I’m one of the top five cyber witches in the world. Most people would put me in the list of the top one hundred witches in the world.”

“Most people would rank you higher than that,” the lieutenant added.

Jim nodded. He didn’t completely trust these strangers, but he knew when he needed to make use of outside resources. “Cordelia is narrowing down the number of stores we need to visit, but I need you to provide some technical backup.”

“You got it,” Willow said with a cheery enthusiasm at odds with her job as a civilian consultant for the Army. At least here was some evidence that the Army had a more hands off approach with civilians who worked the demon problem. “What do you need me to do?”

“When Blair and I interview people at these stores, we’re going to hit three kinds of responses. They won’t remember her at all and they’ll dismiss us, they’ll tell us that she shops there and we can work from there to try and find other points of contact for a geographical profile, or she will have primed them to warn her if anyone came looking.”

Willow sat down. “Why would people help her? She’s crazy, and even if they don’t notice that she’s crazy, you’re the police. Shouldn’t people answer your questions?” That was amazingly naïve.

“Suspects can use a lot of ruses to get civilians to help them. Since Giles is a woman, she might claim an abusive ex-boyfriend or husband is looking for her. She might even tell people her ex is a cop. That will make sure that any locals are more likely to give her a warning if police come.
However, that’s only one story I’ve seen criminals use. There are a lot of ways to get innocent civilians to cross over the line, and the whole time they believe they are doing the right thing.”

Willow wrinkled her nose. “That’s a problem. How can I help?”

“If someone is covering for her, the second Sandburg and I leave, they’ll try to call Giles. They may use a burner phone or go to another location to make the call. They may use a computer and sent a message to a dummy account.”

“So, I need a program that will trace any phone or computer use by individuals who are in the room when you ask about Jenny. I would have to track multiple people and use whatever communication they’re using to track the other end.” She chewed on her lower lip. “That’s a tough one, but I can do it. How important is it to make sure she can’t tell we traced her?”

“I don’t know,” Jim said dryly. “How important is it that she gets as little warning as possible to prepare an ambush?”

Willow grimaced. “Okay, but understand I can only tell you what location they’re contacting. If they call some friend of Jenny’s, I can’t then trace that person’s call.”

“I never thought you could. But anyone she left as a contact will have information on her.” Jim was starting to think he was going to wrap this case up. This can had a lot of strengths, but tracking a mortal wasn’t among them.

“I can do this. How soon do you need it?”

“Would ten to twelve hours work?” Jim asked. He didn’t understand the time constraints on magic or what might be considered normal.

“That’s way more reasonable than Spike’s ‘Oi. Do it in twenty minutes. What? Aren’t you any good at this stuff? In my day, I could have tortured someone into doing it in ten minutes.’” Willow put her hands on her hips and tried and failed to pull off a Spike pose. But Jim had to admit she had the attitude down.

“Don’t let him hear that,” Jim warned.

Willow smiled. “No chance of that. But I can realistically do this in five to six hours.”

“I won’t have the paperwork I need by then, so you don’t have to rush this,” Jim said. In twelve hours, Cordelia would have more shops for them to check, he and Blair would have credentials, and Willow would have a computer trace ready to go. Once Jim gave Graham a little time to get the Army paperwork sorted, Jim would go over security with him, and this operation was ready to go. Satisfied that all the pieces were slotting into place, Jim headed for the lobby. Cordelia would know where the others were, and Jim needed to apologize to Wesley and brief Angel on where they were on the mission.
“Hey, man, do you have a few minutes?” Blair asked the young man behind the counter. Jim hung back and tried to blend with the wall. That was difficult given the pink décor and flowers, but at least Blair could take lead in the questioning. Back in Cascade, Jim had to do all questioning because Blair lacked credentials. But now Blair was reaching for his new badge and ID cards.

“Can I help you find something?” the clerk asked.

Blair slid into the cover story he’d come up with, showing the clerk his identification. After the third store, Blair was already frustrated with how many people thought it was a made-up badge and agency. “I’m Blair Sandburg, a civilian investigator for the Army Criminal Investigation Command.” He slid a booking picture across the counter. It showed a middle-aged sergeant who’d been sentenced to twenty years for child rape, but the identifying information was removed. “Have you seen this man in the neighborhood?” Blair asked.

The clerk pulled it closer and studied it. “This isn’t the sort of customer we normally get.”

“Oh man, you’re not kidding,” Blair said. “He’s wanted for rape, so he’s not going to buy his dates expensive perfumes and lotions.”

The clerk shoved the picture away, horror in his face. “Seriously?”

“Seriously,” Blair said. Technically he was telling the truth, although the guy in the photo was sitting in a prison cell, so dates weren’t an option. However, Blair insisted that the best lies were ninety-five percent truth and five percent fast talking. Blair tapped the picture. “He is a real creep. If you could take another look... Maybe you’ve seen in him the parking lot or on the street?” The clerk leaned down and studied the photograph for a second, before he shook his head.

“No. He doesn’t look familiar.”

Jim broke the spelled stick in his pocket. This little shit was lying, and by breaking the stick, Jim had alerted Willow’s team.

Blair sighed. “Okay, thanks anyway. Is there anyone else here we could talk to?”

The clerk shook his head. “My manager is out making the deposit.”

Blair pulled a business card out of his pocket. “If you see either of them or just remember something, give me a call, and I’ll try to swing by again to speak to your manager.”

The clerk took the card like it was radioactive. “Yeah. I’ll call. Absolutely.”

Blair nodded and headed for the door. “Thanks,” he said as he walked out. Jim followed. The door fell shut and Blair started down the street toward their car. “That was not even subtle,” Blair said when they reached the vehicle.
“Nope,” Jim agreed. He wasn’t surprised that Blair had spotted the lie. Jim pulled his phone out as he got into the sedan.

It had shown up along with the badges, paperwork, and a dress uniform with Jim’s new rank. The Army had parked it in the hotel underground parking and whoever delivered it vanished without saying a word to anyone. Jim assumed Graham had managed to get across the depth of Jim’s hatred for all things Army. Most things Army. Jim respected Graham, and he was starting to really appreciate how the credentials gave Blair a more even footing in their partnership.

Before Jim could dial, his phone rang. “Yep?”

“I have the address he’s calling, and it sounds like Jenny,” Willow said. “Spike said to wait until sundown because he wants a chance to break Jenny into small pieces.” She didn’t sound happy about that last bit, but she passed on the message anyway.

“Copy that,” Jim said. “Give us the address and we’ll set up surveillance far enough out that she won’t spot us.” Jim wrote it down on the back of his hand, and then showed it to Blair. He pulled out the atlas and started flipping through pages in the thick book of detailed maps of LA streets. Jim disconnected and redialed.

“What’s up?” Faith asked.

“Giles just got warned that we’re looking around the area. Any movement?”

Faith paused before saying, “Boyfriend’s still playing with his gun.”

In the background, Jim heard Graham say, “Boyfriend is still using a scope to search sniper positions, but the area’s clear.”

“Same thing,” Faith said. “But we’re good up here, big guy. Is Blair having fun with that badge?”

Jim glanced over. “Yeah. A lot.”

Faith laughed. “He does enjoy the little things.”

Jim wasn’t sure this was little, not to Blair. In Cascade, Blair had been forced to take a backseat, even when his skills would have been more appropriate. Jim knew he could come off gruff, and when he interviewed young people or crime victims, sometimes that worked against him. But they couldn’t risk cases in court by having Blair, who had no credentials, take lead. Now that Jim had seen Blair at work, he wondered how he could ask Blair to go back to being an observer. However, that was a long-term problem that Jim needed to table until they’d dealt with Giles. So he read off the new address.

“So, we’re sure she’s there?” Faith asked. Any hint of her irreverence had vanished under a cold tone. Jim had heard that from more than one cop who was struggling with a temper.

“We aren’t sure of anything. Blair and I are going to park three blocks south and try to scope out the area. Move in behind us and give us cover.” Jim read off the address and waited as Faith passed the message on to Graham.

“We’ll follow,” Faith said.

“Giles will recognize you, so stay back until I call and give you the all clear.” Jim started the engine.
“Will do.” Faith hung up, but Jim could still hear her and Graham talking. Clearly Jim’s senses were a little more sensitive than usual. He would have to be careful to not overextend himself, especially if Blair weren’t around.

“You have our route?” Jim asked Blair.

“Head south, and we’ll turn right on 7th Street.”

Jim followed the directions. “You’re enjoying having the badge, aren’t you?”

“After years of you telling me to stay in the truck and reminding me that I’m an observer? Hell yeah. I’m totally into is.”

“And you’re good at it.”

“Really?” Blair face lit up. “I need to get you to say that for my tape recorder.”

“I will, Chief. You’re good at interviews.”

“That’s because anthropology is all about interviews. All about it. Trying to get someone to give you information about a crime is not all that different from getting them to explain their grandmother’s beliefs about tribal gods. It’s about getting other people to talk.”

Jim huffed. He couldn’t argue with the truth. But it left him in a more difficult position. When they went back to Cascade, Blair would be back to carrying ride-along credentials, and the higher-ups had started making serious waves. Simon had taken a hit on his last written review for allowing the ride-along to continue so long, especially after Blair had landed in the middle of so many dangerous situations. Being caught between Blair and Simon had caused Jim more than a few sleepless nights although no one had yet told Blair that his ability to ride along was in serious danger. Jim didn’t know how much it had already cost Simon in terms of political favors to keep Blair this long.

“How do the CID regulations look?”

“Pretty limited. I mean, you can’t even arrest someone off an Army base and unless the CID can show a clear and direct reason for involvement in a case, they can’t help any civilian law enforcement agency. There are rules on rules.”

Damn. That is not the answer Jim had hoped for. But Blair was nothing if not creative with rules. “If you had that CID badge in Cascade, how would things change?”

Blair studied Jim. He suspected something. “I wouldn’t be able to ride with a local cop.”

“Ever? Not even if you did some verbal tap dancing?”

“What sort of tap dancing?” Blair asked.

“I don’t know. But if you didn’t have another way to ride along, could you make CID credentials work?”

Blair spoke slowly. “Maybe. If I had to. If I were CID up there, I wouldn’t have any arrest powers.”

“You don’t now, so I don’t think you’ll miss them,” Jim said dryly.

“That’s true,” Blair said. “And I could interview witnesses, and as a CID agent, I wouldn’t have to
“Yes, you would.” Jim said firmly. It was bad enough that Blair didn’t carry now, but if he had a badge, people would assume he could take care of himself. The other guys at the station wouldn’t treat him like a civilian, which would have advantages and disadvantages.

“No way. You know how I feel about weapons, and I am not having version 354 of this same conversation. Stubborn meet Ellison. Oh. I’m sorry. You two already know each other.”

While that was true, Jim had a new weapon this time. He turned onto 7th and planned his attack. “Okay,” he said slowly. “I’ll accept that as soon as Spike tells me he’s okay with you going around unarmed.”

“You wouldn’t.” Blair’s voice had a dangerous edge now.

“Hell yes, I would. If you’re going to have a badge, you need to be able to defend yourself. Now, you may want a sidearm or a magical spell. I’m not even going to pretend to understand what the clan might offer in the way of weapons, but you need to carry something.”

“Okay, my whole goal is to avoid causing harm.”

“Really? Do you want to avoid harming Giles? Did you want to avoid harming Maat when she was trying to end the world?”

“That’s a cheap shot,” Blair said. “You know that even when I’m faced with murderers, I’m more comfortable with fire hoses and baseballs.”

“Then carry a taser,” Jim suggested. “Get a bean bag gun.” If Blair walked around with one of those, no one would screw with him. They looked like traditional shotguns. “Hell, for all I care, train to use your damn spirit animal, but you need a weapon, preferable several weapons.”

“Oh man. Do you think I could train with my wolf?” In an instant, all Blair’s aggravation vanished under childlike wonder.

“Sure,” Jim said. “You could call my spirit animal before I could.”

“True.” Blair said. “So, how bad is Simon getting pushed to drop my ride-along credentials?”

Jim sighed.

“That bad?” Blair grimaced. “Okay, the CID thing could work, but normally a CID agent would work with you for one case, and it would have to be a case directly involving Army interests.”

“So, it wouldn’t work,” Jim summarized.

“You need to think outside the box. What if I’m not working with you for a case? What if you’re the case?”

Jim pulled the car to the side of the road and put the car into park. “Meaning?”

Blair grinned. “Meaning we already told Simon you were sidelined here because of a case from your Army days coming back to haunt you. What if the Army had cause to believe that you could be a target? Assigning a CID agent to be a liaison and keep an eye on you for any sign of additional terrorist activity would make perfect sense. Now, do you hear Jenny Giles? I can play her voice print if you need a baseline.”
Jim laughed. He and Simon had been pounding their heads against a wall for months now, and Blair had a solution two minutes after knowing they had a problem. The man was unique. “I have Giles. She’s humming.” She was trying to rip a man’s soul out, or at least a vampire’s soul, and she was humming along to The Flamingos singing “I Only Have Eyes For You.” The woman had a few loose screws. “Call Spike and tell him we have confirmed the target.”
Jim got out of the sedan when the second car parked behind him on the street. Angel was driving with Spike at shotgun and Wesley and Willow in the backseat. Jim asked the first thing that crossed his mind. “Angel, why do you have a convertible?”

Spike leaped over the passenger side door without opening it. “Exactly! I’ve been saying that to Peaches for bloody years.”

Angel got out and turned to glare at Spike. “Now is not the time to annoy me.” A flash of vampire features crossed his face. Spike didn’t seem concerned. “Right then, I’ll wait a week or two and then point out that it’s ridiculous for a creature that bursts into flames in sunlight to have this car.”

Angel growled before he turned his attention to Jim. “Where is she?”

Jim turned to the north. “Next building over from this one, out of direct line of sight.”

Willow climbed out of the back of the convertible. “Are we sure she’s even there?”

“I can hear her,” Jim said. Right now she was humming along with the radio and moving about her apartment. Willow did a quick double take before looking at Angel for some sort of explanation. He ignored her.

Wesley came around the car to join the rest of them standing on the side of the road. “She’s going to have magical shielding, and it will take time to determine what sort of counter-spells would be most useful.”

“Do you need to be up there?” Angel asked.

Wesley looked at Willow, so Jim assumed she had more skills in the area. Willow frowned. “Magic gives off an aura. We should be able to pick up on it from here. I wish I had brought Tara.”

“Who?” Jim asked. He had read enough of the Sunnydale reports that he wanted more intel on the group. He knew Rupert Giles was still there, but Colonel Finn and Buffy Summers seemed to share command. There was a technical unit Willow was most closely associated with and special forces that Spike had used as chew toys when he’d lived there. Jim didn’t remember any Tara in the reports.

“Nevermind. Right, auras and counter spells. We can totally do that, right Wesley?” She gave him a hopeful look, and Jim’s stomach started to churn. He didn’t want cheerful people on the front lines. Ever.

“Hopefully,” Wesley said. “Mrs. Giles has had a lot of time to prepare them, so this will take time.”

Jim cocked his head to the side and listened to Giles’ apartment. “Time we don’t have. She’s spotted us.” Jim looked at Willow. “More precisely, she’s spotted Willow’s magical signature in the area.”

Spike bounced on his toes. “Right then, time to kill the bitch.”
“Spike,” Angel said.

“I know, pet. She’s like to have a lot of firepower up there, but if we don’t take the fight to her, she’ll either disappear or bring it to us. I’ll keep her busy, you babysit the magic users.” With that, Spike was off and running. Jim clenched his hands. Spike was running into danger by himself, and Jim felt a jolt of panic.

“Angel?” Jim said.

“Go,” Angel said. Jim didn’t wait for Blair to lodge his protest. He took off running. Back at the car, Blair was lodging a loud protest, but it sounded like Angel was physically holding him, so Jim focused on Spike. He drove himself harder, his feet pounding the pavement with every stride as he struggled to catch up. His lungs burned, but by the time Spike reached Giles’ apartment building, he was still several feet ahead.

Jim crashed into the side of the building and gasped for air.

“What floor?” Spike asked, not even pretending to be winded. Bastard. Jim held up three fingers, and Spike was off and running again. Jim would have cursed him out, only he couldn’t spare the oxygen. After a second, Jim focused on that inner sense of his spirit animal and pulled. His jaguar screamed and Jim mentally sent the animal after Spike. The black cat crouched, his tail whipping from side to side for a moment before it charged after Spike.

With one last gasp, Jim took off running again, this time up the stairs. He definitely needed to work out more because he could already hear Spike slamming open the fire door on the third floor when he was still on the second. Jim redoubled his efforts and burst out into a wide hallway. Spike had his boot raised, and he kicked the door so hard that the hinges broke and the door crashed into the apartment.

When Spike tried to force his way into the apartment, he slammed into nothing. Jim couldn’t see or smell anything, but from the way Spike hit it, there was some sort of clear barrier that was strong enough to hold him.

“You soddin’ bitch,” Spike snarled just as Jim reached his side. Jim’s jaguar leaped at the open door, but some energy trapped him. Jim went to one knee and he strained backward as though he could free his cat by pulling hard enough. His temper flared, but just as quickly, his jaguar escaped by vanishing. Jim jerked backward as the sense of being caught in a snare ended.

His jaguar reappeared in the hall behind Jim, and now he growled, his voice low and dangerous.

On the other side of the fallen and broken door stood Jenny Giles. Her hair was cut shorter than the pictures Jim had seen, and she’d tried to bleach it blonde. She’d missed and landed on a sort of grayish orange. “The monster speaks. I told Rupert we should have killed you the second you returned to Sunnydale.”

Jim could hear Graham’s voice, distant and distorted as the sound wave travelled around walls. “I don’t have a shot. No shot.” So someone had asked Graham to use his sniper’s skills, but Jim wasn’t surprised he couldn’t. Windows did not offer snipers much of a vantage, especially when most people kept their blinds at least partially drawn.

Faith stood near Graham because her voice was equally distorted as she said, “It sounds like I’m up. I never have minded a little girl on girl action.” After a few seconds, she gave a “Hoorah!” and took off running, so Jim expected her to show up any time. Then three of them could stand around the hallway with their thumbs up their ass. Jim growled.
“You tried that. It didn’t work out for you, did it?” Spike taunted her. “You nearly killed your golden girl and drove your husband away.” Spike bounced on his toes, but Giles’ eyes narrowed. She raised her hand, and Spike dived to the side. A blast tore through the drywall behind Spike, filling the air with chalky dust.

With a snarl of his own, Jim ripped the fire extinguisher off the wall, snapping the plastic ties holding it in place. Jim swung the heavy metal at the invisible barrier, but the extinguisher bounced off it just like Spike had. Damn. Jim had hoped an inanimate object would penetrate her defenses.

“That the best you got?” Spike asked, as he stretched his neck from side to side.

“You monster,” Giles said.

Jim didn’t want to see civilians hurt. “You’d better be careful lady,” Jim said. “Another shot like that, and you’re going to murder someone who’s making coffee in their kitchen,” he warned. Her first shot had penetrated the wall and exposed a steel structural beam. “Hell, maybe you have the firepower to take down the building and kill dozens or hundreds of people, crush children under falling slabs of concrete. Is that the goal?” Jim asked coldly.

She looked at him for the first time. “Who are you?”

“Detective James Ellison of Cascade,” Jim introduced himself. Given the way she narrowed her eyes, exactly as she had with Spike, Jim guessed she had already decided to hate him. If she was smart, she had already figured out that he had tracked her location. God knows the rest of the clan couldn’t investigate their way out of a traffic circle. Jim heard two people storming the stairs, and he moved, keeping Giles’ attention on him. “Do you want me to list the laws you’ve broken?”

Her laughter was rough and just a touch manic. “I know how the monsters have deceived the military. I know all about it.”

“Fuck the military,” Jim said, and his profanity surprised her. Hopefully that had distracted her from Faith carefully opening the stairwell door. When Blair slipped into the hallway behind her, Jim had to clamp down on a whole new level of profanity. “Look, lady, I don’t know you, but I have witnessed you destroying private property and endangering the public through the discharge of a weapon.” Jim was fairly sure the statute hadn’t been written to cover magic, but that was a detail.

“Self-defense,” she said, her words clipped and angry.

“Are you doing your usual job of making friends?” Blair asked as he came entirely too close. Jim’s jaguar got in front of him, growling low. However, Blair’s wolf appeared, shouldering the cat out of the way. Jim knew his cat could win a fight, but if claws and teeth were off limits, the wolf had more push-power. It meant Blair slipped past both spirit animals and stood next to Jim.

“Jenny, I don’t know if you remember me,” he said in his best non-threatening voice. He’d used that on countless victims in Cascade. Jim would have said that was the wrong approach here, but Giles did seem to respond.

“Blair. You’re the soothsayer demon.”

Blair gave her a sheepish smile. “Not exactly how I’d describe myself, but close enough. I’m Whistler’s cousin.”

That was the magic name to drop. Jim could almost see her downgrade to Defcon 4. “Then you
know why this is important.”

“What ‘this’ are we talking about? Killing Spike? I’m pretty sure Whistler steers clear of killing anyone. Man, it is hard enough to see the future, but when you start killing major players, the future is like…” Blair whistled. “Whoa… totally chaosville.”

Giles frowned. “Major players? Spike is a lieutenant. An enforcer.” She shook her head, clearly not agreeing with Blair. As distractions went, getting Giles to engage in an argument was a good one. The more invested she was in talking, the more time their magic users had to get her shield down. Jim carefully didn’t look toward Faith who was near the stairs, crouching down with a cell phone in hand. Even with the volume turned all the way down, Jim could hear Angel’s voice and the two magic users chanting.

Blair nodded. “Spike is a major player. I mean, he’s been close with Angelus for over a hundred years. He’s center stage on at least half the world ending prophecies. Okay, maybe a third, but still. He is a major player.”

Giles frowned. “What do you want?” Clearly Spike’s significance to world ending prophecy was not her debate of choice.

“To talk reason. I mean, if Jim and Angel have to get involved, this is going to end badly.”

Giles shot Jim a confused look. “Him?” Jim was almost sure he was offended at her attitude. He might be late to the world-ending apocalypses, but he was not as irrelevant as Giles was assuming. On the other hand, being underestimated was useful.

“You see, that is why most demons try to keep humans far away from the world-ending plans,” Blair said. “Whistler’s uncle got a prophesy that if he slept with a human woman, he would have a child who was important to the whole universal tapestry, so he did, and here I am.” Blair raised his hands in an exaggerated shrug. Jim knew that abandonment hurt Blair, but he was successfully playing it off as some sort of cosmic joke. “Most humans dismiss me as unimportant. Hell, most demons do too, but that is so not the case. I found Jim, and he’s another of those major players.”

“He’s what?” Giles asked before Jim could ask the same damn thing. Okay, so he accepted that he was va’nuss, but that did not mean he wanted to be center stage for any of the crazy shit the rest of this idiot clan got into. As soon as the danger was past, Jim fully intended to take Blair back to Cascade and go back to being a normal cop. With the senses. And a spirit animal. And healing abilities, and a temper that could apparently decimate dimensions. Jim sighed. Clearly he’d lost on the being normal front.

“You’re a witch. Figure it out,” Spike interrupted.

Giles crossed her arms. “He’s human.”

“I wish,” Jim said with a snort. “Life was simpler when I thought I was.”

Blair elbowed him. “No way. You just thought life was simpler, but if someone had shown up and tried to snatch you up, all the demon pieces were still in there. It would have come out.”

“What would have?” Giles was sounding even more confused, and Jim blessed his partner’s skills at obfuscation and stalling.

“Jenny, you’re trying to force the universe to go backward,” Blair said, which seemed a little off topic, but Jim waited for some sort of connection. “You had a nice roadtrip planned, you and the Powers that Be. You would get Angelus to come out and play, he’d cause a little havoc and then
you’d get your champion back, complete with guilt.”

“What do you know?”

“I know that if you were trying to end the world in a nice orderly manner, that wasn’t a half bad plan. Xander sort of fucked it up, though, didn’t he?” Blair asked with a sort of unctuous sympathy. “Oh man. That must have pissed you off.”

Giles gritted her teeth for a second. Pissed off didn’t even describe her mood; Jim could smell the homicidal fury. “Rupert insisted that deep down Harris knew right from wrong, but when it came down to the final decisions that had to be made, he let himself be blinded by that monster.”

Blair nodded. “He loved Angel and Angelus more than he wanted to help the Powers.”

“I gave up my marriage. I gave up the love of the only man I ever wanted.” Giles’ voice broke. “Harris couldn’t even give up degenerate sex with a mass murderer.”

“That totally sucks. I get it.”

“I can still do it. I can get the soul out of Angelus, and then it will all be back on course.” Giles’ voice had a manic edge that suggested she didn’t believe her own bullshit.

“Whoa, that’s where you’re wrong. You missed that exit.” Blair lowered his voice and spoke in a conspiratorial tone. “Come on. You know how magic works. Once a potion has gone too far, you can’t turn back the clock. Now I know there are some who think that giving Spike a soul would open some new world-ending possibilities.”

“Oi!” Spike looked horrified.

“Sorry, just saying what a lot of demons are thinking,” Blair said. “It’s something to do with the Aurelian line, and all the world-ending magics your ancestors screwed with. There are prophecies about Aurelians returning from the grave, giving birth to children, regaining humanity, giving up their souls, giving up their demons. I mean, the Aurelian line is like prophecy central.” Blair gave a full body shudder. “There is even a whole set of prophecies about an Aurelian turned Slayer. Wild. But once an opportunity slips past, you can’t reverse time. The exit is gone. You have to look for another exit. You can’t use Angelus.”

Giles looked at Spike with a critical eye. “Do you really think this one could end the horrors of this world and return us to the peace of the before days?”

Spike’s demonic face appeared. “I’d bloody turn myself to dust before I’d let you try,” he snarled.

“Let’s not talk about dust here,” Blair said in his soothe-the-natives voice. “Let’s talk about how to end this feud. Jenny, you have a husband back in Sunnydale.”

She gave a mad laugh. “That exit is past. We would have to find another.”

Jim grabbed Blair’s arm and dived to the side as another magic blast slammed into the wall. More drywall dust filled the air, and Blair started coughing. Picking up the fire extinguisher, Jim slammed it into the wall next to Jenny’s door. If he couldn’t get through the opening, maybe he could go around her shield. He hit the wall too hard, and the fire extinguisher cracked a wooden stud and the metal cracked. Fire retardant rushed out of the thin crack with a hiss, and Jim threw the extinguisher down next to the open door before he started ripping through drywall. The sheets parted like he was ripping cardboard, and he reached an arm through into Giles’ apartment.
Giles cried out, and a blast hit Jim, driving him back into the hallway, and he saw Spike ripping through the wall on the other side. He stepped through the hole he made, but from the cursing, he had hit some barrier. Jim dove back into the hole he’d made, but this time he ran into another magical barrier. Jim reached for his spirit animal, pushing the cat to breach the barrier. It screamed, and Jim could hear neighbors calling 911. Shit.

Suddenly Faith was yelling. “Go! Go! Go!” The magical barrier vanished, and Jim’s cat leaped through him into the room. A door slammed open, and Spike shoved the contents of a closet aside as he rushed Giles. She stumbled back into her apartment and threw a small cauldron. Jim threw himself forward, knocking it to the ground, but even the few drops that landed on Spike caused smoke to start rising, and Spike shrugged out of his coat before leaping over Jim.

He grabbed Giles’ neck at the same time Jim’s cat drove his teeth deep into her side, ripping flesh. The cat’s back legs caught her thigh and shredded the flesh from the bone as Giles, the cat, and Spike went down in one pile of gore and blood.

Faith came careening around the corner, a knife held up, but she stopped a couple of feet from Jim. “Damn. You didn’t leave a girl much.”

Jim waved his cat away, and the jaguar vanished, leaving Spike. He was bloody and grinning maniacally.

“Bitch,” Spike said fiercely as he shoved the mangled body to the side. Jim looked away. Giles was definitely dead, and now Jim had a clan to protect.

“Police are inbound, get yourself and the others out of here,” Jim said.

Spike got a stubborn expression, but Jim ignored that. He knew how to handle the authorities. “Blair and I will handle this as an Army issue. Faith, have Graham get Colonel Finn up here with someone who can contain these magical spells. Blair and I will keep perimeter and warn the locals of possible biological or chemical weapons. The faster the Army can get here to handle the human end of this mess, the better.”

Faith glanced at Spike before nodding at him. “On it.” She turned and dashed out of the room. Jim turned to Spike, but the vampire was already crouched at Giles’ window, clearly ready to leap out into the night.

“Don’t let the humans give you too much shite. Worse comes to worse, we can burn the bloody place to the ground,” Spike said.

Jim grinned. “Yeah, but this way the Army knows for sure that she’s dead and they know what happens to people who piss off this clan, even someone with as much power as Giles.”

Spike nodded at him and then dropped out of the window. Jim looked at Blair. He stood at the doorway and studied the carnage.

“She used to be a decent person,” Blair said softly.

“Fanatics always start with good intentions,” Jim said. “Get your ID out. The locals are going to be a little suspicious, so be prepared to talk them to a standstill until Graham can get uniformed Army up here.

Blair took a deep breath and visibly pulled himself together. Jim knew there would be plenty of candle burning and meditating later, but for now he would focus on the job. That’s one of the reasons Jim trusted Blair to have his back. “One obfuscation coming up,” Blair said as he got out
his credentials and headed down the hall toward the stairs and elevator.
“I’m Captain Scot. I understand there’s a problem here.”

“Nope. No problem,” Blair said cheerfully. “I have just been telling your officers that they can’t come down here.”

If a captain had shown up, it was time for Jim to provide some reinforcement. If Finn didn’t get here soon, Jim wasn’t sure he could maintain the crime scene—or explain why the prime suspect in their case looked like she’d been mauled by wild cats and seemed to be missing significant amounts of blood.

“This is LAPD jurisdiction, and we have hazmat units in place, not that you seem to be wearing any protective gear,” the captain said, his voice tight with anger.

“That is the beauty of vaccinations. But this is CID business, and until someone with more rank than you shows up, I’m not moving.”

“I can have you moved.”

“Oh, I would enjoy pressing charges. I would totally enjoy that.” Blair sounded too damn enthusiastic, so Jim walked a little faster. That attitude might scare the patrol officers—hell, it had scared them into full retreat—but captains were a little touchier.

“Sandburg, is there a problem?” Jim asked as he stepped behind Blair.

“Nope. I’m just informing Captain Scot that if he forcibly removes me, I’ll press charges.”

“He won’t have a chance because he’ll have to get through me before moving you,” Jim said as he sidestepped to get in front of Blair. “Major James Ellison, Army Rangers, assigned to CID. Can I see credentials?” Jim held out a hand.

Captain Scot was a wiry man and Jim could almost see the metaphorical smoke rising out of his ears. However, if he thought a show of temper would get him past them, the man was going to have time to learn differently. “Captain Max Scot, LAPD. Major, this is not an Army base, and you do not have jurisdiction.” He handed over his credentials. Actually he just held them out, but Blair neatly slipped them out of the captain’s hand and handed them over to Jim.

“Until my colonel arrives, I have orders to secure this scene. You are not allowed past Agent Sandburg.”

Blair smirked. He was enjoying having a badge a little too much.

“We have reports of explosions.”

“Small ones, no structural damage,” Jim said. Blair hadn’t been willing to give the police even that much information, but Jim figured that Scot was going to order his officers to drag Blair out of the way if they didn’t give him something. “We had a terrorist holed up in one of the apartments. It’s safe, but until the Army can secure any material in the apartment, I have orders to protect the site from anyone not briefed on this case.”

“I can have the governor call you.”
“I’m sorry, sir, but my chain of command includes the Army Chief of Staff, the Secretary of the Army and the President. I’m afraid the governor is not in my chain of command. Give me a few minutes to call in your name and ID. If I’m allowed to read you in, I will. Agent,” Jim said with a nod toward Blair.

“I got this,” Blair said with confidence. Jim gave him a concerned look before he took the captain’s identification and retreated back to Jenny’s apartment door. Only one of her neighbors had stuck a head out, and when Jim flashed his CID badge, the woman had slammed the door. The building did not have a lot of busybodies. That was going to drive the local cops crazy because they were not going to be able to get a lot of information out of these people.

Jim dialed Graham’s number. “What’s the ETA on your colonel?” Jim asked before even introducing himself.

“He’s forty minutes out. Maybe a little less.”

Jim clenched his jaw. Blair had done a great job of stalling the police, but he doubted Blair’s fast talk would work for that long.

“What do you want his number?” Graham asked. Jim heard the uncertainty there. Given Jim’s position on having anything to do with the Army, Jim understood his hesitation. However, Jim had to deal with his feelings, especially if he wanted the Army to give Blair a permanent badge with the CID.

“Yeah.”

Graham quickly gave Jim the number and Jim hung up without saying anything more. Jim couldn’t make any promises about playing nice with the Army, but he did plan on trying. He called and the phone rang once before someone answered with a crisp, “Finn here.”

“Colonel Finn, this is James Ellison.”

“Detective Ellison. Can I help you?”

“I thought you were part of making me Major Ellison.”

There was a long pause, and Jim heard a woman asking, “Is it the va’nuss?” Jim gritted his teeth. He hated the anonymous speaker already. As much as he had never wanted to be “The Sentinel,” he really never wanted to be “The Va’nuss.” The demons had a bad reputation.

“Major, I was not part of that decision, and I will back you if you want to demand that the Army reverse the decision to reactivate your commission. General Chapman is very effective at getting the Army to take a hands-off approach when it comes to those of us serving in demon-infested areas. Tell me how you want to handle this situation.”

“I don’t want to discuss my status right now. On a practical level, the fact that I’m a CID officer is the only thing keeping the LAPD out of this apartment. How soon will you get down here?”

When Finn asked the woman, she answered with, “Oh, I can get us a hell of a lot faster.” Jim could hear the engine rev as she sped up.

Finn came back on the line. “We should make it within a half hour.”

“Don’t take any risks. The scene is secure. I just don’t want the local cops to find this body or the magical supplies Giles has sitting around. Some of them make the hair on my arms stand up, so I think they’re dangerous.”
“Willow is meeting us once we reach the scene, and I have a full containment unit,” Finn said. “We’ll take your warning seriously, and don’t worry about Buffy’s driving. She has slayer reflexes, so she won’t let us get hurt. However, the general is tired of using million dollar computers and our top technical analysts to fix her speeding tickets.” From the tone, Finn had said that for Buffy’s benefit. Jim disconnected the line, feeling a little better at having gotten to hang up on the colonel. It sounded like Captain Scot was giving Blair a hard time, so Jim headed back to that end of the hall.

He held the captain’s credentials out. “Colonel Riley Finn is thirty minutes out. He’ll be handling containment and will have to make a call about when to allow local law enforcement on scene,” Jim said. And then to stave off any continuing power struggle, he added, “We have suspected biological weapons on scene.”

“What sort?”

“Classified.” Jim crossed his arms.

Blair sighed and gave Jim a weary look that implied Jim was being unreasonable. Jim was pretty sure it was an act. “The important part of that is that the weapons are safely contained,” he said. “As long as a young officer doesn’t trip or touch something or bump an end table, everything is completely contained. And that is why we’re out here and not in there. None of us have training to handle the threat, so we’re all going stand out here and wait.”

Captain Scot looked from one of them to the other before he turned and headed back down the stairs.

“Oh, that is not a happy captain,” Blair said with a grimace. Jim didn’t say anything because two of Scot’s detectives were coming back up the stairs. Hopefully they could hold the standoff until Finn showed.

In the end, Blair’s verbal tap dancing held until a square-jawed man in a colonel’s uniform came up the stairs with a half dozen soldiers and one small witch dressed like a soldier behind him. That was a serious violation of Army regulation—putting a civilian in a uniform like that, but if Willow and the colonel weren’t going to object, Jim certainly wasn’t. “Major Ellison, excellent work,” Finn said as he reached the top.

“Colonel Finn,” Jim said. “We have a lot of clean up to do.”

“A lot less than I feared given your target.” Finn turned to his men. “Sergeant, Corporal, hold the hallway. Agent Sandburg, Major Ellison, I’d like to debrief as the team inventories the apartment.”

“Yes, sir,” Jim said, playing his part. Finn gave him an odd look before he headed down the hallway. Jim heard the detectives complaining to the new corridor guards, but the group maintained silence until they reached Giles’ apartment.

“Oh goddess,” Willow whispered.

“You might not want to go inside. The body is in the living room,” Blair said gently. Jim silently cursed himself for forgetting that Jenny Giles had been Willow’s mentor. This whole situation was fucked up, and she shouldn’t be anywhere near it.

Willow drew herself up. “I’m fine. I know what she did, and I can face it. After all, I helped bring her shield down.” Willow tried to head into the apartment, but Finn caught her arm.

“Hey, just let the guys get in there first. You don’t have to see it.” Not only was his voice gentle,
but Jim could hear the genuine distress in it. He either cared about Willow or he had cared about Jenny Giles. He certainly knew her back in her Sunnydale days.

“Give us a sec, Red,” the lieutenant said before he took two corporals into the apartment. Jim could hear the snap of a sheet being unfurled and he appreciated that these people were trying to avoid putting Willow in a difficult spot.

“So,” Finn said, “I got the general rundown on va’nuss, and I’ve seen your file, Ellison, but I’d rather hear from you. Any plans to hunt down all of Jenny’s living relatives and slaughter them for spawning inferior offspring?”

Jim blinked at him. Before Jim’s brain could come up with an appropriate response, Blair jumped in. “Oh, that’s great. That’s just like the Army to make gross, sweeping generalizations. The rampant assumptions in that one statement are enough—”

Jim caught Blair’s arm. “No, I’m not,” Jim said firmly and left it at that. Finn looked at him for a second, and then nodded.

“Good, because the general has ordered us to keep out of your way unless it looks like you plan on slaughtering someone the Army considers vital to national security. It sits wrong with me that they’re willing to give you a free pass on murder, but they do the same for Angel and Spike.”

“Well, it sounds like Jenny Giles has explained the clan to you just fine.” Blair spat out the words, his anger and sarcasm front and center.

Finn sighed. “Jenny believed Spike and Angel were killing. She believed they had no control over their nature. I don’t believe that, Mr. Sandburg. I believe they are far less likely to kill than most. My problem is with the Army deciding that Angel could take up killing nuns as a hobby and they would order me to stay clear.”

“I didn’t like all my orders,” Jim said. “But if it makes you feel better, I plan to go back to Cascade and go back to my job with the Cascade Police Department.”

Finn nodded. “It does make me feel better, especially since you don’t have a lot of questionable kills on your record.

“Colonel, we’re ready for the cleanup,” the lieutenant said.

Finn looked at Willow. “We can call Tara. You don’t have to do this.”

Willow stood up a little straighter. “I helped make this mess by not standing up to Jenny years ago. The least I can do is help finish it and make sure none of her magical supplies end up in the wrong hands.” She strode into the apartment without looking back.

“She’s got a spine of steel,” Jim said softly.

Finn nodded. “She does. This whole war to keep the world safe from demons is filled with amazing fighters, both in Sunnydale and here. I’m sorry Buffy isn’t here because she’s another one with enough fortitude to supply a whole platoon. But she was afraid that either you or she wouldn’t be able to control your instincts.”

Jim might have taken offense, but Blair leaned into Jim’s arm and huffed. “No joke. Slayers are designed to fight the things that go bump in the night. Va’nuss don’t bump—they knock over buildings.”
“Are you saying I would have attacked the one person who is genetically and mystically designed to protect the world from going to hell?” That didn’t even sound logical.

“If she attacked you, maybe,” Blair said.

Jim slung his arm over Blair’s shoulders. “Look, Chief, I’ve been attacked by a hell of a lot of people. I generally don’t retaliate. Now if she attacked you or the clan, I might rethink that, but I’m not about to let instinct lead me around by the nose.” Jim said that to Blair, but he kept his gaze locked on Colonel Finn. “I’d take on anyone who hurt my clan, but as long as they’re safe, my second goal is to uphold the laws of Cascade, Washington. And the statutes frown on murder.” The colonel nodded.

“Understood. The Army is here to logistically support of local populations, so there is no chance we will ever challenge Angel’s clan, not even if he loses his soul again.”

“Don’t even say it,” Blair whispered. “A fun time was not had by all.”

Finn frowned, but he didn’t comment. “Whatever you want in the way of support, I will do my best to provide it. If you don’t want to see us again, we will make sure the Army stays clear of Cascade in general and your precinct in particular.”

Jim looked down at Blair, and in that hopeful expression, he could see that Blair still wanted the badge. It would certainly take the stress off Jim and Simon if Blair wasn’t relying on a badly out of date ride along pass. “Could you arrange for Blair to continue with his CID credentials in Cascade?”

“We could,” Finn said slowly, “but there are very few CID cases. Someone would see through that cover rather quickly. It might be better to get him NCIS credentials.”

“Wait,” Blair said. “What if I’m only working one case—the Ellison case? You know, hanging around the most recent kidnapping victim of a terror group waiting to see if they take a second bite at the same apple? And if I’m a civilian expert, I wouldn’t even have to carry a weapon.”

“Oh, you’ll carry one,” Jim said darkly.

Blair rolled his eyes.

“That could work.” Finn smiled. “The general is going to want to know if you’ll be willing to help us out if there is demonic activity in the area.”

“Help you out?” Jim’s stomach clenched as he thought of the things he’d done for the Army. Jim would never regret helping the Chopec hold the pass, but he wished he hadn’t recovered such vivid memories of all the men and women he’d killed. “I won’t kill for the Army.”

“No, but hopefully you would be willing to step in if anyone tries to end the world, starting with the Pacific Northwest.”

Jim considered it. The request was reasonable, and that made Jim hate it even more. “You can call, but I will report back to Angel and take any orders about how to handle it from him. If you want to know what I’m doing, you’ll have to go through the clan.”

“Fair enough,” Finn said.

Jim disliked the way Finn’s easy attitude and good working relationship with his men was undermining Jim’s hate for all things Army, so he turned and pulled Blair along with him down the
hall. Walking away without even acknowledging the colonel felt strange. Jim had been a ranger too long to flaunt the rules without feeling an itch under his skin. However, Jim wouldn’t let Finn or anyone in his command think for one second that Jim’s loyalty was divided.

“Let’s get back to the hotel,” Jim said.

“Oh man, and then we can go home,” Blair said in a reverent voice. He sometimes had that same tone when he described ginger hazelnut ice cream and ancient Incan statuary.

“Yep,” Jim said as they reached the stairs. “We can go home.” Jim yearned for the loft. His life might never be the same, but it was time for him to find his new normal.
Chapter 28

Jim smiled and greeted the various members of Major Crime as he walked through the bullpen.

“You’ll do anything to get out of a conference,” Henri joked, slapping Jim’s arm.

Brian settled for a thumbs up and a quick “Looking good!” before he headed out.

“Oh man, it is so weird to be back. It’s like nothing’s changed, but everything has,” Blair said. Jim agreed. Cascade might be the same, but they had both changed. Jim might have va’nuss ancestors but now that he could label which feelings were nothing more than demonic instincts, he could control them must more easily. In Peru, he hadn’t understood his feelings, and Incacha had guided him to become the killer the tribe needed to protect their land. Now Jim could make his own choices.

He could choose to love Blair without having his darker instincts rule him. The specter of Alex Barnes would never come between them again, because Jim understood his feelings, and he knew how baseless they were. Blair’s commitment to Jim’s Sentinel research had nothing to do with his vow to protect Alex’s identity. Blair acted ethically, and Jim’s gut settled some now that he understood why that had felt wrong when objectively Blair had done nothing wrong.

Now that they shared a bed, Jim knew he could trust Blair as a lover. And Jim was trying very hard to repress the fact that if both he and Alex had va’nuss blood, that meant they were related somewhere back on the family tree. Jim thought he understood his mother better, too. There was no way Jim’s father was va’nuss. The man considered business betrayals a normal part of making a profit. That meant his mother had been the one with demonic blood. No wonder she left. Frankly, Jim was proud of her for not murdering her husband before she took off, driven away by his attitude and her need for loyalty.

“Simon looks like he’s about to blow a gasket,” Blair whispered.

Jim smiled. Simon stood at the door to his office, and to Jim, he looked worried as hell. “Simon!”

“Jim. Thank God. You’re turning my hair gray.” Simon waved them into office.

“Sorry about that Simon,” Jim said as he passed the captain. The worst part of this was that Jim could never tell Simon about the truth of demons. As badly as Simon sometimes handled Sentinel facts, sometimes ordering Blair to not tell him the truth, there was no way Jim would put Simon in a position of having to deal with a whole new set of dangers.

Blair bounced into the room, his energy turned way up. “Hey Simon.” The weariness of the past months had vanished, and Blair was back to the hyper graduate student Jim had first met. Jim smiled.

Simon raised his eyebrows. “Sandburg. Did you drive anyone insane down there?” Simon might sound gruff, but a smile played at the edges of his mouth.

Blair dropped into one of the visitor’s chairs. “Me? I am a sweetheart to live with compared to Detective Grumpyboots.” Just as Jim sat, Blair used a foot to shove Jim’s chair. Jim firmly grabbed his chair before sitting.

Simon headed for his chair. “Someone tried to kill him. How certain are you that the threat has been taken care of?”
“Completely,” Jim said. Jenny Giles was permanently dead and so were the drunken morons who had taken him in Chicago. Jim still would have preferred arresting them, but he understood he didn’t get to dictate how Angel and Spike reacted. “I wouldn’t have come back here unless I was. I wouldn’t put Blair or anyone else in danger.”

“Oh man, how about worrying about yourself?” Blair said. “You were the one scheduled to get buried alive.”

Simon nearly came over the desk. “What??”

“Blair,” Jim glared at his partner.

Blair, the snitch, held both hands up as if surrendering. “No way am I hiding something from Simon. I thought I was going to have a heart attack waiting to see if the team was going to get to you in time. Simon, if you thought your hair went gray, I’m having to dye mine. Oh man, that was…” Blair whistled.

When Simon sank back in his chair, his complexion was ashen. “Christ, Jim.”

“It’s fine. The Army has taken care of what it needed to take care of, and the threat is neutralized,” Jim said. “Sandburg is just spreading a little happiness and joy as revenge for worrying him.”

“I’m not so sure the danger is past,” Simon said, and Jim’s senses immediately sharpened. His jaguar appeared in the corner behind Simon, although thankfully Simon couldn’t see him.

“Simon? What happened?” Blair asked before Jim could ask the exact same thing.

“I got paperwork this morning. I’m waiting for a new Army liaison, someone from the Criminal Investigation Command. There is no reason for the military to have any interest in what we do around here, and if they did want a closer relationship with us, they’d send someone from NCIS. We have a hell of a lot more Naval personnel around here than Army. We only have one Army National Guard Base in our jurisdiction, and CID investigators can’t arrest civilians. You know they’re sending this guy to keep an eye on you, Jim.”

Jim came off high alert, and his jaguar vanished. When he glanced over, Blair had a ‘cat that ate the canary’ grin on his face. Since this was Blair’s news, Jim leaned back and let Blair take this one. “Oh, the CID guy totally plans on keeping track of Jim.”

Simon glared at Blair. “Okay, and what are we going to do to keep him away from Jim?”

“Hopefully you won’t. I expect you’ll sign off on us being partners.” Blair bounced a little in his chair.

“Partners? Us?” Simon’s eyes slowly grew large.

“Yep. Meet your new CID liaison.” Blair pulled his badge and identification and slid them across the desk.

Jim hurried to explain before Simon could stroke out. “The Army was impressed with his interview and investigative skills, and they wanted someone to stick close since they know about my Sentinel abilities. Besides, you and I both know the right along credentials were coming to an end, and I’ll admit that I’m used to having him around. It’s easier to keep him than housebreak a new partner,” Jim teased.

“Dick.”
“Hey, play nice because I can make you do the shit work now. Officially.” Jim gave Blair a sadistic grin.

Blair rolled his eyes. “You made me do the shit work anyway. Who’s been writing your reports for three years, Ellison?”

“Me.”

“Oh yes. And then I rewrite them when your idea of detail is ‘He shot at me. I shot back.’”

“And then I rewrite the rewrites to take out any use of the words ‘preposterous’ or ‘egregious,’” Jim countered. Jim had never wanted the Army back in his life, but now he could take advantage of the benefits while still having Angel and Spike acting like a firewall. He didn’t fear the Army coming in and taking advantage because Jim had no doubt that if one Army officer sneezed in Jim or Blair’s direction that Spike would come up and rip out spines. In general, Jim disapproved of that kind of violence. In this case, he found it comforting.

Simon issued a sharp whistle to shut them both up. “Jim, are you saying you’re going along with this? The Army will use Sandburg to keep a hook into you.”

For once in his life, Jim didn’t have to worry about that. “No, they really aren’t,” Jim said. “I asked them to extend the badge, and they agreed because they know about the senses and they want to be able to call on Sandburg’s skills in an emergency.”

“Sandburg’s skills?” Simon’s disbelief was insulting, and Jim’s blood pressure started to rise.

“Nice, Simon. Thanks for the vote of confidence.” Blair snatched his badge back and shoved it in his pocket.

“I didn’t mean it like that. It’s just that the Army is not a fan of your sort of outside the box thinking,” Simon said.

“Which is why they were totally going about their investigation wrong. Jim and I turned them around and took care of their terrorism problem way faster than they ever could have, and let me tell you, there is only one team that I would ever help, no matter what the emergency, and that’s the team who got Jim out.”

“We do owe them,” Jim said.

“Oh man, that is an understatement. Totally. Completely. If you ever come that close to getting dead again, I’ll kill you myself to avoid having to go through the stress of waiting.”

“No worries on that front, Chief.” Jim smiled at Blair before turning to the captain. “So, Simon, can I assume that I get first dibs on our new CID liaison?”

“I am still trying to figure out how we’re going to explain any of this.”

“I’m a liaison. The Army is trying to play nice.” Blair shrugged.

“That story holds less water than that crap you tried shoveling the first time you came in here talking about the thin blue line,” Simon growled.

“Which is why we have a backup,” Jim said. “If anyone pokes around in the CID computers or sends any queries up the chain of command or even if someone pushes you too hard for answers, Blair is assigned to watch for members of the terror group that paid to have me grabbed in
“Chicago.”

“And if anyone digs farther than that,” Blair said, “they’ll find extra-classified files that say a CID general is using the Ellison case as an excuse to illegally investigate white supremacists in the area after one of his underlings stole from his command and took off to join a group Kincaid ran before we put him in prison. And if they dig farther than that, they’ll find out Jim and I are both demons and the CID has a hands off policy with the demonic community. Layers, man. It’s all about the layers.”

“The CID does not have a good enough sense to make up shit about demons,” Simon said drily.

“I have a question,” Blair said. “Why is it CID when the Army calls it the Criminal Investigation Command?”

“You’re the one who read all the regulations,” Jim said with a shrug.

“Yeah, and through that whole handbook, they assumed anyone reading it would already know. The Army. They are not always big with the logic.”

“Well, make something up. Simon is right about one thing—we don’t get many CID agents up here, so no one is going to challenge you, Agent Sandburg.”

Simon didn’t even try to hide his flinch at the idea of Blair being a federal agent. “So, we’re going along with this?”

“Yep, I think we’re going along.” Jim didn’t add that the situation was the best of all worlds for him. Jim got to have his guide, friend, and lover in his life and he had a clan who provided a layer of security between him and the military. “So, Simon, I assume my cases went to other detectives. Where are we on them?”

Simon shook his head. “Go grab yourselves some coffees and we’ll go over them.”

“Hey, you have coffee right there.” Blair pointed at Simon’s sacred coffee maker.

“Oh no. I’m not sharing with you two heathens, especially not when you’re both giving me more gray hairs than my son. Now go, get some coffees and let the rest of the squad know you finally got back safe.” Simon then ruined his gruff act by smiling widely.

“Come on, Agent Sandburg,” Jim said. Blair’s face lit up. One of these days Blair was going to get used to having a real badge. Jim still wasn’t sure if it was the badge or the security the badge offered that made him so happy. Never again would Blair be the tag-along in the department. Now that Jim had his head screwed on straight, he could see how much he had hurt Blair, even before Alex. It was time to put that right.

And if he couldn’t make Blair feel more secure both in the job and in Jim’s bed, Spike could always come up and kick Jim’s ass. Hell, Jim would make that call himself if he ever fucked up as badly as he had with Alex.

“Agent Sandburg,” Blair bounded out of the room. “Oh man, that is still a wild trip, you know? Wild.”

Simon rolled his eyes as Jim was closing the office door behind him. Some things didn’t change. As they headed toward the break room, Jim draped his arm over Blair’s shoulders. Luckily, some things did.
Please [drop by the archive and comment](#) to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!