The Choices We Make
by Arianna

Summary

Blair's heart is breaking, and he feels he has to leave after TSbyBS. Jim doesn't understand that the choices he's making to 'protect' Blair are killing him. First times, set post Crossroads and TSbyBS.

(This is the slash version of this story.)

Notes

This story was inspired by a discussion on the SentinelAngst list... specifically, by the question as to why so many fans seem to expect that Blair has to sacrifice himself for Jim, but there is not a similar expectation that Jim would sacrifice himself for Blair. Well, I ask you - how could I resist? Also, credit has to go to so many of you who commented thoughtfully during the discussion... you'll see your ideas in the story. Hope you don't mind me building on your commentary. Wish I could have contributed, but I've been on the road and only saw the discussion belatedly on digest.

'Not exactly the restful weekend I had planned,' Ellison thought, with the whimsy of a relaxed and contented man, as the lights of Cascade came into view over the horizon, 'but at least I finally got some quiet time to myself.' After Simon and Blair had left Clayton Falls, he'd headed to his favourite fishing spot and let the peace of it soothe his frazzled soul... caught some fish, communed with nature, admired the mountains and didn't zone once. Well, alright, the senses had acted up a bit,
going a little fuzzy, like a television with bad reception or lights blinking off in a thunderstorm but, basically, they'd been fine. He'd been fine. It had been just what he'd needed, had been longing for - solitude. Blissful isolation, without another soul anywhere in the vicinity, no riotous city noises, just the call of the wild - a hunting owl, the distant howl of a wolf and a big cat prowling somewhere up on the cliffs.

But, as he got closer to home, he couldn't help frowning as he wondered if there'd be any hassle with Sandburg or Simon. They hadn't appreciated being told they weren't welcome, and he figured he'd have to make nice to soothe their ruffled feathers. Not that he wanted to, or thought it should be necessary. What was so wrong about wanting a little peace and quiet? Sure they were all friends, but they weren't joined at the hip - though it seemed for the last three years that he'd had a Siamese twin dogging his footsteps, closer than a shadow, always there. Ellison grimaced as he recalled Sandburg's expression when he told his partner that he just needed some space because the kid was always in his face. Big eyes had gone wide with startled hurt, like he'd just been kicked. Sighing, Ellison figured the kid would have gotten over it by now; Blair wasn't the sort to hold a grudge. And it wasn't like there hadn't been other things to think about during their brief sojourn in the small town. The memory of Sandburg being carried into the isolation tent was one he wouldn't soon forget.

Nobody had said anything; he'd been too sick and appalled by the thought that Blair had contracted some deadly disease, and that he would likely die in that damned tent. It sent a shiver down his spine to even *think* about Blair dying... but it had turned out okay. Thank God. A day or two of 'peace and quiet' was one thing, but Jim had gotten used to his little guppy and, though he'd probably never admit it, would miss the kid when the time came for him to move on.

That thought made Ellison uncomfortable, because it reminded him of their rarely mentioned agreement and Sandburg's dissertation. Sniffing, Jim rubbed his mouth absently as he admitted to himself that he wished he'd never made that agreement. He'd just been so damned desperate at the time and 'someday' had seemed a long way away. But he knew Blair had all the material he needed and it was just a matter of time. Sooner or later, Sandburg would get tired of the 'roller-coaster' and move on with his own life. Down deep, Jim hoped that Blair would decide to never write that paper, not about him, specifically, anyway. Snorting to himself, he figured *that* scenario was a bad case of wishful thinking. But it would be so much easier if the kid would settle down and choose the roller-coaster, become a cop and his permanent partner, do something worthwhile with his life rather than fritter it away in the surreal world of academia. "Get real," he muttered to himself. Sandburg a cop? Maybe when pigs learned to fly.

As he pulled into his parking spot beside Sandburg's beat-up old 'classic', Jim reflected that, in the confusion of events, he hadn't told the kid how glad he was that Sandburg was all right. Well, as part of 'making nice' to soothe any lingering hurt, he'd make damned sure the kid knew that he was very glad it hadn't been as serious as they'd feared, and that Blair was okay. He hauled his gear out of the back and headed into the building, smiling as he thought of the fish he'd brought home as a peace offering of sorts. Too late tonight to cook up a fish fry, but they'd feast tomorrow.

As he strode down the hall, juggling his gear while he sorted through his keys, Ellison thought vaguely that the loft was quieter than usual when Sandburg was around. Normally, especially when he was home alone, Blair had some jungle beat thumping in the background like an atavistic echo of the sound of him pounding out some paper or other on his laptop. Mildly concerned, he recalled how wasted the kid had been when Blair and Simon had left Clayton Falls; maybe Sandburg had turned in early, still a little worn out from the misadventures in the mountains.

But as he neared his doorway, his nose twitched at a sickly sweet odour and he frowned, confused - and then, pushing open the door, his heart froze in sudden fear. Blood. The stench of it permeated the air, and his gut clenched as nausea roiled in response.
"Sandburg!" he called out sharply, dumping his bag and tackle box, his senses raking the loft and quickly zeroing in on Blair, lying curled on the floor in a crimson pool on the far side of the kitchen island; streaks of dried blood from a spot near the foot of the stairs were mute testimony of his vain struggle to reach the phone. "Chief?" Jim gasped as he lurched across the room and dropped to his knees; he carefully turned the kid and saw Sandburg's badly battered face before searching for the source of all that blood. He could hear the slow, thready heartbeat, the rasping, shallow, too-fast breaths, so he knew the kid was alive, but only barely.

Blair moaned as he was moved, flinching even though only semiconscious. "Don't know... where he is..." he mumbled doggedly, his voice so faint that the words were scarcely audible. "Don't know..."

"Easy, Chief," Jim soothed as he pushed aside layers of cloth thick and stiff with blood to find what looked like a knife wound in Sandburg's left side, and saw that Blair's whole torso was covered with bruises to match those on his face - he'd been beaten so brutally it amounted to torture. Blood was still leaking from the ugly gash in a weak pulse, and Ellison wondered anxiously as he lightly probed Sandburg's ribs and abdomen, feeling heat and swelling, and eliciting small groans of unconscious protest, if there was internal bleeding as well.

Trembling with the effort of controlling his rioting emotions, Ellison pulled out his cell phone and punched in 911, identifying himself and demanding an ambulance as well as police backup, snapping, "Officer down," before he rattled off the address and a very brief description of the severity of the injuries. He hated leaving Blair lying on the hard floor, but he didn't dare move the kid in case he aggravated his injuries. Focusing himself on what had to be done rather than on the chilling realization that Blair was more dead than alive, he hurried to get a blanket and towels. Sandburg was gray with shock, his skin cold and clammy; from the look of things, he'd been bleeding to death for hours, maybe since the night before. Swiftly, if gently, Jim padded the wound and bundled the blanket around the younger man before easing Sandburg's head and shoulders up with one arm, to cradle Blair against his body - to ease his breathing, to lend warmth, to let the younger man know he wasn't alone any longer - and just because he needed to hold the kid.

"Chief? Can you hear me?" he called softly, as he gently brushed Blair's sweat-matted hair back from his battered face. One eye was swollen shut and black with bruising, his upper lip was cut and puffy, and one cheek was swollen and reddened from the abuse he'd taken. Lightly touching his best friend's throat, Jim noted the layered marks of fingers and thumbs, as if the kid had been repeatedly nearly choked to death. God, if his larynx had been crushed, he'd be long dead by now...

"Don't know... where he... is..." Sandburg muttered again, and Jim frowned. The tone and the weary repetition reminded him of a soldier giving his rank and serial number, over and over.

"Where who is, Chief?" he asked to keep Sandburg talking, as if he didn't know, hadn't figured out with a sick, sinking sensation in his belly that Blair was suffering, maybe dying, because of him.

"J-jim. Don't know where..." Blair murmured brokenly in the monotonous tone, his voice thick and slurred.

"Who did this, Blair?" Ellison demanded then, his voice cold and brittle with the grim realization of what must have happened. Someone had come looking for him and had tried to get information from Sandburg, had tried to beat it out of him, and then had left him to die. "Who hurt you?"

Blair's lashes flickered and he tensed as he looked up, confused, uncertain, the fear he felt and the agony he was enduring starkly etched on his face. His eyes widened when his gaze shifted to Jim's face, but then another spasm of pain took him, making him gasp and shudder weakly, stealing away his brief moment of awareness as he slumped against Jim, his head falling against Ellison's chest.
"Where the hell is that ambulance?" Jim cursed, scared. The kid couldn't last much longer...

Swallowing hard, Ellison fought the rising panic that swirled in his gut. His jaw tight, he looked around the loft, seeking any sign, any trace of evidence that might give him a lead on who had done this. The stench of blood assaulted him, sending his senses into overload and he furiously fought for control; he couldn't lose it now. But the pervasive smell blocked out other scents that might be lingering in the air. There was nothing that he could see or smell that gave him a clue as to who had been here and had left Blair for dead.

Blair's rasping breath and sluggish heartbeat thundered in his ears, drawing his attention back to the sorely injured man in his arms. It seemed an eternity before he finally heard the sirens in the distance. Tightening his embrace, he grated, "Hang on, Chief. Just a little longer, okay? Help's almost here..."

"Jim! What the hell happened?" Simon growled as he entered the waiting room and saw his best detective standing rigidly in the corner, staring fixedly down the hall toward the treatment rooms. At Ellison's request, the uniforms that had arrived with the ambulance had alerted Banks that Sandburg had been assaulted, but dispatch hadn't given Simon any details other than that the call had come from Ellison's residence. "Jim!" he repeated when he got close enough to grasp Ellison's arm and give the detective a little shake to get his attention.

Startled, distracted from his concentration upon what was happening down the hall, Ellison blinked and looked dazedly at Simon. "I don't know," he muttered, his mouth and throat dry. "I found him when I got home. Beaten within an inch of his life and stabbed..."

Shocked and appalled by the news, Banks looked from Jim to the corridor beyond. Lifting a hand to Ellison's shoulder, he asked hollowly, "He'll be all right, won't he?"

With a half-shrug and a tight shake of his head, Jim replied hoarsely, "He's hurt bad, Simon - real bad - I don't know how long he'd been lying there, bleeding to death, before I got back. Since last night, I think."

They both tensed as a woman in a white coat over scrubs came out of the treatment room and pulled bloodstained gloves from her hands, tossing them in a container in the hall as she came toward the waiting area. Jim stepped toward her, catching her attention, and she nodded in acknowledgement.

"I'm Dr. Meadows. Are you here with Mr. Sandburg?"

"Yes. I'm Detective Jim Ellison, and this is Captain Simon Banks, Cascade PD. Blair's my partner and roommate," Jim explained in a rush, his voice tight with fear. "How is he?"

"Roommate?" she echoed, surprised. Frowning thoughtfully, she mused softly, "I'd thought, from the state of his injuries, that he must live alone to have gone so long without help."

Defensively, Ellison muttered, "I was away for the weekend, fishing..."

"Ah," she murmured, shaking her head. "Too bad he didn't go with you." Returning to the business at hand, she told him bluntly, if not unkindly, "I'm afraid that your friend's condition is very grave and I'd suggest you contact his family..."

"There's only his mother, and I don't know where she is," Jim cut in. "He's going to live, right?"
"We're prepping him for the OR and he'll be taken there in a few minutes," she replied briskly, avoiding a direct answer, so they'd understand when she got to the bottom line. "He has numerous critical internal injuries, as well as a severe concussion. Right now, he's comatose and bordering on terminal shock from massive blood loss, but we have him on life support. We need to know if he has a living will, as extraordinary measures may well be required to continue to sustain his life." Pausing briefly to look from one very worried man to the other, she continued more gently, "I'm sorry, but I can't make you any promises. He's not likely to survive the surgery."

Jim paled, his chest suddenly too tight, as he gaped at her. "You can't be serious," he gasped, scarcely aware of Simon's firm supportive grip on his shoulder.

Sighing, she replied, "Frankly, it's a miracle he's still alive. Even if he makes it through the surgery, there's no guarantee he'll live through the night. I wish I didn't have to be so blunt, but I really think you should try to find his mother." And then, because they needed to know the patient's wishes if at all possible, she asked again, "Do you know if he has a living will?"

Jim shook his head. He knew damned well what Sandburg thought about the artificial prolongation of life where there was no real hope, but no way in hell was he prepared to accept that all hope was gone. "You do everything you have to do to keep him alive, is that clear?" he told her sharply. An order. No discussion.

Taking no offense from the tone, understanding the pain and fear of those whose loved ones were at risk, she nodded. "Very clear, thank you," she replied gently, and then continued, "There's little you can do here, but if you wish to wait, there's a lounge outside the Operating Theatres on the second floor. I am sorry - I wish I could give you better news, but you should prepare yourself for the worst." Turning aside when a nurse called for her attention, she gave them a last quick look as she said, "If you'll excuse me..."

Mutely, the two men nodded, too overwhelmed by her apparent conviction that Sandburg was at death's door, to speak. A stricken look of deep sorrow on his face, Simon lifted his arm to encircle Jim's shoulders and could feel the slight tremble of shock rippling through Ellison's body. Sighing heavily as he studied the other man's stunned expression, Banks could pretty much guess what Jim was thinking. "This wasn't your fault," he murmured, as he gently tried to maneuver Ellison toward a chair.

Swallowing, Jim wiped a hand across his mouth as he grated, "Yeah. It was. If I hadn't told the both of you to leave..."

"Jim, stop," Simon counseled compassionately. "You couldn't know -"

"They were looking for me," Jim cut in, his voice tight with his effort at control.

"You can't know that -"

"Yeah, I can," he argued, turning to Simon. "When I found him, he was muttering, over and over, 'Don't know where he is'. They were after me and Sandburg wouldn't tell them anything, no matter how much they beat him. Jesus, Simon..." he grated, his voice breaking. "He suffered this, might well die, to protect me."

Banks' eyes narrowed as he absorbed the new information. He'd assumed it had been a random home invasion but evidently it was a lot more personal than that. And whoever had done this was still out there, looking for Ellison. His expression hardened as he thought with a measure of grim satisfaction that that would make it a lot more probable that they'd eventually be able to catch the vicious scum who had done this. His gut twisted as he thought again about Sandburg... and that the
charge, when and if they caught the bastards, looked as if it would be murder. But, unless the kid held on long enough to identify or at least describe his assailants, they couldn't do much more - other than wait for the next attack - than hope the officers canvassing Jim's building for information came up with something.

"I'm sorry, Jim," he rumbled, his throat suddenly tight. "The kid didn't deserve this, but you still can't blame yourself. You know he wouldn't want that." Pausing, he then suggested, "Maybe we should try to find Naomi. She'll need to know, need to be here for... the funeral..."

"He's not going to die," Ellison rasped, shrugging off Simon's arm, not wanting comfort.

"Jim, you heard the doctor. Blair's chances of living through this aren't good," Banks cajoled softly, understanding the reaction of denial but believing they needed to face the facts.

"NO!" Jim snapped back, furiously - desperately. "He won't die. He's hung on this long... he won't give up."

His lips thinning as he looked away, Simon shook his head. But then he sighed heavily as he turned back to face Ellison. "I hope you're right. I really do." Feeling infinitely weary, he looked vaguely around and then muttered dispiritedly, "Come on, let's get some coffee. It's going to be a long night."

Time passed torturously, seconds dragging into minutes that ticked into one hour, and then two... and three, without word. They paced the confines of the small waiting room and drank endless cups of bitter coffee, lost in their own thoughts and emotions, each trying to find some measure of hope in the fact that the surgery was still going on - that Sandburg was still alive and might, by some miracle, survive.

Jim was a seething caldron of emotion, barely able to think straight. He wanted to find the men who had done this and tear them apart with his bare hands, make them suffer as they'd made Blair suffer. But he knew the best he'd ever be able to do, and only if they got lucky, was arrest the bastards and hope Blair lived to testify against them. He wanted to hold onto his fury because it was a shield against the guilt and the profound regret that rose up to crush his lungs and clog his throat. Blair had been no more than an innocent bystander, caught in some act of revenge against him. It shouldn't have happened. If Jim hadn't taken it into his head to run away from home for a couple of days, he'd've been there and Blair wouldn't be... wouldn't be struggling to hold onto life. Wouldn't have suffered the pain and the fear. Wouldn't have laid there for hours and hours, wondering if anyone would come, if Jim would get home in time to find him still alive, wondering if he was going to die alone. If he'd been grateful that his friends wanted to spend time with him and had tracked him down, had welcomed them rather than spurned them, Blair would have been safe, with him, fishing - it tore at Jim that he'd been so proud of himself, had enjoyed the peace and tranquility of the mountains while Blair had been bleeding his life out in the loft. Bile burned in the back of his throat as nausea twisted in his belly. God... what the kid had endured...

For him.

To protect him.

Ellison's eyes burned and he scraped at them, desperate to hold onto his control and not weep like some baby. It was Sandburg who was hurt, not him.
But under the fury, the guilt and regret, there was such fear. Fear that the kid would die. Oh, God - he was so damned young. He should have a whole life to live, and he would have, if he'd never met one James Ellison. And he was so... special. Loss, a hollow empty gaping hole inside, threatened to swamp all the other feelings and thoughts. Blind loss. Of someone essential, someone who'd become part of the tapestry of Jim's life, a vital part, and Ellison couldn't bear to think past the emptiness, to even try to imagine what life would be like without Sandburg's persistent cheerful curiosity and energy, without his help and support and... friendship.

So he paced, and drank coffee, and wished he could believe in prayer... so that he could beg someone or something to spare Blair's life and hope it might do some good.

Simon watched Jim, deeply worried about him. He'd never seen Ellison so distraught, and he wasn't at all sure what would happen if that door opened and some doctor came out to tell them that Sandburg had died on the table. Slumping into a chair, Banks wiped a hand over his face and eyes, sniffing a little, as he held onto his own emotions about what had happened to Blair. Much as he scowled and bellowed and pretended Sandburg was more annoyance than help, he loved that kid. He kept thinking about how Blair had jumped out of a plane over the jungles of Peru, following Jim on a mission to find him and Darryl - Sandburg, jumping out of a perfectly good plane when he was terrified of heights, because he cared about them, considered them friends. And about how the kid had been shot after following Jim into the forest, to track him down and rescue him from Quinn. The kid wasn't a cop, didn't have to put himself on the line, but he did. Not just for Jim, but for Simon, too - and he never seemed to think that was anything extraordinary.

It made Banks sick to think that Blair was going to die. Hell, they'd just been through this in Clayton Falls when they'd thought him stricken with Ebola and then had found out, with indescribable relief, that it had all been just an elaborate scam. But, for a while, he and Jim hadn't known that, and had despaired that they might well lose Sandburg. They'd gotten through that only to be here, now, waiting to know if the kid would even last the night. So, yeah, he felt sick and angry - and so damned helpless. When they'd come back from Clayton Falls, he'd been worried that Blair still seemed under the weather, pale and too quiet, either from the poisoned water or from running around when he should have been resting - or because he was thinking hard about what Jim had said when they'd first arrived. Simon had almost invited him over to the house for the night, almost invited him to dinner - almost but didn't. He'd been tired, too, and had just wanted to get home. So he'd dropped Blair off and hadn't even watched while the kid shuffled wearily to the entryway. Damn, if only...

If only. The sorriest, damn phrase he knew. If only. Only thought about once it was too damned late and the harm was already, irreparably, done.

And this sentinel business... what would happen to Jim if the kid died? Could he handle his senses on his own? Or would they spiral out of control again, like they had three years ago? Jim had thought he was going crazy or had a brain tumour or something; would he be able to manage on his own now? Had Blair taught him enough about what he was, about how to use his senses and not be overwhelmed by them? Or would he be adrift without the support and insights Sandburg came up with, with disconcerting and apparently effortless ease?

Even if he could manage the senses, would Ellison ever forgive himself, ever be able to get past it, if Sandburg died? This wasn't some unfortunate accident, some illness that struck out of nowhere but was impersonal, if deadly. If Jim was right and had interpreted Sandburg's words and the situation correctly, then Blair was dying because he was Jim's friend, pure and simple. Because they shared a home. Because Blair was in the wrong place at the wrong time, and had refused to betray his friend.

Regardless, even if the attack hadn't been ultimately aimed at Ellison, if it was just random violence, Blair was the best friend who had been willfully left behind - who had been virtually chased away
when he'd followed. No, Jim would never forgive himself for that... not if the kid died.

'God,' Simon prayed as he lifted his eyes to the ceiling, *please* don't take the kid now...

Every damned time the doors that led to the Operating Theatres opened, as doctors and nurses, technicians and orderlies came and went, they'd freeze, caught between hope and dread... and still there was no word. As the hours went by, all the staff in the OR came to know that two men were keeping anxious vigil and the staff, too, began to watch to see what the word would be. All they knew was that a young man had been brutally attacked and left for dead - and that his odds weren't good. Both Jim and Simon came to loathe the look of sorry compassion on the faces of the nurses or others - expressions that held little hope.

Until finally, four and half hours after their vigil had begun, the doors swished open and a weary surgeon walked through, but didn't keep going - he turned toward them, and they stood, like deer caught in the headlights, waiting to know if they were going to be struck down or given reprieve.

"I'm Shamus McNally and I've just finished working on your friend, Blair Sandburg," he told them. "First, he's still alive."

Both men visibly slumped at his words, some of the tension easing from their stiff shoulders. "Will he make it?" Jim asked quietly, his gaze searching the surgeon's eyes, seeking reassurance, afraid he wasn't going to get it.

"It's too soon to know, for certain," Dr. McNally replied regretfully. "The prognosis isn't good, I'm afraid. But - I don't like to give up on my patients while they're still breathing. He'll be in Recovery for the next hour and then we'll move him to our Intensive Care Unit. You should go... there's nothing you can do here. The staff will call if..."

"No, I'm not going anywhere," Jim asserted vehemently. "I want to see him as soon as I can."

Shrugging, not interested in arguing about it, the physician nodded. "Fine. You can wait upstairs, on the fifth floor. The staff will come for you when he's settled up there."

"Doctor," Simon interjected solemnly, "we're grateful for what you've done to try to help Blair."

"Just doing my job," McNally replied with a small, weary smile. "I hope he survives, I really do."

It was another hour and a half of waiting and more waiting, but Simon knew precisely the moment that Sandburg was transferred by some back corridor into the closed ward. Ellison stiffened, his head tilted to one side and his expression became one of intense concentration.

"Careful, Jim," Simon warned. "If you zone..."

"I can hear him, Simon," Ellison cut in, his voice taut with emotion. "I can hear his heart beating; I know it's him."

"Okay, well, we knew he was still alive, right? So, it figures his heart is beating," Banks replied ironically. Moving to grip Jim's arm, he directed, "Stop it. You'll spiral into the sound and that won't do him any good."
Reluctantly, Jim eased up on his hearing. Simon was right; it was too risky. But he had this urge, this need, to be connected somehow to Sandburg, so he held a slight contact, the too-slow thudding a distant beat of life. Heaving out a breath, he crossed his arms as he stared at the floor. "He doesn't sound good..."

"Well, we expected that, too," Banks muttered wearily. "Jim, the best we can hope for right now is that he keeps breathing. You can't stay all wired up like this; you'll be a basket case."

"What am I supposed to do, Simon?" Ellison snapped as he looked up with a fierce glare. " Pretend I don't care? That it doesn't really matter, one way or another? He's in there because of me!"

"This isn't about you, Jim," Simon told him bluntly. "Not completely, anyway. I know we may have a problem with your senses if we lose him -"

"This isn't about my senses, dammit!" Ellison cursed.

"What then? Your guilt? Your regret? Your anger, maybe?" Banks challenged. "Because so long as you're so wrapped up that he's maybe dying because of you, you're focused on yourself and not him. And, frankly, Detective, he deserves better than that."

Rearing back at if he'd been slugged, Jim gaped at his boss and then looked away. He took a deep, shuddering breath and swallowed hard. "No," he murmured, shaking his head. "No - I, uh, I just don't want to lose him, Simon. I don't want him to die..."

"Neither do I, Jim," Simon sighed. "A lot of people, probably a lot more than we even know about or could imagine, will mourn that kid if... well, if he doesn't make it."

Ellison bit his lip as he turned away, his hand lifting to cover his eyes as he leaned one shoulder against the wall. He hated this. Hated to feel so helpless. Hated to care so much and hurt so bad. Hated to think Blair might not see another dawn or... or anything else. Sniffing, he pinched the bridge of his nose, forcing back the tears that threatened. He wouldn't weep. That would be... giving up. And he couldn't, wouldn't, give up on Sandburg.

"He has to 'make it', Simon," he finally grated. "He just has to..."

A nurse finally came to lead them into the ICU. Most of the lights were dimmed, and it was only then that the two men realized it must be close to midnight. Several staff members bent over charts in the open square office area in the centre of the large chamber; others were working with patients in the small glass cubicles around the perimeter. When they reached the one where Sandburg had been placed, they paused a moment, staring in through the uncurtained window, anguish written on both their faces.

His skin was mottled with dark bruises, his ribs wrapped tightly to support cracked or broken ribs, and a wide, white bandage was wrapped around his abdomen. A sheet covered his lower body, and he seemed to be ensnared in a web of tubes and wires, with an oxygen mask obscuring part of his face, and his hair tangled around his head. But for the shallow rise and fall of his chest, he was perfectly still, void of all animation and life.

Simon winced and looked away. Jim had said Sandburg had been badly beaten, but Banks hadn't expected anything as bad as this. The kid looked like he'd been trampled by a herd of wild horses.

Jim was caught by Blair's absolute stark pallor, his skin translucent, like fine porcelain, under the unhealthy stain of the bruises. Ellison could make out the faint blue patchwork of damaged capillaries and see the erratic pulse beating at the base of his best friend's throat. Sandburg's lungs
rattled with each ragged breath... and he looked so vulnerable. So utterly defenceless and broken.

Simon touched his shoulder, and then they moved into the cubicle, walking quietly, almost tentatively, as if on shards of glass. They took up positions on either side of the bed, and Jim reached to stroke Blair's forehead lightly before grasping his partner's hand. He frowned at how cold the kid's skin felt and thought poignantly about how much Blair hated to be cold. Looking around, he spotted a blanket in the lower half of the bedside cabinet and pulled it out to drape it gently over his best friend's body. And then he just stood, his hand on Blair's shoulder, as he murmured brokenly, "Hey, Chief - I gotta say I've seen you look better. But... you're going to be okay, you hear me? You just keep fighting, Blair; just keep holding on. I'll be here. I promise. You aren't alone; you're safe now."

If Sandburg could hear, he gave no sign. Simon bowed his head, looking away from Jim, reluctant to be a witness to the profound emotion on his Detective's face and in Ellison's voice; but he found himself sincerely hoping that Sandburg could hear - and would know that even if his best friend never said it in so many words, Jim clearly loved him... maybe more than words could ever express.

They were an odd pair, Ellison and Sandburg, Simon reflected. Complete opposites in so many, maybe superficial, ways. One was a rigid, authoritarian, conservative cop and the other an irrepressible, open, academic hippie throwback. And yet... they meshed, like finely-crafted, skillfully engineered parts designed to form one, complete being. They bickered and sniped, teased and sulked, laughed at things others didn't always get, and worked together better than any team he'd ever known. And, they had more downright courage, stubborn determination and outright chutzpah than any other men he'd ever known. In their own, odd way, each was quietly devoted to the other, fiercely protective and loyal. Banks found he wasn't at all surprised that Sandburg had taken such a brutal beating to protect Jim, though Ellison, himself, seemed to think it was somehow amazing. That rankled Simon a bit - the fact that Jim really didn't seem to grasp that Sandburg would do just about anything for him. Most of the time, he seemed to take the kid's commitment to him for granted... when he wasn't finding it irritating. Banks wondered if, maybe, Jim was only realizing for the first time that Sandburg would, quite literally, die for him. Looking back up at the detective, he wondered what Ellison would do with that knowledge, if the kid lived.

Jim was staring down at Sandburg as if, by force of will alone, he could keep Blair alive.

Simon wished with all his heart that it could be that easy...

Lost in the netherworld of the unconscious, Blair stumbled down blind alleys and around corners that only led him back to where he'd been. Fragments of memory haunted him, tormented him. Voices and faces, and the slam of painful fists. Being jumped in the corridor outside the loft... Jim saying, "You're always in my face." Being scared of dying from Ebola. Chasing through forests, some of pine, others wild jungles. Voices demanding, "Where is he, runt?" Blows, relentless, snapping his head back, stealing his breath away. Lash laughing at him and chanting, "I can be you." Chapel chasing him from the shadows. Thunder and lightning, violent winds and gunfire. Pulling Jim down, under a truck. His mother astonished, "But he's a pig, Blair." Jim... blind. Jim... doubled over in pain, his senses spiking. Jim laughing at him, swiping at his hair. An elevator endlessly dropping, a bomb ticking down. The searing burn of a knife. Sharp kicks thudding into his body. Jim holding him on a rainswept deck. Standing on the balcony. "It's about friendship."

Round and round, exhausted, scared and lost. Jim was in danger, and he couldn't find him. Had to find him, warn him.
But pain lacerated him with every breath, ached deep in his chest, pounded through his body with each drop of blood and he couldn't find his way out; it was too dark and confusing. And it hurt so bad...

"JIM!" he shouted, with increasing desperation and despair, trying to be heard over the noise in his mind. "JIM! They want to kill you, man! JIM! Oh, God, where are you? I have to find you. I have to..."

McNally found them there half an hour later, when he came to check on Sandburg before heading out for the night. He watched both men for a long moment from outside the cubicle, taking in their postures of exhaustion and despair. Shaking his head, he stepped into the small, glass cell and said quietly, "You'll have to leave, at least for a while."

Startled, Jim jerked and lifted his head to turn to the doctor, his body stiffening with resistance. But, before he could say anything, the surgeon continued, "You're both at the end of your tether. Any fool can see that. And you," he nodded at Ellison, "in case you haven't noticed, have dried blood all over your jeans. You need to clean up and get some rest."

Ellison's jaw tightened as he lowered and shook his head, belligerent, unwilling to leave. But Simon could see the sense of the doctor's advice. Still... if Sandburg died while they were gone...

"It's hard to go, not knowing..." he murmured, glancing from Ellison to the physician.

"I know," McNally acknowledged kindly. "But he's a stubborn young cuss, isn't he? He's holding his own, better than anyone would have predicted a few hours ago." Moving forward as Simon stepped back to give him access to his patient, the surgeon fitted his stethoscope to his ears, unaware that the man on the far side of the bed could hear the irregular heartbeat better than he could, even with his fine instrument. Nodding to himself as he checked the monitors, he continued, "His blood pressure is holding steady, as are his other life signs." Lifting his gaze to Jim's, he added, "You won't be much good when and if he does wake up, if you don't take some care of yourself. Besides, you smell like fish and that might well make him nauseous once he's more conscious. Go home. You can see him again in a few hours."

"The doctor's right, Jim," Simon threw in. "C'mon, Detective. I'll give you a lift back to your place."

"But if... what if..." Ellison stammered, uncertain. He couldn't explain it, but he felt so strongly that Sandburg needed him close by.

"If he begins to look like he's going to wake up anytime soon," McNally assured him, understanding the unspoken questions, having heard them innumerable times before, "or if his condition begins to deteriorate, they'll call you immediately."

Swallowing, Jim looked down at Blair and reached to gently stroke the younger man's cheek. "I'll be back soon, Chief," he said quietly in capitulation. "You'd better still be here, you hear me?" He tried to imagine Sandburg grinning at him, teasing that he wasn't in any condition to go anywhere, but the thought of never again seeing that irrepressible impishness, or hearing that laugh, tore through him. It was a long moment before he could move, so hard was it to master his emotions.

But, finally, he looked up at Simon, his eyes dark with anxiety, and he followed his boss out of the room. Every step of the way out of the hospital, he told himself that Sandburg wouldn't quit on him,
and that he had to be strong and alert, able to give whatever support was needed, when the kid finally woke up. The soldier in him knew that meant he had to have some rest, however much he only wanted to stay by his best friend's side. So, grudgingly, he let Simon drive him home - but he wondered how he'd ever manage to sleep when every fibre in his being shrieked that he should be standing watch over Sandburg.

So lost was he in his own thoughts, Jim didn't even notice the patrolman on guard in the hall outside the ICU entrance, or the unmarked car parked in front of his building. He was too fraught with worry about Blair's condition to think about the possible threat of another attack to silence a possible witness, and he had completely forgotten the threat to his own security. But Simon hadn't, and had taken the necessary steps to keep both of his men secure. As he watched Jim slowly walk into the building, the Captain of Major Crimes just wished they had something to go on, but he'd learned hours ago that the interviews with Ellison's neighbours had borne no fruit. Nobody had heard or seen anything. Wearily, he shook his head... sometimes it seemed to him, nobody ever did - especially when it mattered most.

As soon as he stepped off the elevator, Jim could smell the blood. Nauseated by the stench of it, he strode through his apartment to throw open the balcony door, and then he grimly washed the floor. He held himself rigidly under control, pushing away unwanted memories, images of Blair looking so hurt up at Clayton Falls, so brutalized, lying in a pool of his own blood - so vulnerable in the hospital. Once he'd finished cleaning up the mess, his actions almost mechanical in their deliberation, he stripped to shower and, under the spray, he scrubbed himself with soap, as if he could wash away the horror and the fear.

But he couldn't... no more than he could fight back the sob that rose in his chest.

His head bowed under the hot shower, salty moisture staining his cheeks. Sagging against the tiled wall, his arms crossed tightly, he choked, "God, Chief... I'm sorry. I'm so sorry..."

After a restless night of very little sleep - and that fitful, broken by nightmares - Jim returned to the hospital. When he buzzed for entry into the ICU, he didn't know whether to be grateful or alarmed when the staff had no objection to him sitting beside Sandburg for as long as he wanted to stay, only stipulating that he'd have to leave whenever they needed to perform some act of care for his friend.

Grateful, that he didn't have to fight about being where he needed to be.

Scared shitless, that they were only giving him unlimited access because they saw his vigil as a deathwatch.

But, mostly, he was relieved beyond words that Sandburg was still breathing, still holding his own - until he got close enough to realize that Blair was running a low fever. The last thing the kid's thin resources needed to deal with was an infection.

"He's hot," he grunted, shooting an accusing look at the nurse who'd escorted him to Sandburg's cubicle.
"Yes, I know," she replied calmly. "The fever started a few hours ago - we've already begun a regime of antibiotics. It's not unexpected, and so far, he's managing to hold his own."

Jim nodded tightly, knowing there wasn't anyone to blame or anything more that could be done, and he turned away to look at Blair. He was still ghastly pale, and his breathing was still ragged. His heartbeat was no stronger, but Jim tried to console himself that it was no worse, either.

He pulled the single chair in the cell closer to the bed and then sat down, his hands clasped between his knees, until he couldn't resist reaching out to grip Blair's wrist. "I'm back," he murmured. "And this time, buddy, I'm not going anywhere until you wake up." Lapsing into silence, he simply sat and gazed at Sandburg's face, watching for any sign of returning consciousness.

One hour drifted past, and then another. The silence, Sandburg's stillness, wore at him, and he wondered if Blair could sense any of what was happening around him. Belatedly remembering that people in comas supposedly could hear what was said to, and around, them, Jim began to speak softly, hoping the sound of his voice might draw Blair back from the abyss.

"You know I didn't mean anything personal about getting away for a couple of days, right?" he murmured anxiously, rambling from one thought to another. "I mean, I just needed to - I don't know - have some down time. I guess I wanted to see if I could manage on my own again, you know? Not that I don't want to have you around. I've gotten used to you. Hell, fine, I'll admit it - I'd miss you if you moved out. But - it's important to me to not get too dependent, you know? Anyway, I'm sorry I said what I did. I know the tests are important, that they help. I was scared, when it looked like you were sick. Hated to see them carry you away into that tent. You know that, right? You know how glad I was that it turned out not to be some damned plague - that you were okay? I should have said something, but so much was going on - happening so fast. I just didn't think - you know I don't ever want anything bad to happen to you, don't you? I... I wish I could change things, Chief. Wish I'd told you and Simon to stay, once you'd arrived. I really do. More than you'll ever know. When I got home... and found you... ah, God, Chief..."

His voice cracked, and he had to stop to force his emotions back before he lost it completely. If Blair could hear him, Jim didn't want his best friend to hear him falling apart. It would sound like he'd given up, that he was sure Sandburg was going to die. And he wouldn't give up... he wouldn't.

Clearing his throat, he sniffed and wiped his eyes, and then began again. "I, uh... I could kill whoever did this, you know? Cheerfully. You never deserved this, Chief. To be hurt so bad. I'm sorry you had to wait so long for me to get home. God, you're one tough sonofabitch, though, you know that? To have held on so long? To not give up. You won't give up, will you, Chief? You'll beat this. I wish you'd wake up. Scares me to see you so... still and... quiet. It's not natural. You're not even quiet when you sleep, did you know that? You mumble and shift around all night long, your mind never resting, I guess. You're always thinking, always trying to figure things out. Even in your dreams. Don't get me wrong - it doesn't bother me or anything. It's sort of reassuring - background noise that lets me know you're there. Like the sound of your heart and your breathing. Like I said, I guess I've gotten used to having you around. Seems strange, too silent, in the loft, when you're not there. But you'll be home soon, right? You hate hospitals, well, except for the nurses... you want to get better and get out of here; I know you do. I haven't tried to find Naomi; I figure you wouldn't want her worried. Wouldn't know where to start looking for her, anyway, I guess..."

His voice drifted off as he gazed at his friend, wishing so badly that Sandburg would regain consciousness. Absently, his hand drifted to clasp Blair's, his thumb drawing idle circles on Sandburg's skin. He frowned, thinking the fever seemed worse to him and wondered if that was a good thing or a bad thing. Fevers were a sign of a body fighting infection, and that was a good thing. But they took a lot of energy, and Blair didn't have any to spare.
"They were after me, weren't they?" he asked then, miserably. "And you wouldn't tell them where I was or when I'd be back. Why'd you do that? Take so much punishment? Risk your life like that? Who did this? Who left you like that? Dammit, kid - I don't want you hurt because of me. I never wanted that. Never expected you to put yourself on the line like that. I'm not worth this, Chief. I want you to live a long life, have a bunch of kids, be loved as you so deserve to be loved, grow old - be a crazy senior citizen bouncing around, talking a mile a minute, with wild gray hair..."

When his voice broke again, Jim drew in a ragged breath and looked around the sterile, impersonal cell and out the glass window at the strangers who monitored his best friend's life signs. It was cold, colourless. Blair didn't belong in a place like this. Should never have had to be there. "I swear," he whispered. "I won't let this happen again. Hanging around with me is just too damned risky; I should know that by now. I'll... I'll find a way to do this on my own, so you can get your own life back... so you'll be safe. So you'll have the time to find someone to settle down with, grow old with. God, Chief... would you just wake up?"

Ellison swiped at the tear that had sneaked down his cheek as he looked back at Sandburg. "Hold on, kid," he murmured. "If you just hold on, you'll be okay..."

He took heart despite his exhaustion; he could hear Jim's voice in the distance. Ellison was somewhere nearby, not far. If he could only find the way out of the confusion, find the right path, the right hallway - where the hell was he, anyway? God, he was so hot... and the pain still tore at him. But he couldn't give up. He had to get to Jim. Had to warn him...

"Hot," he muttered. "'m so hot..."

Jim leapt to his feet to lean over the bed as he reached out to stroke Blair's brow. "You with me, Chief? You back?" he called softly, knowing he was trembling with hope.

"J'm?" Sandburg gasped with what sounded like profound relief, his lashes blinking open briefly as his unfocused gaze floundered around the room. "Foun' you..." But his voice died away into incomprehensible murmuring and his eyes drifted closed again.

"Yeah, you found me," Jim reassured him, his voice shaky with relief that Sandburg seemed to be getting a little stronger; surely, it was a good sign that he was waking up, wasn't it? "I'm right here, Chief. Right here."

"Hot," the younger man fussed, restless, only semiconscious, his voice so soft that no one but Jim could have understood him. "Hurts..."

Ellison hit the buzzer to attract a nurse, so he could ask if Sandburg could be given something to ease his pain. And then he turned to the small sink in the corner to dampen a cloth to cool Blair's forehead. After the nurse had come and gone, he filled the basin he spotted on a shelf by the sink with tepid water, and set about bathing his best friend, doing what he could to make Blair more comfortable.
And all the while, he kept up a steady patter of soft encouragement. "You're going to be okay, Chief. I know it hurts, buddy - but you're going to be fine. You hear me, Blair? You just keep holding on, kid. You're doing great..."

For several hours, Sandburg drifted in and out of his confused, semiconscious state, mumbling incoherently before lapsing for long periods back into the eerie still silence of unconsciousness. Though Jim kept talking to him, Sandburg didn't seem to be connecting; didn't seem to have any awareness of where he was. And while Ellison was glad Blair's condition appeared to be improving, the closer to consciousness he came, the more he seemed to be suffering from his injuries. 'At least the fever isn't getting any worse,' Jim reflected silently, grasping onto even the slightest shreds of hope, the most meager indications that, maybe, the kid was getting better.

McNally had come shortly after Blair had first awakened, and had nodded, pleased, at the improvement in his patient's blood pressure and the steadier, stronger beat of his heart. "He's not all the way home yet, but I think he might just get through this," he murmured, and then looked up at Ellison with a warm smile. "He's a strong man. Determined."

"Yeah, he is," Jim agreed quietly, his throat thick with the surge of hope that filled him at the physician's words. "In some ways, he's the strongest man I've ever known."

Simon and Joel dropped in for a few minutes in the afternoon, visibly relieved to hear that Sandburg seemed to be rousing, if slowly, and that McNally was guardedly optimistic. They hadn't exactly begun to dig the grave, but they'd been steeling themselves to start looking for shovels. Joel's eyes glistened as he bowed his head and blew out a long, slow breath.

Simon surprised both of the other men by reaching out to stroke Blair's brow tenderly as he murmured, "I'm so glad to hear..." But his voice caught and he swiftly lifted a hand to his mouth, as he blinked rapidly. "God," he grated, "I've been so worried about this kid." Jim half-expected Banks to make a joke of his emotion, to say something like, 'If you tell the kid, you'll be writing parking tickets until you're too old to drive.' But Simon offered no caveats, no humour - he just crossed his arms as he fought to regain some degree of emotional control. "Keep us posted, Jim - everyone in MCU is pulling for him," he ordered gruffly as he and Joel took their leave, neither even pretending that they thought Ellison would relax his vigil until Sandburg's recovery was certain.

The fever finally broke about an hour after they'd gone. It was another milestone, another cause for increased hope and wordless rejoicing in Jim's heart. He wished Sandburg wasn't in so much evident pain, but he dearly wanted the kid to wake up and recognize him - and the dark part of his soul wanted Blair to tell him who had done this.

It was early evening, and the ward was quietly busy with people visiting other patients, doctors doing final rounds and the staff changing shift, when Blair again stirred, mumbling and groaning softly as if, even not yet conscious, he was trying to hide the agony that burned through his body.

"Easy," Jim soothed, standing as he had time and again throughout the long day, to stroke his best friend's brow to relax and reassure him. "I know it hurts... but you'll be okay..."

Sandburg grimaced, hissing a little at the pain of his wounds, one hand feebly moving restlessly to his side, where he'd been stabbed. Ellison caught his hand, bringing it back down to the bed and retaining a grip. "You're safe, Chief," he murmured. "You're getting better... ."
Blair blinked his eyes open, squinting against the light and he winced at the pain as his gaze darted around the room, coming to rest on Jim's face. "Hey," he muttered, frowning, trying to remember - there was something he had to tell Jim. And then he gasped, his eyes widening as he blurted, "They wanna to kill you! God, Jim - they..."

"Whoa, slow down," Ellison cut in, fighting hard to not pull Sandburg into a fierce hug. He was awake, really awake and aware this time. Jim reached for the cup of ice chips he'd been feeding to Sandburg all day and slipped a cool pellet into Blair's mouth. "Just take your time," he urged, his hand returning to Blair's brow. When the kid swallowed, he asked, "Can you tell me who did this to you?"

Frowning, trying to remember, Blair shook his head, looking stricken by his failure to be more use. "Don' know, 'xactly," he whispered. "Sorry... didn' rec'nize them..."

"Shh, that's okay, Chief," Jim reassured him, hating the look of abject apology in Sandburg's eyes. "No. Isn't. They're after you, Jim... need names..." the younger man murmured fretfully, blinking heavily, struggling to stay awake. This was important. He had to tell Jim, had to give him something. "Uh, Arty... big, blond. Nelson... black, 'nother musclem'n." Gasping for breath, fighting the darkness, gritting his teeth against the pain, he held Jim's gaze, drawing strength from his best friend. "Guy who did the talkin'... 'n beat me... no name. 'Bout thirty-five, tattoo on... his arm. A fish... shark, I think. Brown hair. Mean bastards, man... dang'rous..."

Exhausted by the effort, Blair twisted as a spasm of pain ripped through him, and he couldn't bite off the moan. He clutched at Ellison's hand, holding on for dear life. Panting through clenched teeth, he hissed, "God... hurts..."

"I know, buddy, I know," Jim ground out, wishing to hell that he could do something more than hold the kid's hand. "Don't talk anymore, now - just rest. Okay?"

Unwanted and unwelcome tears glistened in Sandburg's eyes as he rode out the blinding agony. "Be... be careful, J'm..." he grated, his voice wispy, before he lost his battle with the darkness.

"Ah, God, Chief," Jim groaned softly. "God, I'm so sorry..."

He caressed Sandburg's brow, trembling with so many mixed up feelings that he could barely stand. But he stiffened his spine and squared his shoulders, sniffed and rubbed his eyes, and then turned to use the phone at the nurses' station. He had names and descriptions, a place to begin. Arty and Nelson were likely hired help, and might not be all that hard to find. The bastards had held Sandburg, were party to the abuse - but it was 'shark' who was the real target, the one who had brutalized Sandburg and left him for dead.

Shark. Ellison bit his lip as he punched in the number, trying to remember where and when he'd seen a tattoo like that. Down at the docks? In a holding cell?

"H," he said crisply, when his call was answered. "I've got something..."

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It took a night and most of a day, sorting through old records, chasing down snitches, matching names and descriptions, and another day of waiting for the APB to get results. Jim was more than content to let others do the legwork, leaving him the time to stay by Sandburg's side.
But he was determined to help take the bastards down.

They'd figured out the motive once they had 'Shark's' identity nailed. Samuel Robbins AKA 'Sammy the Shark', the enforcer for a union boss down at the docks - a crook who was stealing from the membership dues, using muscle and intimidation to silence any and all opposition, and was mixing it up with drug and arms smugglers. Jim had almost forgotten; it had been nearly a year since they'd finished the investigation and turned everything over to the DA's Office. A year of motions to stay proceedings, delays, lawsuits for harassment - the whole shebang. Not his problem, so he'd shelved the case and turned to others that still needed solving. But it was finally coming to court and, as primary investigator, Jim was on the docket to testify in two weeks. Without his direct evidence, the case was shaky... so he'd been targeted. As simple as that. And an innocent man had been beaten, tortured, within an inch of his life... a life that still wasn't assured... because those vipers had come after him.

Jim looked up expectantly when Simon came in, a sober look on his face. "How's Sandburg doing?" Banks asked, his eyes narrowing in concern as he studied the unconscious young man.

"The same," Jim sighed as he rubbed the back of his neck. "Maybe... maybe a little worse. Yesterday, he was lucid, at least for a few minutes at a time, but today..." He shrugged, looking worn and very worried. "I thought... I thought he'd just keep getting better. But once he gave me what he had - it's like he's slipping away, Simon."

Banks nodded solemnly, his jaw tight. It was his belief, unexpressed to anyone because it scared him to think he might be right, that Sandburg had held on so hard and so long just so he could warn Jim. That kind of will, such strength of determination and commitment, awed him. But... he wondered if Blair had anything left to fight with, and was deeply saddened to think the kid might yet die.

Shifting his gaze to Ellison, he said, "We're taking them into custody tonight. I'll let you know when it's over."

"Let me know?" Jim echoed, confusion on his face. "I'll be there..."

"No, Jim, you won't," Banks replied firmly.

"Now, wait just a minute!" Ellison protested vehemently. "Those bastards did this to him! If you think I'm just going to sit back and let someone else do my job..."

"It's not your job to go out and wage some vendetta," Simon grated, his eyes flashing. "I know you want them so bad, you can taste it..."

"Don't try to tell me you don't feel exactly the same way!" Jim cut in, furious.

Faltering, too honest to deny the charge, Simon looked away as he schooled his patience. He knew all too well how much Ellison wanted those perps. But that wasn't the point. "You're too emotionally involved, Jim, and you know it," he sighed as he turned back to Ellison. "Neither of us wants anything to get in the way of a textbook bust. And, besides," he added, "your job is to be here. He needs you, Jim. Needs you here. Let the rest of us do our jobs."

"But, Simon..." Jim tried to argue, only to be cut off.

"Don't force me to make it an order - because I will, if I have to," Banks growled. Jim stiffened, but then backed down, disgusted, but the fight had gone out of him. "I promise you, we'll get them."

"Yeah," Ellison sighed. Simon was right; he needed to stay here. Sandburg was barely holding on, his heartbeat erratic, his breathing ragged, and his blood pressure kept falling as he teetered on the
brink of terminal shock. But it felt wrong to have others do what should be his job. It was his partner, his best friend, who'd been brutalized. Closing his eyes, he weighed out how he'd feel if he did go and, while he was gone, Sandburg slipped away - and he accepted that his boss had made the right decision.

"I'll be back later," Banks promised, as he left to arrest those responsible for what had been done to Sandburg. In all honesty, he couldn't wait to put the cuffs on those bastards.

"J'm?" Blair whispered as he struggled back to consciousness.

Ellison had been dozing in the chair by the bed, as he had for the last four days, but was instantly awake and on his feet at the wispy call.

"I'm here, Chief," he replied softly, gently gripping Blair's shoulder.

"'m so tired..." Sandburg sighed.

A shiver of fear rippled through Jim's body at the defeated, weary tone and the deep sorrow in Sandburg's eyes. Dear God, he was trying to say 'good-bye'! "No... don't you quit on me," Jim choked as he captured Blair's face with one palm along the younger man's cheek. "Don't you let go - not now. Not when you've made it this far."

Sandburg blinked slowly as he struggled to focus on Ellison's face...

... and he swallowed in surprise and dismay at the stark desperation in the older man's eyes.

"Chief?" Jim called, his tone urgent - afraid. "You hear me? You hold on!"

Weakly, wearily, Blair gave a slight nod. Jim wasn't ready to let him go. Still needed him. "'kay," he whispered so softly that even Ellison barely caught the murmured acquiescence. The heavy lashes drooped as Sandburg slipped back into unconsciousness... or seemed unconscious...

... but his heartbeat grew ever stronger, and his blood pressure came up. Slowly. Steadily. Hour after hour.

When McNally came in the early the next morning, and pronounced the crisis passed and that, in his considered judgment, Sandburg would recover, Jim had to turn his face away as he sank weakly into the chair, too unsteady to remain standing. He leaned forward and covered his face with his hands as he shuddered with relief.

The surgeon gazed at him compassionately, and then gripped his shoulder. "You're a good friend," he observed quietly.

But Jim shook his head. "Not as good a friend as he is to me," he rasped. "Not even half as good..."

Simon was pleased to see the kid was finally awake when he dropped in a couple of days later. The
head of the bed was raised and, though Blair was still very pale and clearly was far from fully recovered, he was grinning and very much alive. "Hey, Sleeping Beauty - did I miss the prince on my way in?" he teased gently as he smiled down at Sandburg.

Blair snorted weakly. "I must've missed him, too," he murmured with a slow smile, his voice still wispy and frail. "Good thing - I'd rather be kissed by a princess."

"It's good to see you on the mend, Blair," Banks told him, warmly. "You had us worried for a while."

The smile widened as Sandburg flicked a look at Ellison. "Figured that," he acknowledged. "Jim's been a real bear since I woke up. Keeps growling at me that 'nothin' like this is ever goin' to happen again!'" he quoted, deepening his voice and scowling to give the proper effect.

Banks chuckled but Ellison couldn't see what was so funny. "I meant it," he growled, lending unwitting credence to the kid's story. "Dammit, Chief, you should have told them what they wanted to know. Why the hell didn't you?"

Hearing real anger lacing his best friend's words, Sandburg sobered. For a moment, he looked genuinely baffled by the suggestion of what he should have done - and the question. "Jim, I couldn't, wouldn't ever, betray you," he asserted ingenuously. Squinting at Ellison, he asked softly, "You do know that, don't you?"

When Jim's eyes flickered away, if only the briefest moment, Sandburg blinked and Simon saw the hurt in his eyes. But the kid recovered quickly, absently rubbing an ache deep in his chest, as he blithely carried on, "Besides, I figured they'd just kill me anyway, and I couldn't see why I should give them any satisfaction." Smirking at Ellison, who now returned his gaze, he added for good measure, "You know how I hate to be bullied."

Ruffling Sandburg's curls, Jim grinned back, as he replied sardonically, "Oh, yeah. I know very well how stubborn you can be."

"Learned from the master," Blair chuckled weakly, still very tired and far from well. He shifted his attention from Jim to Simon, changing the subject at the same time. "So - what have I missed? Any good rumours?"

Simon fell into the game, willfully complicit in aiding and abetting the distraction.

But he had seen the shaft of sorrow, and he wished Ellison wasn't so... what? Afraid to believe in anyone? Afraid to trust that much?

"Well, for a start," he replied, "you missed this guy standing sentry by your bed, day and night, since the morning after your surgery. Talk about stubborn. Good thing they've got showers for the staff and they agreed to let him use them, otherwise it would have been pretty ripe in here by now."

"Really?" Blair asked, light sparkling in his eyes, teasing... shyly pleased.

Ellison huffed and looked away, vastly unamused. There wasn't anything funny about what had happened to Sandburg. He'd never forget those chilling moments just two nights ago when Blair had been on the verge of letting go... had been saying 'good-bye'. No way was he ever going to let the kid be hurt so badly again.

Ignoring Ellison's pout, Banks assured the kid, "Really."

Sandburg relaxed against the pillows, his smile a sight to see.
Nine months later...

The offer of a permanent position was truly astonishing, but they couldn't really be serious. Didn't anyone else understand the implications? Surely, Simon must know it was impossible, however well meant.

"I'm still not going to cut my hair!" he said with a feeble grin to buy time, but his heart wasn't really in it. Too much had happened in too short a time. He'd gotten everything he'd ever dreamt of, in more ways than one, but found the achievement was hollow, empty... and in the end, there was nothing left of anything he really valued. Now, he just felt tired, and so very empty, like he had nothing left of himself, certainly nothing left to give.

When Jim grabbed him, though, and pulled him into a playful headlock while Ellison scrubbed his hair, making some crack about a 'Blairskin rug', Sandburg knew he couldn't let the farce go on.

"Jim, stop," he said with deadly quiet as he stiffened in his friend's grip, and, catching the dangerous tone, Ellison stilled and stood away, uncertain.

Straightening, Blair pushed his hair back behind his ears, his lips thin and his jaw tight as he swallowed against the lump in his throat and tried to decide what to say. There'd been enough hurt to last a lifetime, and he had no interest in adding to it. Clearing his throat, lifting his gaze to Simon, and then the rest of MCU, his back to Jim, he said with as much dignity as he could muster, "I'm grateful, and... well, very surprised. It hadn't occurred to me that any of you would still want me hanging around. But - you all have to know it's impossible. Even though I can explain that paper, a man who proclaims himself a fraud on national television could never be accepted in your community. And, if I'm not a fraud, then, well, people would always wonder..." he cut a quick glance over his shoulder at Jim, but then turned immediately away. Blowing out a breath, he continued into the uneasy silence, "I had a great ride on a ninety-day pass, and I truthfully loved every moment. I owe all of you a lot, for putting up with me, and for teaching me so much. It has been really great to work with each of you, to get to know you, but my ride's over. It's time to move on."

"Sandburg, what are..." Jim tried to cut in but Blair raised a hand, and kept on talking. He'd had time to come up with the story he planned to stick to for the rest of his life, about what had happened a little less than a week before, and that would be given credence by the paper he'd written.

"This latest misadventure with the media just highlights the dangers of having a ride-along with no discernable purpose - things get exaggerated and misunderstood," he said regretfully. "Here, I've been riding with Jim to study your community and subculture, but because I also noticed that a lot of you have enhanced abilities to see and hear, and had drafted an article about that, it all got blown out of proportion. Simon, you and Megan almost died because the media got in the way of Jim capturing Zeller when he could so easily have done so, and it could have been finished, with no one hurt." His voice cracked and he paused a moment to clear his throat before going on, "I know I'm a risk, not being a cop, not carrying a gun - an added complication that you've all been very good to tolerate for so long. But... when you guys got hurt, I knew it was my fault. I've hung around a lot longer than I
should have, and I'm sorry that I made such a mess of things." He looked at the black leather wallet in Simon's hand, and thought of the badge it contained as he added very quietly, "Most of all, I honestly think Jim deserves an experienced partner who really does know what he or she is doing - someone he can whole-heartedly trust and rely upon to watch his back, without any doubts or questions."

"Sweetie, I..." his mother tried then, but Sandburg shot her a look that was colder and more distant than any he'd ever given her in his life, and she stumbled to a halt, confused.

"What will you do, son?" Joel asked into the awkward silence.

"Well, for a start, I'm heading over to Rainier to defend my dissertation," Blair replied, causing them all to gape in surprise. "It's been finished for a while," he went on, his expression shamefaced and embarrassed, well aware of their reactions of astonishment, and playing it for all it was worth to lend credence to the lie that the sentinel paper was never intended as his dissertation topic. "I just didn't want to stop having a good time working with all of you, and I knew as soon as it was finished, well, I'd lose my pass to ride with Jim. But I guess it's time for me to grow up. My doctoral dissertation is called 'Lives on the Line: A Study of the Law Enforcement Subculture in Modern Society', and it's dedicated to the men and women of the Major Crimes Unit, Cascade Police Department."

At Simon's look of understandable amazement, he couldn't help but smile a little. But the humour faded as he continued, trying hard to sound assured, as if his next move was what he really wanted. "And, I've already met with a lawyer to sign off on documents to bring lawsuits against Berkshire Publishing and Syd Graham for unlawful publication, and against Rainier, for unlawful dismissal. Since they very clearly violated my rights, my lawyer expects swift settlements, but I won't likely be granted a professorship at Rainier, given all that's happened. So, I plan to leave the country on a field expedition... likely within the next week. That will allow a little time for my national notoriety to cool off, and I'll look for work here in the States after the fieldwork is finished. So, you can see there's absolutely no need to worry about me, though I really appreciate everyone's concern. I'm fine, just fine. And, since my defence is in less than an hour, I really have to be going. Thank you, all of you, for your support and friendship over the years."

"You're moving out?" Jim gasped, shocked, but Sandburg was already pushing through the crowd before anyone else could think of anything to say. He didn't look at either Jim or his mother as he hit the hallway and then took the stairs, so he wouldn't be caught waiting for an elevator.

They all looked at one another, stunned. Megan blinked, and said, "Well, I'm glad things are okay with Sandy."

"Yeah, looks like Hairboy has managed to land on his feet again," Brown observed, though he grimaced as he turned back to his desk. He was going to miss having the kid around. Glancing at his partner, Rafe, and then at Joel, he realized he wasn't the only one who wasn't buying the snow job on the sentinel paper - but, God, when had Sandburg had time to write a whole other dissertation?

"Did you know he'd written another paper?" Simon hissed at Jim with a glare, and then cocked his head toward his office.

Ellison's jaw was tight, and he looked a little shell-shocked as he shook his head. "No, I..."

"Dammit, don't the two of you talk at all anymore?" Banks snapped, but then glanced back over his shoulder, and noticed Naomi hovering uncertainly near the door to the hall. "Maybe you'd better see to his mother, first. She's staying with you, right?"

"Yeah," Jim muttered as he made his way toward her, leaning heavily on his cane. She looked up at
him, her face pale, as he approached and said with tight cordiality, "If you just give me a few minutes to talk to Simon, we can share a cab back to the loft."

"You didn't know anything about all this either, did you?" she asked, her head spinning from the news Blair had given them, and her heart aching from the hard look in his eyes. He'd said he still loved her but that, apparently, didn't preclude him being very angry with her.

"No," Ellison replied shortly, and turned away. He hadn't spoken to Sandburg since the day Zeller had raided the precinct. Once Blair had gotten him settled in the hospital, the younger man had taken off, saying he had some errands to run. After that, whenever Jim had called the loft, he'd either only gotten the machine or Naomi, who had never known where Blair was when she answered.

When Jim hobbled into the inner office, and closed the door, Simon challenged more forcefully, "So whose idea was it for him to move out this time - yours or his?"

Sighing as he sank into a chair, Jim shrugged. "Mine, I guess," he admitted reluctantly. "At first, when it all blew up, I assumed he'd submitted the paper and just didn't have the guts to tell me," he explained uncomfortably. "We had a deal - he got to publish the stuff about my senses, but I got to read it first. I just figured he decided not to bother with that - I didn't react all that well the last time I saw what he'd written..."

"You mean you assumed he screwed you deliberately," Banks mocked repressively, too angry to be subtle, as he took off his glasses and pinched the bridge of his nose.

"I was just reacting," Jim muttered, defensively. "And later, well, when I knew what had happened, all I wanted was to be left alone - and I told him I wished that I could go back to the way things were before, when I was just a good cop. And, well, I told him it was over, to give it up - that it was time to move on - and then I walked out on him."

"I see," Simon sighed, with a look of harried irritation and no little disgust. "Well, looks like he's taking you at your word."

"I thought, after the press conference, I thought it would be okay," Jim said hollowly. "I mean, he came with me to deal with Zeller - he stayed with me when my leg was being treated at the hospital, to make sure they didn't use meds I shouldn't have - "

"Okay? You and the rest of us watched him destroy himself on national television to protect you, but that was just 'okay'?" Banks challenged as he cut in, feeling a brief surge of frustrated contempt. "Jesus, Jim - did you even thank him?"

"No, I didn't," Ellison flared aggressively. "Why should I? It wasn't my fault the whole damned thing blew up! He didn't discuss it with me - if he had, I'd never have gone along with..."

"Were you even speaking to one another at that point?" Simon cut in again, out of patience with Ellison's attitude. The kid had publicly humiliated himself and had labeled himself a fraud and liar, risked everything, to protect Jim; surely that warranted some measure of appreciation. "Or was that after you walked out on him - after you told him it was over?"

Ellison looked away and shook his head. "What the hell was he doing, even writing that paper," he grated angrily, "when he already had a different dissertation written?"

"I don't know. Maybe you should ask him," Simon replied sarcastically as he sank back against the wheelchair. "How are you going to manage without him?"

"I'll be fine," Jim muttered.
"Yeah, sure you will," Banks replied flatly, having serious doubts but seeing no point in raising them. The damage was done and they'd have to deal with it. "What was all that stuff about you needing a partner you could trust?" he asked then with a frown, recalling Jim's request that Sandburg's pass be revoked just before Zeller's bullet had interrupted their conversation... but also remembering that the kid hadn't been present, so Blair wouldn't have known.

Jim's lips thinned and he looked away. Swallowing, he replied quietly, "I think he was referring to something I said earlier, before I really knew what had happened."

"Uh huh," Simon grunted. His jaw tightened, and he rubbed his mouth with his hand, holding back comments that wouldn't be helpful now. Banks knew Ellison had told Sandburg, on more than one occasion, that Jim didn't trust Blair and didn't want to work with him any longer. Banks didn't really believe Jim had been serious, not in the long-term sense, but had just been reacting to out-of-control situations. However, that didn't mean that Sandburg hadn't believed him, especially if he'd been told repeatedly that he wasn't trusted. That would have hit the kid hard, no matter how well he appeared to understand Ellison's moods and defensive reactions. 'God,' he thought sorrowfully, 'the kid deserves so much better.' Finally, he sighed, "Well, I'm tired. I'm going to head home. I suggest you do the same."

For the past two weeks, Naomi had been doing her best to survive the negative vibes in the loft. First, Blair had been so upset with her, and then Jim had turned to ice, his aura a roiling melange of black, purple and red - and then Blair had been so sad, seeming almost lost. Naomi felt like crying every time she thought about that terrible press conference, because it was only then that she had realized her well-intentioned efforts had truly destroyed all that was precious in her son's life. Then Jim had been shot and Blair had been running around, away from the loft more than he was home, never saying where he was going and scarcely talking to her. And now, he was off defending a dissertation she hadn't even known he had written and Jim was like a coiled snake, ready to strike in anger and frustration. Blair was still upset with her, that much was clear, and she also believed that her son and his best friend needed to talk without a third party hovering nearby. It was beyond time for her to move on, so she called a friend in town while she was waiting for Jim to finish with Simon and, as soon as they got back to the loft, she disappeared into Blair's bedroom to pack her bag.

"I think you and Blair probably need time to - " she began as she carried her small case out of her son's room, but Jim wasn't in the mood for one of her fast vanishing acts, leaving him to pick up all the pieces.

"I don't think I'm the only one who needs to clear the air with him," Ellison cut in coldly, his eyes sparking with anger. Though she was aware of his anger, she was still startled by the aggression, and she stiffened a little. Her chin up, she snipped defensively, "Blair says he still loves me, and that's all that matters."

"Really? Well, good for you," Jim shot back furiously. "You blow in here every eighteen months or so, treat him like he's about four years old, exhibit absolutely no respect for him - and you sure managed to screw us both royally this time because you refused to leave well enough alone. Did you even give him a chance to express his anger, or did you just go for the 'do you still love me' punch line?"

"I said I was sorry, to you and to him," she countered, looking away. "I made a mistake, but I was
"Maybe if you'd respected him, trusted him to make his own decisions..." Jim snapped.

"That's enough," Naomi cut in abruptly, her voice rising sharply, her own emotions making her feel nauseous. "I know you're angry - your aura is very disturbed. But I won't accept that everything is my fault. If the two of you had discussed anything that ever mattered - like the fact that he has a whole other paper, which I could see was a surprise to you - or if you hadn't told him you wanted him to move on, maybe he'd at least still be talking to you!"

"Damn it," Ellison snarled. "I was angry - he knows I didn't mean it."

"Oh, you meant it," she grated. "I was here and I saw the look on his face when you slammed out. You treat him like your own personal punching bag and, frankly, I am very glad that he's decided he's had enough of dancing to your tune! Maybe now he'll get his own life back on track, instead of simply living to accommodate your wants and needs."

"Look, he chose to live here," Jim snarled. "It's not like I kept him chained in the back room! He was the one who came looking for me - he wanted to study my senses - "

"Is that all he did?" Naomi snapped back. "I was under the impression that perhaps he'd helped you with them. Otherwise, why was he riding around with you, getting shot at, kidnapped..."

Jim opened his mouth to yell back, but the door banged open and then slammed shut as Sandburg growled at both of them, "The whole building can hear you fighting! What's the matter with the two of you? Enough already!"

"Blair, sweetie, I'm sorry," his mother demurred, flushing. "How did the defence go?"

"It went fine," Blair replied flatly, though he couldn't keep all the sarcastic disillusionment from his voice as he continued. "It was a straight-forward thesis, well documented, and reasonably argued. It won't change the world or make anyone's life better, but it'll give me my PhD, and I guess that's all that matters." Seeing her suitcase at her feet, he quirked a brow as he asked, "You going somewhere?"

"Yes, I thought you and Jim could use a little space, so I'm going to stay with Spring Rain for a few days," she explained.

"That's probably a good idea," Blair replied coolly, though his shoulders slumped and he looked away. He wasn't really up to dealing with his mother but, at the same time, her typically abrupt decision to disappear left him feeling abandoned - and that hurt. It had been a long time since he'd felt so alone in the world.

Once again, caught by his aloofness, Naomi faltered. Her son had never been anything but indulgent with her until this terrible mess had overtaken all of them. He'd said he still loved her, but... he was still so very hurt and angry. "Sweetie, I get the sense that you haven't processed everything that's happened... and, well, it's clear you are still upset with me," she murmured, looking up at him with imploring eyes. "You have forgiven me, though, haven't you?"

Sandburg's gaze narrowed as he studied her impassively. And then he shook his head. "No, not really," he answered candidly, too tired and emotionally wrung out for anything but the truth. "Oh, don't get me wrong - I know you were only trying to help. But if you want me to be honest, I'm really tired of being treated like a child or, more, like a doll that you can play with when you feel like it and cast aside when something more interesting comes along. I love you, Mom, I always will - and only trying to help..."
I guess, ultimately, things work out the way they should... but this really isn't the way I'd hoped things would work out. The next time we get together, I'd like you to try to remember that I'm almost thirty years old, and all grown up. It would be nice if you'd at least try to respect that.

When Naomi swallowed hard, and tears brimmed in her eyes, his gaze dropped as he said softly, "I'm sorry, Mom. I don't want to upset you - but this time, you really hurt me, and my best friend. You need to accept responsibility for that."

"I see," she whispered, and then sniffed. "Well, Spring will be downstairs by now; she was coming to pick me up. So I'd better be going."

"Take care of yourself," Blair murmured as he hugged her and kissed her temple. "We'll get past this; I just need a little time. I do love you - you know nothing will ever change that."

She nodded, too overwrought to speak, and then was gone.

Jim had wandered away while they talked, and was staring out the balcony window, his back to the room. Sandburg looked at the rigid posture, his expression suddenly very sad. Wordlessly, he carried on to his room, where he continued filling boxes he'd brought earlier from the store down the street.

Jim was surprised that Blair didn't say anything to him - he'd expected some kind of explanation for the bombshells Sandburg had dropped down at the station. Had thought that the kid would want to talk about how he'd sorted out things at Rainier... or about moving out. But he could hear the sounds of packing, and his throat tightened. For the first time, it seemed like Blair had run out of things to say... and it sure seemed as if he planned to leave immediately.

Had Blair given up hoping that any amount of talk might make things better?

Forcing himself to swallow his own pride and sense of hurt at being left in the dark about Sandburg's plans, Jim turned and moved to lean on the doorframe in the entrance to Sandburg's room. "You don't have to leave," Jim asserted, his throat tight. "This is your home."

"Only so long as it's convenient for you," Blair cut back, sealing up the box. Standing, he began to take pictures and masks off the wall, to place them in another box on the far side of the bed. "This was the second time in six months that you told me you wanted me out. The third time that you said you don't want to work with me anymore. The second time, or was it third, that you believed I'd betrayed you. It's become very clear that you don't trust me and that I live here on sufferance, so long as it's convenient for you. Well, frankly Jim, I don't need to be thought so little of, you know? For almost four years, I thought we had a deal. More, much more, I thought we had a friendship that counted for something - "

"We did... do," Ellison cut in quickly - not easy when Sandburg was on a roll.

"Did we?" Blair challenged as he looked up from his packing. "Let's see, I thought the original deal was that I'd help you with your senses on the understanding that I'd be able to use what we learned in my diss. Wasn't that the deal? Oh, and that you'd get to read it first. I guess that's why you were upset, right? That you didn't get to read it? Not that it was published - or was it that you'd really never planned to let me publish anything about you? You were just using me all this time, to learn what you could, and then when you'd learned enough that you didn't need me anymore, I'd be on my own. Well, that's where we're at. You haven't wanted my help since Alex. I guess you meant it then, when you said that you couldn't trust me anymore. That you needed a partner you could count on, and I'm not it. It's time to grant you your fondest wish, Jim. You've got it, buddy; you're on your own, man. Your secret is safe and I am out of your life."
"You know damned well I haven't just been using you!" Jim yelled, having had enough of the diatribe.

"Then, what, exactly, did I get out of this deal, Jim?" Sandburg seethed. "I thought I had the best friend I'd ever known. In fact, I thought your secret was so important to you that I wrote a whole other paper, rather than risk your wellbeing. Do you know how many people I might have helped by writing about you? People who are suffering the way you were when I first met you? But, no, for you, I decided to stay silent, at least for as long as you needed me to be silent, or I could figure out a way to hide your identity and maybe even my own, to protect you. So, I didn't get the paper that was my part of the bargain. You wouldn't believe the fancy footwork I had to do to get the second paper accepted as my doctoral dissertation; I'm just lucky I've got an understanding and supportive advisor, a tolerant committee, and that I had a pretty hot reputation for publishing cogent, illuminating papers and for the quality of my teaching. And, yeah, before you remind me, I know I've had a more than decent roof over my head, and you've been easy about the rent when I've been short - but my severance pay from the university is on the kitchen counter. It more than covers what I owe you, monetarily at least."

"If you'd decided to write a different paper, why'd you write that stuff about me in the first place?" Jim demanded then, trying to find something in the flurry of words to contend with. "And why didn't you tell me?"

Turning to his closet to pull out his carryall bag, Blair opened it on the bed and began to haul clothing out of the closet to jam into it.

"Well?" Jim demanded when Sandburg didn't answer.

Taking a breath, Blair stopped moving and looked up at Ellison, his face stark and his eyes dark with emotion as he replied, "First, like I said at the station, if I admitted to having finished the other paper, then my ride would have been over - and I didn't want to stop being your partner. Stupid, huh? Especially since you've been working with me as little as possible for months now, and I know you don't really need me anymore. Second, if you hadn't been able to revive me at the fountain, what would you have done? How would you have begun to explain to Simon how to help you, to help him really understand what kind of support and backup you need?"

"I... the fact is I did revive you - so what's the point?" Jim shot back, not wanting to think about the fountain or anything else having to do with that sorry time.

"The point is, the next time, I might not be so lucky, and you would be on your own," Sandburg said quietly. "I wrote the paper for you, Jim. No one else was ever supposed to see it, unless you chose to show it to them. I put the only copy of it upstairs on your dresser. Read it, burn it, lock it away - whatever. It's yours."

And then he went back to packing up the rest of his clothing.

"Would you stop that!" Ellison exclaimed in frustration. "It's goddamned hard to have a conversation with you when you're busy packing."

"You want to talk, talk," Blair muttered. "I can listen and pack at the same time."

In the sudden silence, Jim wasn't sure what to say. Blair seemed so remote - cold and angry. And, beneath it all, he seemed... hurt. Badly.

"You told your mother that we're still best friends," he hazarded.
"No, I said she'd hurt my best friend," Sandburg replied quietly, turning away as he shoved the last of his clothing into the bag.

Jim's eyes narrowed at that, as he stared at Blair's back. "Isn't that what I just said?" he queried.

"No, what you said implies that I'm also your best friend," Sandburg sighed. "And it's pretty clear I'm not."

"Where did you get that idea?" Jim challenged.

Sandburg stilled. "I don't know," he grated as he stared at the far wall. "Lots of things, I guess. Like you believing I'd screw you for profit, or betray you for personal glory. Maybe it was being treated like I had the plague and you wished I'd fall off the edge of the earth. Or maybe it was telling me to get out, or the fact that you really haven't had much time for me since... Mexico... even before that. Take your pick. None of those behaviours is the way someone treats anyone they trust and value, let alone their best friend." Turning to face Ellison, he added, "I don't know who I am in your life - an irritation, maybe? An embarrassment, evidently. Friend? No, I don't think so."

"Dammit, Sandburg," Ellison growled, embarrassed. "You're the first one to remind me about my so-called 'fear-based responses'. I was angry and upset...

"And you had every right to be, but even in anger, I don't know why your first instinct is to believe I would deliberately do you harm," Blair replied as he zipped up his suitcase. "And even when you knew your first assumptions were wrong, you still wanted me gone - still didn't want me anywhere near you while you tried to deal with Zeller. You only suggested we work together again after I publicly crucified myself. Everything was fine then, so long as you felt safe. Well, good. I really am truly glad you feel safe. To make sure you continue to feel safe, I'm out of here."

"I, uh, my assumptions were clearly wrong," Jim muttered, uncomfortable and not a little ashamed about his hair-trigger reactions to all that had happened.

"Yep, you've got that right," Sandburg grunted as he shoved his spare shoes into the outside pocket of his bag. Turning to the desk, he began loading his backpack and briefcase.

"I don't want you to go like this - I mean, you don't even have a place...

"Not your problem, man," Blair snapped. "I'm a big boy now, and responsible for myself."

"Chief, I'm getting the impression that whatever I say, it's going to be wrong," Jim said then, feeling as if he were banging his head against a wall.

"What? It doesn't matter to you that I don't want you to go, not like this?" Ellison countered.

"How would you rather I leave?" Blair demanded, his voice tight with emotion. "With a smile?" he continued, looking up with a parody of a grin. "Happier now? Like Naomi, you don't want me to be angry? You don't want to think that maybe, just maybe, you really hurt me? It's all supposed to be about her good intentions and your sense of betrayal and fear? Okay, fine. It's because of your fear, and your need for continued secrecy that I'm going. Not because I'm mad or hurt, which I am, but I'm not leaving for those reasons. Jim, think about it for two seconds! After all that's happened, if I stay, don't you think people would start wondering why you haven't booted my ass into the street? The storyline is that I wrote fraudulent material that caused you tremendous embarrassment and inconvenience. Why the hell would you tolerate having me around? Most people likely wonder how you can even stand to look at me without wanting to beat the crap out of me. Even if I wanted to
stay, I couldn't."

"Where will you go?" Ellison asked, feeling as if it were all happening too fast.

"Don't worry about it," Blair sighed as he finished stuffing his notebooks into the backpack. Slinging the pack over his shoulder, he grabbed the carryall and picked up the briefcase. "I'll have the boxes picked up in the morning and the linens on the bed are clean," he said as he moved toward the doorway.

But Jim blocked it, and didn't seem inclined to move out of the way.

"Jim, don't make this any harder than it already is," Blair said quietly. "It's done. You said it yourself. It's time for me to move on."

"Do you really want to go?" Ellison asked then, his gaze fixed on the floor.

"What I want hasn't mattered a damn for quite some time, so why should it matter now?" Blair retorted.

"Answer me," Jim pressed.

"I don't want to stay where I'm neither wanted nor respected," Blair replied, his voice flat. "You've gotten what you needed from me, Jim; I guess you got a whole lot more than you ever wanted."

"You said, once, that it's about friendship," Ellison remembered quietly. When Blair didn't say anything, he looked up as he asked, "Why did you hold that press conference? There had to have been another option that didn't require you to..."

"... commit professional suicide?" Sandburg filled in, when Ellison's voice died away. "Yeah, lots of things. Things I'm doing, like suing the publishers, putting a restraining order on the media, suing Rainier - but all that takes weeks, even months, maybe years, to sort out. Zeller was shooting people, and you couldn't stop him with the press in your face. Ethically, it was my responsibility to bring the circus to an end, and quickly. So I did. My reputation isn't worth the cost of someone's life."

"So, you didn't do it just to protect me?" Jim clarified, a little surprised.

"No, I didn't," Blair replied bitterly. "Feel better now? Less guilty?" When Jim winced, he carried on, "I won't deny that it was, in part, to take the heat off you personally. You were a hapless victim of my mother's good deed of the day. And since I'd written the damned thing for you, I didn't bother obscuring your identity, so I had a professional responsibility to give you back your dignity and privacy." Suddenly weary, he slumped as he said, his voice cracking, "I'm sorry, man, really, really sorry that it has to end like this. You're the best friend I ever had, and... and I had to find out that you don't trust me as far as you can throw me. I would rather have never known that, you know? Please, Jim... get out of my way and let me leave with some dignity."

"How do we fix this?" Ellison asked then, still standing foursquare in the doorway.

Blair bowed his head, his hair obscuring his face. "It's not fixable, Jim. Once the media had the information and a public denial was required, that was it." Looking up, he added, "It might have been different if you could have ever envisioned letting the world know your secret, but that's never going to happen. All you really want, have ever wanted, is to go back to being a pretty damned good cop, like you were before your senses came back online. Maybe if you try hard enough, you can turn them off." When Jim frowned and looked away, but still didn't move away from the door, Blair rolled his eyes. What the hell did Ellison want from him? Exasperated, he continued, "Regardless, you've made it plain for months now that my presence is superfluous, and frankly, I have to agree with you.
I don't understand why you're fighting me now. If you feel guilty, don't. They are your senses and nobody has the right to tell you how to handle them or what to do with them. If you're worried about me, stop; I'll work things out with the university and the lawsuits should clear my debt load. I might not be able to get an academic job in this country for a while, but there are lots of field projects and there are still some people who believe I have something to offer. I'll be okay."

"What about..." Jim began, but his throat closed up.

"About what?" Blair asked, wishing Ellison would move so he could go and be done with it - before it all crashed in. When he mourned the death of this friendship, he wanted to be alone.

"Are we still friends?" Ellison managed to ask.

Searching Jim's eyes, Blair replied tightly, "I honest to God don't know. You tell me, Jim. Were we ever friends? And if we were, how could you ever think such despicable things about me?"

"I... I didn't know what else to think," Jim admitted.

"I guess that pretty much says it all," Blair sighed. "I've got to go..."

"No, not like this," Jim insisted. "We need to talk..."

Snorting mirthlessly, Blair shook his head. "Now you want to talk?" For a moment, he gazed at Jim, and then his eyes lost focus as he thought about it. Finally, he shook his head. "I honestly can't see any point, Jim. We're done, man. Every time push comes to shove, you make it perfectly plain that you don't trust me and have no interest in figuring things out together, or talking about them rationally. Once things calm down, you decide it wasn't such a big deal or that maybe you over-reacted, or maybe we can learn something and move on. Not this time. I'm tired of being someone you have little inherent respect or trust for. I can't be any other way. This is me, and I guess I'm just not good enough for you. I can't keep doing this dance. I can't keep absorbing your diatribes and the emotional and verbal abuse. Hell, you don't even pretend that anything will ever be any different. And like I said, for your sake as much as my own, I can't stay anyway, and I have to head out on a field trip. It's been an amazing ride, but it's time for me to get off the roller coaster and give you your life back. So - move your ass and let me out of here."

"I said, 'no, not like this,' Jim insisted, pretty sure that if he stepped aside at that moment, he'd probably never see Sandburg again - and that left him feeling oddly hollow inside. "What's the big rush? You act like you wish you'd gotten away before I even got out of the hospital!"

"Truthfully? That's exactly what I had planned," Blair told him bluntly. "I didn't think you were getting out until tomorrow."

"You were just going to... what? Disappear?" Jim demanded, not sure whether to be appalled, furious or scared. Sandburg wasn't the type to just cut and run - God, how badly was he hurting? Was there any hope of mending these fences?

Or, maybe he shouldn't be thinking so much of mending fences and reestablishing comfortable boundaries, but about tearing down a mighty high and thick wall that had apparently been growing, brick by brick, for some long time now.

"I thought you'd prefer it that way," Sandburg replied quietly, looking away. Very softly, he murmured, "Why are you surprised? You were the one who told me that it's time for me to move on, that you wanted your life back." Cutting a quick look up at Jim, he added, "I'll even bet you asked Simon to revoke my pass."
When Ellison flushed and looked away, Blair nodded sadly. It wasn't a huge surprise. Jim had made it very clear that they were finished as partners before the press conference. God, it hurt to remember how much Jim had despised him, the disgust and hate that had radiated from him. Sandburg's shoulders slumped and he dumped the bags on the floor as he turned to sit down on the edge of his bed, his hands clasped between his knees as he leaned forward, his hair again obscuring his face. He didn't have the energy to fight any more. If Jim wanted to talk so damned bad, then he could talk. It wasn't like he really had to be anywhere specific or had anyone expecting him.

The silence stretched out as Jim tried to figure out what to say. It didn't help that his leg was aching so bad he could hardly keep standing. It all felt awkward, forced; they needed more time than just a few minutes while Blair listened grudgingly, if he listened at all.

"You need to be anywhere over the next couple of days?" Jim finally asked.

"Why? You thinking of locking me in this room or something?" Blair challenged. He really didn't want to admit that he had nowhere to go other than a cheap motel somewhere.

"No, I was thinking maybe we could go camping for a couple of days - you know, head to neutral territory, give ourselves time to sort all this out," Ellison explained. "I don't know - it just seems to me that everything spun out of control, and it's still spinning. I... I think we need to slow it down a little. We've been friends, good friends, for almost four years. If this is the end, well, I just don't want it to be like this. So - can you spare me a couple or three days?"

"If I say no, will you let me leave?" Blair asked wearily. Jim seemed to so easily accept that he was really going to go and would never be back; it tore Sandburg up inside but also convinced him he was right to be leaving. Jim just wanted to have a gentler closure - which Blair could well understand - but it all just hurt so badly. He didn't know if he had the energy to make it all 'all right' for Jim, to keep pretending that this was what he wanted.

"No," Jim replied, but he dared a slight smile.

"Then I guess I can spare you two or three more days from my life," Sandburg sighed. Standing, he absently rubbed at the hollow ache in his chest and then grabbed his carryall and backpack. "I'll load up the truck with our tent and the gear in the basement, while you pack. Meet you downstairs in half an hour."

"You won't just take off?" Jim demanded, wary of letting Sandburg out of his sight.

Giving him a straight look, Blair replied coldly, "You really don't think much of me, do you?" Jerking his head toward the briefcase, his voice was brittle as he added, "That's my laptop, the only thing I own besides my car that has any worth... and I'm leaving it here. So, no, I'm not just going to 'take off'." With that, he pushed past Jim and headed for the door.

In deference to Jim's injured leg, Blair drove. He headed out of town and up into the mountains, to a campground that he knew wouldn't require any hiking. They could park the truck right near the river, pitch the tent and fish - and talk, if that's what Jim wanted. He stopped at the outskirts of town to pick up some basic food supplies, and was in and out of the truck before Jim could manage, with his stiff leg, to get out to help. And Sandburg just ignored him when he offered to split the cost of the supplies.
During the whole of the drive, the silence in the cab of the vehicle was deafening. Usually, Sandburg chattered on about something at Rainier, or some article he'd just read, or something he'd heard on the news, or the case they'd just finished, or he was making up new tests, or listening to some tape or radio station - but now, he just drove. Casting a sideways glance at him, Jim noted the younger man's pallor, and the rigid set of his jaw. Blair looked exhausted, as if he'd been the one who had been shot and had only just gotten out of the hospital.

Turning his gaze back to the narrow, winding highway, Jim used the silence between them to sort his thoughts into some kind of useful order. First - he'd hurt the kid by doubting him, and not for the first time. They had to deal with that; he had to figure out why he reacted like that so reflexively, without thinking. It had more to do with him, and he knew it, than it did with Sandburg. Second - they had to figure out what to do about his senses and the press conference; at least, they did if he had any hope of persuading Blair to stay and be his partner. Third, he had to decide why it mattered so much to him that Blair not just disappear from his life. God, you'd think he'd be used to it; just about everyone else had either left or died, so why should it matter if Sandburg disappeared over the horizon? Why did it leave him feeling so - empty and more than a little sick?

Sandburg had called his behaviour 'abuse' - emotional and verbal. Jim hadn't intended to be abusive, but he could see how his words and actions could be interpreted as being deliberately and maliciously callous. Did abuse have to be deliberate or could it be casual, unconscious but still hurtful? He swallowed hard - he'd been a cop long enough to know the answer to that question. Hell, he'd lived in such a situation when he'd been growing up, and it chilled him to think he'd re-created some of that nightmare - sickened him to realize he'd been playing his father's role in the 'you'll never be good enough' game of rejection.

Stealing another glance at Blair, his face shadowed now as dusk set in, but no less visible to Jim's eyes, Ellison asked himself just who Sandburg was in his life. Roommate, but evidently not for much longer. Partner, but that seemed to be over. Best friend - the best he'd ever had. But, why? Because he trusted the kid? Because for all of the past four years, Blair had done his best to help him and back him up? Because he didn't have to pretend around the younger man? Because Blair was closer than his brother had ever been? Because the kid made him laugh? Because he'd miss the sound of his heartbeat? Even more, the sound of his voice? The laughter in his eyes? The intelligence? The compassion? The energy?

Sighing, Jim grimaced as he stared out into the gathering darkness. Would he be able to say the words that might make the difference in changing Sandburg's plans and clear intention to disappear from his life? The ones that said, 'I love you' and 'I don't want you to go'? Or, if he couldn't bear to be that honest, 'I think I still need you, please stay?'

What could he offer Blair to encourage him to stay? The job at Rainier was gone. So far as anyone in town, hell the country, knew - at least those who watched the news - the kid was a liar and a fraud. Why would he ever want to hang around Cascade knowing that people thought that about him? What about his own career? He said he had a dig lined up. Where? For how long?

And, did he need Sandburg? As a guide in handling his senses? As a human being? What would it be like to know Blair would never again back him up on the job? To never see Sandburg again? He had told Blair, his mother and Simon that he just wanted his life to go back to the way it had been - but was that the truth? It had been pretty lonely. Hadn't been all that satisfying...

Did he just want to go on chasing and catching bad guys until he was too old to keep doing it, or dead?

Was that really all that mattered in his life?
Two hours later, Blair paid the park fee at the gate and in less than another half hour he pulled into
the campsite on a bend of the river. It was wooded, with spruce and birch, the ground soft with
centuries of accumulated pine needles layered over the granite. The river lapped at the rocky
shoreline, and a light wind rustled through the boughs above them. There was a slight trace of wood
smoke in the air, barely discernable over the more prevalent scents of the forest and water.

Blair got out to unload the back of the truck, and when Jim began to help, Sandburg just shook his
head. He pointed at a handy boulder, and said, "Sit - your leg doesn't need any unnecessary
aggravation. I'm capable of setting up the camp."

His voice was tight, not encouraging of any comment or conversation. When the tent was up, and the
sleeping bags unrolled, he handed Jim one of the sandwiches he'd bought and stored the rest of the
food in sacks that he hung from nearby trees. When he finished gathering a couple of armfuls of
wood, and got a small campfire started, Blair called it a night.

Wordlessly, he curled up into his sleeping bag and rolled to face the wall of the tent. However much
Jim might want to talk, he was just too damned tired to listen...

By the time Blair woke the next morning, Jim already had a fire going, and a pot of coffee brewed.
He was down by the shore, trying to catch their breakfast. The morning was fresh, peaceful, with
only the chirping of some birds, a chattering squirrel and the rush of the river filling the vast silence
of the wilderness. Sandburg saw Ellison cast a hopeful look over his shoulder, and his heart ached to
imagine that Jim apparently did still want them to be friends. He pulled out his own fishing rod and a
lure, stuck his outback hat on his head, poured himself a mug of dark Columbian and then wandered
down to perch on a rock and cast his line.

"Morning," Jim offered.

Sandburg nodded as he sipped the hot beverage. He let the tranquility sink inside and ease the
turbulent emotions that had run amok over the past ten days or so. Taking a deep breath, smelling the
fresh, clean forest air, letting it out slowly, he murmured quietly, "This is nice."

Jim heard him, as Blair had known he would, and ventured a smile, the tension in his shoulders
easing a little. They fished in silence for long minutes, content to simply be in one another's
company, but then Jim caught a good-sized trout, so they moved back up the long slope of rock to
their camp. Jim cleaned and filleted the fish, while Blair got out the skillet and the flour. While Jim
fried his catch, Blair sliced up tomatoes and an avocado, and then toasted some bread on the fire.
Finally, the fish done, Jim set it in a pan to keep warm while he scrambled some eggs.

They ate in silence, which had gone from companionable to expectant. Blair kept giving Jim
sideways glances, and Ellison couldn't believe the kid could be quiet for so long. Finally, they
finished eating and Blair took the dishes and the pans down to the river. "Maybe you could make
some fresh coffee," he suggested over his shoulder as he went.

By the time he got back with the cleaned and dried utensils, the coffee had finished perking.
Sandburg put the gear away and hauled the two lawn chairs that he'd belatedly remembered tossing
in the back of the truck the day before, over toward the fire. "Here," he offered, setting one up.
"This'll be easier on your leg than perching on that rock."
"Thanks," Jim murmured as he gratefully shifted to the more comfortable support. Blair set up his own chair, sniffed at the coffee and then poured two fresh mugs, handing one to Jim before he sat down.

When the silence still stretched between them, Blair chewed on his lip to keep from pushing Jim to say whatever it was that he evidently so badly wanted to say. But, even when Jim wanted to talk, he had trouble knowing how to start. The simple fact that he'd wanted to do this, that their friendship was important to him, too, was good to know, but didn't really change anything - didn't make anything better or solve any of the problems between them.

"So... you're going to get your PhD?" Jim asked, the search for facts easier than trying to tackle the complicated feelings that twisted in his gut and filled his chest. "I thought the dragon lady had expelled you..."

"Fired me, actually," Blair clarified with a distant look in his eyes. "But, I'd taken the precaution of submitting my 'real' dissertation to my advisor before I held the press conference - so there could be no question that what had been leaked to the press had no legitimate status. She wanted me expelled, but the chairman of my department argued that I had a right to defend my paper. She finally agreed, so long as it happened quickly and I disappeared right after."

"When will you actually get it?" Ellison asked, thinking that these things usually took a while.

"As soon as the administrative work is done - they told me yesterday when the defence was over that I'd passed the oral," Blair replied flatly. He'd always imagined that he'd feel better about achieving his doctorate, but it all just felt hollow.

"I wish I'd known you were working on the second paper," Ellison observed, making an effort to keep his tone mild. Had he known, he wouldn't have jumped to such wild conclusions when the shit had hit the fan.

Blair gave him a steady look, knowing full well that it was yet another way that Jim could hold him responsible for how bad things had gone, and not disagreeing. He'd screwed up in so very many ways.

But the fact that Jim believed he had deliberately abused Ellison's trust, maliciously betrayed Jim for gain, still rankled - would likely hurt for a long time. Worse, even when Jim knew his assumptions had been wrong, he still had wanted Sandburg out of his life. He hadn't wanted to talk about what they might do to mitigate the situation - he hadn't wanted to talk at all. It was just over. Like he'd been looking for an excuse to cut Blair loose and finally had one.

Wearily, Blair looked away. When he was honest with himself, he could see things had been going downhill for months... since before Alex even. He just hadn't wanted to admit it - and he could hardly blame Jim for being sick of having him around. "I didn't think you'd really be very interested," he said finally, his voice and bearing devoid of animation. "You've always been pretty indifferent to my work at Rainier. I did realize that you'd be glad to know I'd never hand in the Sentinel paper, but I really did think that as soon as I got my PhD, any excuse I had to keep riding with you would be gone."

Ellison had seen hurt darken the wide blue eyes before they shifted away, but he didn't know where to begin to deal with it all. Blair was entirely right about his lack of interest in the university - it just all seemed so damned esoteric and irrelevant. But saying so now wouldn't help anything. It was easier to stick with the facts, such as they were.

"You said you would be leaving the country," Jim finally ventured. "Where're you going?"
Blair almost refused to say, but then realized he was being childish. He'd said the day before that he considered Jim his best friend, and he did - he just didn't trust Jim anymore, or believe that he really mattered a damn to the older man. Still, if they could manage courtesy between them, it would be a good thing. After four years, it was damned hard to leave with nothing but hurt and anger between them. "I'm going back to Mexico," he replied quietly. "A couple of months ago, I applied for a small grant from the University of Mexico to explore the ruins you found with a view toward substantiating the thesis that it's the ancient temple of the sentinels; the grant was approved the day after you were shot by Zeller. I'll fly down there in a few days, as soon as I've got everything sorted out with the lawyer."

Jim was surprised, and then realized he shouldn't have been. Of course Blair would want to spend a lot more time there, studying the hieroglyphics. He nodded as he looked off toward the river. "How long will you be gone?"

"Six months, at least," Sandburg replied. "Depends a lot on what I find."

"And after that...?"

Blair shrugged. "Some of that depends on what happens with the lawsuits. I doubt I'll ever be able to work at Rainier again, which is too bad, because I liked it there for a lot of reasons. But, if I win, at least I'll have a reasonably clear personal and professional reputation - well, except for looking like an idiot and a troublemaker. Maybe Simon will give me a note or something to indicate that I was acting in the interest of the ongoing investigation as opposed to being deliberately confusing about the fact that the sentinel paper wasn't a fraudulent dissertation and was no more than fiction or a speculative draft about the innate attributes of law enforcement officers, take your pick. I don't like to ask him for it, but I might not have any choice if I can't find a job when I get back to the States. It's hard to say what possibilities of a professorship somewhere might exist next year." He paused for a moment, and then added softly, "I just don't know if I want that life, anymore."

"I thought getting your PhD was one of your big dreams," Jim replied, surprised, treading on uncertain ground.

Nodding, Blair sighed, "It was. But... I guess I've changed. You've changed me, your work. I still want to teach, but what you do is so much more - immediate. You and the others at the PD save lives, protect people. I liked being a part of that." He paused as he gazed up at the cliff that loomed on the far side of the river. "The university world just seems so... stuffy, so self-conscious... narrow. I don't know. I don't think I want to spend the rest of my life in the rarified atmosphere of some college, worrying about small-minded politics and publication requirements. It just seems... a little shallow, I guess."

Listening intently, Jim frowned a bit in concentration. "Are you saying you'd consider being a cop?" he asked, unable to keep a vestige of hope from his voice.

Sandburg rubbed his jaw, and then leaned forward, his forearms on his knees. His lips thinned a little as he shook his head. "No, I don't think I want to be a cop, though I liked being a detective, well, as much a one as I was, hanging around with you. I was thinking that, if I can clear my reputation, and maybe if Simon gave me a letter of reference, I could go to Quantico, and learn to be a profiler..."

Ellison's gut clenched at the thought of Sandburg having to witness the atrocities of truly crazy serial killers, and maybe becoming a target in his own right - not that he hadn't been targeted before. But a profiler had to get inside the head of the psycho, had to think like they did to predict what their next move might be - a lot of profilers ended up very depressed, even suicidal. "Why would you want to..."
"... be a profiler?" Blair supplied when Jim's voice faltered. "I guess because I think my understanding of cultures, social mores and norms, and human behaviour might actually be useful in that kind of work." Shrugging, he looked away. "They probably won't even consider my application. It's just one of the possibilities I've been thinking about."

"Why didn't you talk to me about any of this?" Jim asked. "I tried to reach you from the hospital, left messages - but you never got back to me."

"I guess I didn't think you'd be particularly interested," Blair replied, his voice tight, clipped.

"See - that's what I don't understand," Ellison blurted, frustrated. "I thought after your press conference - at the hospital before Zeller attacked MCU - that we were okay..."

"Yeah, I know," Blair murmured as he crossed his arms. His shoulders tightened and he bowed his head. He really didn't want to get into this.

"Why aren't we okay?" Jim demanded, really not understanding the problem.

Sandburg snorted and shook his head. Clearing his throat, he looked up at Jim, and pushed his hair back behind his ears before again crossing his arms tightly. "Jim, let me ask you - if someone, me for example, who knows you as well as anyone ever has, honestly believed you capable of betrayal, at the most fundamental level, for personal gain - to get rich at my expense - if I honestly, after four years, could decide that our friendship was all a huge waste of time and I wished it had never happened - how would you feel?"

Before Jim could begin to respond, Blair had risen from the chair, his face flushed, and his eyes flashing with barely controlled anger and hurt. Unable to remain still, he began to pace, gesturing with his hands for emphasis as he continued, his words flowing faster, his tone harsh. "You believed that I trashed you deliberately. After four years of working together, of living together - of what I'd thought was a pretty good friendship, you honestly believed I could do that to you. And even when you knew I hadn't, you still never wanted to see me again. You still wished that none of the last four years had ever happened, that you could just go back to what your life had been before we met. And if, after all that, you'd had to put your career on the line to protect me, and everyone in your world thought you were a liar and a fraud, and you had to give up everything that mattered to you - your home, your work, the future you'd planned on, your best friend, all your friends - would you be okay with me?"

"I didn't ask you to give that press conference," Ellison protested, defensively.

"No, you didn't; you didn't have much of anything to say to me at that point," Blair replied wearily. Shrugging as he turned back to face Jim, he admitted, "I guess it was a stupid thing to do - but there was no one I could talk to about it. Simon and Megan were in the hospital and, at that point, I was scared stiff that Simon might die. I knew it was my fault that you hadn't been able to get Zeller, and as long as the media believed in the stuff Syd Graham had released, they were never going to leave you alone. And it just kept getting worse. When the University held the press conference about the nomination for the Nobel Prize for Medicine, I wanted to throw up. God, Jim - all my wildest dreams had become a hideous nightmare! Three million dollars! Imagine the kinds of things I could have done, for research and learning, to set up trusts, to contribute to environmental protection! And do you have any idea of the impact even a Prize nomination could have had on interest in further research into sensory genetics? I'm not talking about getting rich and famous here, man; I'm talking about the impact I could have had on the lives of countless people around the world. But, none of that was worth betraying you, not to me, anyway. I can find other ways to get the information into
the public forum without compromising you. I had to stop it, make it go away; what else was I supposed to do?"

"You could have taken the money..." Jim began, intending it wryly, trying to mask how very guilty he felt that his desire for privacy was costing so much, in so very many ways - but it was the worst thing he could have said in the circumstances.

Blair whirled away and was packing up the tent before Ellison quite knew what was happening.

"Wait, I didn't mean..." Ellison stammered.

"You never mean it," Sandburg grated as he rolled up and tied the sleeping bags. "You blow up, accuse me of the worst possible motives and behaviours, and then expect me to just shrug it off, because you were mad, or scared, or misinformed, or feeling like things were crowding in or out of control, or you were driven by your sentinel instincts, the ones you don't even want to acknowledge or talk about, or whatever - and I'm just supposed to take it, and then laugh about it afterwards. Well, that sucks man, and I've had it. I am not your doormat. I've made mistakes - fine - so shoot me. But I have always done my best by you. And I have never betrayed you - not even when protecting you pretty much cost me everything that really matters to me. This attempt at 'conversation' is a waste of time, Jim. You want me to take full responsibility for everything getting so screwed up? Okay. Fine. It's all my fault. You'd pretty much decided that, anyway, right? Well, good, 'cause you're absolutely correct. The whole four fucking years have pretty much been a waste of time. I was so excited about finding a real, honest to God sentinel, and so blown away to think that I'd also lucked in to the best friend I've ever had, and so grateful for the first real home I've ever known, that I never noticed that you didn't feel the same way. Some observer I am, huh?" All the while he ranted, Blair continued packing up their gear and tossing it into the truck. Finished with loading everything up, he stomped over to kick out the fire and tipped the coffee pot to drown the ashes.

"Come on, get in the truck," he directed Jim, but wasn't able to make eye contact. "We're finished here."

"Chief, I..." Jim began, clearly not ready to move, but Blair was at the end of his tether.

"What do you want from me?" Blair shouted, his eyes glazed with unshed tears. "God damn it, Jim - would you just put me out of my misery? I can't stand this, okay? I can't stand having to face you feeling like the world's biggest fool. You hate me - deep down inside, you truly despise me - you still see me as some 'neo-hippy, witchdoctor punk'. I get that. You don't have to make it any clearer for me. Can we please just go?"

"You know, for a genius, sometimes you're really dumb," Ellison observed, his voice thick with the lump in his throat.

Blair blinked, and his expression went completely flat. Turning away, he strode down to the shoreline and sat on a rock, his back to Jim, his elbows on his knees and his face in his hands.

Jim pushed himself to his feet and, limping heavily, he followed Blair, sitting on a nearby rock, facing the younger man. As hard as it was to talk about how he felt, to risk putting his own feelings on the line, he had no other choice if he had any hope of restoring their friendship. "If you're done making it clear how badly I've made you feel, maybe you could just listen for a few minutes, okay?"

Blair didn't move. Nor did he say anything, so Jim continued quietly, "If you think I either hate or despise you, you couldn't be more wrong. As far as I'm concerned, you're the best friend I've ever had - and better than I deserve. I don't want you to move out - I sure don't want you leaving the
country. If we could find a way to work it out, I'd like to keep you as my partner. We both made mistakes - and the worst one was that I wouldn't talk to you about what happened."

"Why did you treat me like... like garbage?" Blair asked, his voice catching and very low. "After all these years... how could you think I'd hurt you like that?"

"I reacted, like I always do - like a match set to dynamite," Jim sighed as his gaze shifted to the rushing water. "My whole life, just about everyone who ever mattered to me, has let me down. For the last four years, I've kept waiting for the other shoe to fall. I just couldn't believe that you wouldn't hurt or betray me, let me down some day, too, so it had to be only a matter of time, right? And I knew when you did, it would hurt me more than anything else ever has, because I've never trusted anyone as much as I trust you. I screwed up, Chief. I was so caught up in my 'poor me' story - I just reacted. I asked you yesterday how we could make it right. There has to be a way..."

"It's too late, Jim," Sandburg whispered, though he lowered his hands to his knees. "If I hung around, people would start to wonder if the sentinel stuff was true..."

"Maybe I should just admit that it is," Ellison offered tightly. The idea scared the hell out of him, but he couldn't hold his tongue when it was costing Sandburg so much. Hell, if what Sandburg had just said was true about the good the research could do for countless others, then his silence and privacy were indulgences too petty to be borne. He'd just never thought about the impact Blair's research could have on anyone but himself - until now. He felt like a complete jackass.

But Blair shook his head. "No, I don't think that's a good idea. Right now, the bad guys can't use it against you, well, except for well-connected ones like Brackett, who can access your old army records and the CIA files on the possibilities of genetically enhanced senses. To drag it all up again now would just create more frenzy and get in the way of your job; you don't need that, nor does Simon or any of the others. Tell your colleagues, if you want - I think they've all pretty much figured it out anyway - but a public announcement would be counterproductive and even dangerous."

"But you're paying too high a price," Ellison replied.

"What price?" Blair asked bleakly. "I've got my PhD. I'll likely win a bundle in the legal settlements. I just have to get on with my life - and that was pretty much inevitable anyway."

"But, what about the good the research could do others?" Jim tried again, his voice dry and tight.

"That's why I'm going to Mexico," Blair reiterated wearily, appreciating the sacrifice Ellison was prepared to make but knowing it was unnecessary; more, that it could be truly dangerous to his best friend's wellbeing, and that was something he would not compromise, not for anything or anyone. "I'm almost certain that I'll find more than enough there to support a cogent academic analysis that I can then publish without in any way putting you at risk. Jim, I don't want you to feel guilty or bad about any of this. I made the decision not to go ahead with the sentinel dissertation months ago, even before we knew about the temple, let alone before that press conference. Let it go, man."

"This just feels wrong..." Jim sighed. "What if I need your help?"

"You won't," Sandburg insisted. "It's not like I did anything all that special. It's just that I understood what you are, when you didn't. Simon or Megan or Joel - any of them could do what I've been doing. Probably better, 'cause they're real cops."

Ellison shook his head. "Incacha seemed to think you, you specifically, had an important role to play. He passed you the way of the Shaman..."
"That's not something you just 'pass along'," Blair interjected, bluntly. "It takes special skills, knowledge, experience and wisdom to be a shaman. We haven't even talked about it since - and I sure haven't done anything to be either worthy or able to fulfill the responsibility. Face it, Jim - I'm not the one who is special. You are."

All the time they'd been talking, Blair had remained turned away, and his voice was dull, lifeless - resigned. Jim frowned, still feeling that, if it all ended like this, he might never see the kid again. "You do believe me when I say I consider you my best friend, right?"

Blair looked up at the cliffs. Finally, he said, "I think you mean it when you say it. I also think you'll forget it again if and when the next crisis arises. I accept that it's not 'personal', in an odd sort of way. But that doesn't make it any easier to take." Turning to Ellison, he continued thoughtfully, "You know, you're a lot like my Mom. You both expect me to understand that you mean well, and to just roll with whatever you throw at me. And I've been guilty of aiding and abetting the behaviour because I've never really called either of you on it when it's hurt in the past. I guess because you are the two people I love most in the world, I just figured I could deal with it. But - I don't know if I can anymore. I just don't trust you not to turn on me again. And I don't believe you either need me or really want me in your life. You've told me too often that you don't."

"How the hell often do I have to say I'm sorry?" Jim demanded, frustrated that even when he bared his soul that it didn't seem to be enough to placate Sandburg.

"Once might be nice," Sandburg muttered, but before Ellison could reply, he held up his hands and said, "It's not really about being 'sorry', Jim. I'm sorry, too. It doesn't change anything. What's done is done. You thought I'd betrayed you, so you rejected me. I had to publicly deny that you're a sentinel to get the heat off your back because there wasn't any other way I could help you at that point. I can't stay in Cascade and there's no real reason for me to be here any longer. If I can find something substantive in the temple ruins, I can still publish information about sentinels that might help others like you - maybe even help you, too - without ever having to compromise you or expose you. And after that? Well, I just don't know yet."

"You could come home," Jim suggested hopefully.

"I don't have a home, Jim," Blair replied tightly. "Not anymore."

"That's not true," Ellison argued.

Sandburg just turned his face away and said nothing as he rubbed at the nagging ache, recognizing it for grief and anger... and almost unbearable sorrow.

Jim was beginning to feel an odd sense of desperation - like he'd felt before he'd met Sandburg and didn't understand what was happening to him - that things were out of control and he didn't have a clue of how to fix them. "You really don't trust me, do you?" he ground out. He could scarcely take it in. Sandburg had always trusted him, had never hesitated to follow him anywhere, and never doubted him, not once since the day they'd met.

"Actually, yeah, I do - I trust you to trash me again at the first opportunity," Blair replied bitterly. "What's that saying - 'you only hurt the ones you love'? Well, I guess, if I'm your best friend, that must be true, because you sure wouldn't ever treat anyone else the way you treat me." Swallowing, he gave himself a shake as he muttered with self-disgust, "God, I sound like a fishwife, whining that you're mean to me." Turning to Ellison, he said sorrowfully, "Look, this isn't making anything better, Jim. It means a lot to me to know that I wasn't completely wrong all these years and that, maybe, you don't think I'm the worst scum of the earth. We can both wish it never happened, but it did. And now we have to move on. No amount of talk is ever going to change that. My life here, with you, in
Cascade, is over. It's done. You'll be fine and I will, too. I just need some time to get my balance back. Can we please just go back to town?"

Ellison swallowed hard and looked away, blinking against the unexpected moisture in his eyes. He was irascible, they both knew that. He said or did pretty much whatever felt right to him at the time, without giving thought to how his words or actions impacted on other people. If they didn't like it, tough - he was a self-professed loner and couldn't care less what just about anybody ever thought of him. But he wasn't a cruel man, and he didn't intentionally set out to hurt other people. If anything, he only wanted to protect those few he really cared about. It cut him deeply, to see how very much he'd hurt the kid with his thoughtless reactions. Sandburg had always seemed to have a light inside, that sparked from his eyes and glowed in his smile - but suddenly, Jim realized he hadn't seen that light very often in the last few months - and now, it seemed as if it was completely extinguished. Looking at the kid now, listening to him, it seemed as if Blair were bereft of energy or enthusiasm, empty and dull. As if his soul was sick - and Jim realized he had done this. And he was desperately sorry. "Will you come back to the loft, and stay until your flight leaves?"

Blair hesitated, but then nodded. It was only for a couple of days. The media had pretty much stopped paying any attention to either of them. "Yeah, okay," he finally murmured. "Thanks."

Jim stiffened at the gratitude. He didn't want gratitude - he wanted forgiveness. He wanted things to be the way they were, not just before the latest fiasco, but also before Alex. He wanted to forget that Blair was vulnerable, and could be taken from him, wanted to believe they were both immortal and would live forever - that nothing would ever harm them - that he'd always be good enough to make everything turn out okay. He'd thought they had all the time in the world to work things out after Alex; Sandburg was alive and all that was really important was to keep him that way, to keep him safe. Almost losing him twice in a few short months had been just too hard to take. So Jim had consciously begun to push him away from the PD, had done more and more without him, to keep him out of the line of fire. Not that it had worked. Between Ventriss and Cyclops Security, Kincaid and Harry's ex-partner, the kid had been in as much danger, as often, as he'd ever been. And for all of that time, Blair had just figured that Jim was tired of having him around.

"I'm sorry," he choked past the lump in his throat. But Blair had already gone back to the campsite to load up the camp chairs, and didn't hear him. For the first time, Jim realized that though he had said, 'I'm sorry' a lot more often than once, Sandburg had never heard him say the words. And now, the kid had made it pretty clear that it was too late for those words to hold any magic to heal the rifts, the scars. It wasn't about being sorry anymore. It was about a loss of faith and hope and trust on Blair's part, and a fundamental lack of respect for Sandburg on his own.

The drive back to Cascade was as silent as the one the day before. All the way back, Jim kept wondering how he was ever going to repair the damage between them, how he could win back Sandburg's trust. How he could fix things so that Blair didn't have to leave.

But he only had a couple of days, and Blair didn't want him going public - and the kid had a good reason to go back to the temple. The best of reasons. He wanted to find enough evidence to allow him to write what he knew about sentinels so that the years he'd spent working with Jim wouldn't be wasted, but might help others.

And Blair wouldn't look at him. Wouldn't talk to him. Sandburg very clearly believed that it was hopeless. The kid who was perpetually optimistic and always believed that things would work out, held no hope for them or their friendship. Couldn't see why it should even matter to Jim if he left. Still believed, down deep, that Jim wanted him to go.

So Sandburg was going to leave, and he didn't plan to ever come back.
Jim tried to tell himself it shouldn't matter so much, shouldn't hurt so much. When they'd first started, neither of them had ever intended that it should go on forever. It was normal for things to change, for life to go on. Sandburg had his own career to follow; he couldn't be a ride-along forever, and he didn't want to be a cop. Jim would get his personal space at the loft back. No more loud music or constant chatter, no more wet towels on the floor of the bathroom or weird, smelly stuff in the fridge. It was what he'd said, in his extremity of anger and hurt, he'd wanted. To go back to the way things were.

However much he told himself to just let go, though, Ellison felt as if something inside was tearing apart, and it left him feeling nauseated and breathless. He felt he'd failed in some fundamental way and, because he'd failed, he and Blair were both somehow doomed. All logic said that Blair was right. As sad as it was, it was time to let go and move on. But his gut told him this was wrong, very wrong. Like it or not, he knew he needed Blair - and he suspected Blair needed him, too. God, it felt worse than when his marriage had failed. Maybe because when he and Carolyn had finally split, the love between them had already died.

By the time they arrived back in Cascade, Jim hadn't come up with any answers, and he was both irritated and frustrated. He took their personal gear up to the loft, while Sandburg unloaded the rest of the stuff and stored it back in the basement. As soon as Blair came into the apartment, he called his lawyer and learned the papers had been served on the plaintiffs in his lawsuits - and their lawyers were already beginning to make noises about settlements. It looked like it wouldn't take long to work things out. Sandburg told him to go ahead with negotiations on his behalf according to what they'd discussed. And then Blair called the airlines, and booked his flights to Sierra Verde.

"Who's going on this field trip with you?" Jim asked, his voice brittle and parched with grief.

"Nobody," Blair replied with a shrug. "I want to be able to take my time - and no one knows as much as I do, anyway, about sentinels, well, except for you."

Ellison frowned. The temple was old, with broken steps and crumbling walls, and it was in the middle of nowhere. If Blair got into trouble, or was ill or hurt, there was no way to get help. Cell phones didn't work that far out into the jungle. And though the drug dealers they'd fought with were dead or in prison, there were others who might well resent what had happened and want revenge.

Reading his face and body language, Blair couldn't resist a small, sad smile. "Relax, Jim," he murmured. "I'll be fine. Besides, I'm not your problem any more. Don't worry."

Telling a sentinel not to worry about anything, let alone his best friend going off into the wilderness alone, was like telling a wheel that needed grease not to squeak.

The packed boxes were picked up by the storage company the next day, even though Jim had insisted that Sandburg could leave his stuff in the loft. Later that evening, the kid who had bought Blair's Volvo showed up to exchange a wad of cash for the keys and registration. The last physical tie Blair had to Cascade was gone.

The next morning, Blair was up before dawn had even streaked the sky. He refused a ride to the airport, citing Jim's injured leg, and had booked a cab the night before. It was too early to bother with breakfast, or even a fast cup of coffee. Too early to do anything but rush through his morning ablutions, toss on a sweatshirt, jeans, socks and sneakers, grab his jacket and his bags... and turn to
Jim, who was standing by the door, looking lost somehow.

"I guess this is it," Sandburg said, his voice tight with control. He only hesitated a moment, and then he stepped forward to give Ellison a quick, hard, hug. His whispered, "I love you, man - I always will," was still echoing in Jim's ears as Blair slipped out the door and was gone.

Jim limped to the balcony and saw Blair look up once, his eyes dark with sorrow, and then turn away to climb into the cab. Ellison watched until the taxi disappeared around a corner, and he could no longer make out the sound of its engine. Then he turned back into the apartment, standing by the couch to feel the emptiness and taste the silence.

It had all happened too damned fast. He felt as if a tornado had ripped through his life, leaving him uprooted and surrounded by wreckage - too shell-shocked to figure out how to start putting things back together again, or even where to start. He felt a pressure in his chest and a hollow, twisting ache in his gut. He was as pale and breathless as if he'd been beaten within an inch of his life, and his eyes were shadowed with hurt and defeat. Shaking his head dazedly, he remembered with bitter anguish that he had stood in the same spot, less than three short weeks ago, and had raged about wanting his life back, the way it had been, and that Sandburg should just accept it was over. Crossing his arms tightly and bowing his head, he clenched his jaw as he remembered the old saying that people should be careful what they asked for, lest they get it.

Well, he'd gotten what he asked for - he'd gotten his precious privacy and his old life back - at the cost of the best friendship he'd ever known, the price of a good man's reputation and the good Blair might have done if he hadn't been so monumentally self-absorbed, the loss of the best partner he would ever have, and the pain in Sandburg's eyes.

It had been a long time since Jim had felt so lost, so bereft and alone, or had wished with such futile despair that he could turn back time. With a heavy sigh, Ellison scrubbed at his face and forced himself to straighten up. Swallowing hard, he tightened his jaw as he once again looked around the silent loft. He'd only gotten what he'd asked for, and now he had to live with it.

Jim told himself he'd just have to manage as best he could, one day at a time. It wasn't like he had much choice.

Blair stared straight ahead during the ride to the airport, and then mechanically paid the cabby, took his bags and checked in. He tried very hard not to let his emotions overwhelm his thoughts, but to remain focused on where he was going, and not on what he'd left behind. But it wasn't easy. His thoughts kept jumping to memories of the past four years... special moments, ones he'd never forget. Like meeting Jim for the first time and then explaining to the detective what he was... and the first time he'd worked with Ellison, on the Switchman case. Or the moment when Jim raced into the warehouse and fought Lash, to save his life. And... inevitably, his memories crashed up against Alex, and the fountain, and dying... and seeing Jim kissing her on the beach in Mexico.

And, now, that's where he was headed. Back to the location where he'd experienced some of the worst moments of his life. But he had to do this. For himself, and maybe for Jim, too. Who knew what secrets the temple might hold? What he might be able to learn that Jim could use to improve his control and use of his senses even more? And, for sure, he had to go with the hope of discovering information he could use as a launch platform for an article or a book to introduce the idea of sentinels to the modern world, so that others, like Jim, might better understand the miracle of what
they were.

Time and again, he pushed back the sorrow that threatened to swamp him; he couldn't afford to lose control of his emotions, particularly not here in the middle of Cascade's busy airport, where he might be recognized. That's all he needed - to create a scene and generate even more unwanted and destructive attention.

So he boarded the plane, and tried not to look out at the city as it ascended into the air... tried not to pick out the neighborhood he'd come to love so much. But, he couldn't help but look - and couldn't help the burn in his eyes when he did. Taking a deep breath, he swallowed hard and blinked away the moisture, his arms crossed tightly against the anguish deep inside. He had memories he wouldn't trade for any number of millions of dollars. He'd met his Sentinel. Had had the chance to work with Jim for years - had become his friend. Had learned what it meant to have a real home, a place to belong. Had been happier and more settled for years than he'd ever been in his life. Whatever the pain now, he wouldn't give up those experiences for anything, or ever wish them away.

And, well, he *had* achieved his PhD. He was 'whole', sort of - even if he felt torn apart. Life was about change. He'd learned a long time ago that separating from a person or place he'd come to love was painful, but he'd also learned he could endure the pain and go on. He'd survive this agony that ripped through his heart and soul; he just needed time.

The plane landed in Los Angeles and he made the change to the international flight that would take him to Mexico City. It was a tight connection and he didn't have any time to linger or dawdle. Less than three hours later, he landed in the huge capital and learned that his next flight, to Sierra Verde, was delayed by several hours - in addition to the five hour wait he'd anticipated. Sighing, he looked around the crowded airport and wished the journey were over. God, he was tired - tired right down to his soul.

It didn't help that, whenever he thought of his destination, he remembered Jim on that beach with Alex - and Alex pointing Jim's gun at him...

Jim puttered around the loft, washing the floors, cleaning out the fridge... until he found some of Blair's containers, and decided that he really didn't need to clean it out that moment. He did a laundry, grateful that the elevator was working, as his leg was really quite stiff and sore. After he'd remade his bed, and hung fresh towels in the bathroom, he made himself a light lunch of soup... and noticed, with a pang, that all Blair's teas and spices were gone from the cupboard.

The silence bothered him, so he clicked on the television to watch the first game he came to... and then the next.

The phone rang around mid-afternoon and, for the space of a heartbeat, Jim hoped it might be Sandburg, but then he told himself that was crazy. The kid would still be in transit and had no reason to call. Might never call - unless he found something of interest or import at the temple.

Picking up the receiver, Jim was surprised to hear Simon's deep voice.

"How's the leg?" his boss asked.

"Stiff," Ellison replied, not really feeling like talking with anyone. "How're you doing?"
"Not bad," Banks replied, and then hesitated a moment before continuing, "I was thinking about Sandburg. You know, there may be things we could do to, I don't know, mitigate that press conference he held..."

"Thanks, Simon, but it's too late," Jim cut in, trying to keep his voice even. "Blair left this morning.'

"What? Already?" Banks blurted. "Where'd he go?"

"He's going back to the temple near Sierra Verde, to see what he might be able to learn from the ruins," Jim sighed as he ran his hand over his head and absently began to massage the back of his neck.

"Ah, well, that makes sense," Simon murmured. "When's he expect to be back?"

The words caught in Jim's throat, and his chest tightened. In the silence, Simon prompted, "He does plan to come back, doesn't he?"

"No," Ellison managed to grate. "He doesn't."

Now it was Simon who was silent. "He'll change his mind," he finally said, certain that Blair wouldn't stay away for good. The idea was inconceivable, though he could never have explained why he believed so strongly that Sandburg belonged in Cascade with Ellison.

"I don't know, Simon," Jim sighed. "He sold his car and put all his stuff into storage; wouldn't consider leaving it here to 'clutter up the loft', as he put it, when he won't be back. He even insisted on returning his key to the apartment. He doesn't think there's anything left here... he's convinced that, if he stayed or came back, people would begin to wonder..." Frustrated and angry, sick that all of this was, ultimately, to protect him and his secret, Jim just wanted the conversation to end. "Look, he's gone, and that's it, okay?"

Simon heard the warning notes in his best detective's voice, but ignored them - hell, if he let Jim intimidate him, they'd never get anywhere. "No, it's not 'okay'," Banks snapped back. "Maybe we need to think about how we make it feasible for him to come back, not just give up, as if his leaving doesn't matter." He paused a moment and, remembering Jim's comments just before Zeller's bullet had ripped through his back and Megan's shoulder, he added warily, "Unless, of course, you're relieved that he's gone..."

"He has a right to his own life," Ellison grated, avoiding the implied question.

"He has a right to the life he wants," Banks growled. "Did he really want to go?"

"Simon," Jim sighed again, pinching the bridge of his nose, reaching for control as he endeavoured to explain as best he could. "I offered to go public and he refused that option. He... he doesn't really trust me anymore and... and he doesn't believe I want him here. I tried to persuade him that we'd find an answer, but..."

Ellison's voice trailed off. What was there to say?

Banks grunted unhappily. "Well, maybe he just needs some time. Doesn't mean we can't be working on cleaning up the situation at this end. I'll talk to the Chief, and get a press release out that Sandburg was acting on our behalf, to kill off the media attention that was getting in the way of apprehending a criminal. As a minimum, it may help his lawsuits... you need to be thinking about your answers if anyone asks what the sentinel paper was about since, apparently, he had a whole other dissertation written."
"You were worried that all my cases would come up for review..." Jim recalled, beginning to wonder if maybe they could shift the situation enough that Sandburg could come home. If Blair's credibility wasn't in question, then there was no reason he couldn't come back.

"Yeah, I know, but I've been thinking about that," Banks replied. "You always had solid evidence to take into court. What difference does it make if your heightened senses gave you an edge? Cops are supposed to have keen observation skills and use their natural abilities to the fullest extent to protect and safeguard our citizens. So you see and hear better than most - so what?"

Nodding, Jim felt a frisson of hope for the first time in days. "Okay... I'll talk to him the next time he calls about how we handle questions about the sentinel paper. Likely, we can pass it off as fiction - he made some comment about that in his statement, that it was fiction, or maybe that it was a draft article about cops in general, like he told the others in MCU."

"Good, fine, I'll begin the recovery action on my end and get back to you," Banks told him. "Don't get all morose on me, Jim; we'll work this out."

Ellison wanted to hope that was true, but he wasn't sure he could regain Sandburg's trust enough to talk him into coming back. "I appreciate your help on this, Simon, and I'm sure Sandburg would be grateful, too. I don't know if it'll be enough, though..."

"How will you manage if, well, if he decides he really does want to start fresh somewhere else?" Simon asked then.

"Sandburg figures you, or Megan, or Joel could give me whatever backup I need," Jim hedged.

His boss snorted. "First, I'm not paid to be your backup, Detective. Second, yeah, maybe we can help, but the kid has a knack that nobody else has got in understanding and anticipating what you need... but persuading him to take another chance on us is your job, not mine. I'll get back to you once I've got some of the clean-up underway."

Ellison heaved a sigh as he hung up and looked around the loft. Would Blair consider coming home, if the option were feasible? How the hell could he convince the kid he'd learned his lesson? He'd never, ever, jump to the conclusion that Sandburg had betrayed him again. But would Blair believe that?

Simon called again a few hours later to say he'd had an 'interesting' conversation with the Chief, and the two of them were scheduled to meet with the Commissioner the next day. Reluctantly, Simon told Jim that he was going to have to clue in his superiors to Ellison's special skills to explain why he thought it was so important that they be able to offer Sandburg some option of permanent employment with the PD. But Jim just told him to go for it. He'd been prepared to go public; letting his superiors know the truth was no longer a big deal.

When the basketball game ended, Jim flicked to CNN, not so much because he cared a whole lot about what was going on in the world that day, but to keep his mind occupied. But his mind wouldn't stop wrestling with the situation. Belatedly, he'd begun wondering how to get in touch with Sandburg if the kid didn't call. The temple was so remote that even if Blair had taken his cell, there'd be no way to keep it charged, and no relay stations to enable call transmission. Maybe he could get in touch with the police captain they'd met on the last trip to Sierra Verde - he might be able to help get
a message out to the temple...

His attention was caught by the tickertape news update that scrolled across the bottom of the screen...

'Air Mexico Flight #771, a commuter flight out of Mexico City, exploded on its descent into Sierra Verde. The aircraft became a fireball before crashing into the jungle, killing all 21 people on board. While no terrorist organization has claimed credit for a bomb, it is assumed that the drug cartel-supported faction opposing the incumbent in the upcoming election for the Presidency were responsible. Action is underway to attempt to recover the aircraft's 'black box', though that may be difficult given the remote and rugged terrain. At this time, it is believed that one American was on the flight, but names are being withheld pending contact with next of kin. Further details at the top of the hour,'

...descent into Sierra Verde... exploded... fireball... killing all... bomb... one American...

Jim froze in stark, sick horror, the words searing into his mind as he stared at the flickering screen. More than anything, he wanted to believe that Blair was alive and well somewhere in Mexico, but he'd heard Sandburg confirm his flight arrangements - knew the kid was scheduled to be on that ill-fated flight.

No survivors... one American... all dead... Sandburg... dead...

The telephone rang a few minutes later, but Jim didn't hear it. He was still staring sightlessly at the flow of letters across the screen, lost in a haze of grief so profound that nothing else registered or mattered a damn...

He had thought there was still hope, that they might work things out - his memories flipped back, first to those terrible wretched moments at the fountain at Rainier, when he'd thought Blair dead - and then the joy that had made him weak with relief when the kid had started to breathe again. He remembered the jungle and their spirit guides - and Blair's offer to 'come into the water' when he woke up at the hospital. But Jim hadn't been ready to accept the profound link between them - had been frightened by it because he didn't understand it. And then he remembered another conversation at the hospital, after Blair had died in a different kind of way, by his own actions and words. 'It was just a paper,' Blair had said. 'It was your life,' he had replied and, with darkened eyes and a hollow, empty voice, Sandburg had nodded as he'd rasped out, 'Yeah, it was...'

'I love you, man... I always will...'

Blair's last words haunted him, and tears burned in his eyes. He hadn't found the strength to say the words that he'd give everything now to have said. 'I love you. I don't want you to go. I need you and want you to stay...'

He curled forward, his arms wrapped around his body as he shook with emotion - grief and guilt, overwhelming sorrow and loss. If he'd found a way to make Blair stay, the kid wouldn't have been on that damned, doomed, flight - wouldn't have left to safeguard Jim's secret and to find another way to explain sentinels to the world. For the third time, Blair had sacrificed his life to their friendship. Only, this time, there were no second chances; no way to undo what had been done. This time, Sandburg was really gone and couldn't be brought back. And Blair had died not knowing how Jim really felt, because he'd been too stubborn, too prideful and just too scared to admit he loved the kid as he'd never loved anyone in his life, and needed him in ways Jim didn't even pretend to understand.

"No," he grated in vain protest and desperate denial. "Please, God, no..."
Simon was frantic.

He'd seen the news update on CNN, and had immediately called Ellison. When he'd gotten no answer, he'd decided he was well enough to drive himself over to the loft - he sure as hell wasn't going to wait around for a taxi to show up. Contrary to regulations, he put the bubble light on his dash and raced across town. Bad enough if Sandburg had been killed on that flight, but for it to happen now, like this - he didn't want to think about what it would do to Ellison.

There was no answer to his knock, so he used the key Jim had given him years ago to let himself into the apartment. There was no light in the loft, except for the flickering of the television screen, and Ellison was sitting like a statue carved from stone, just staring into space.

"Damn it," Banks cursed as he lumbered across the room. "Jim!" he called out, as he flicked on a lamp and turned off the television. "Jim!" he shouted, as he shook the unresponsive man. Easing himself down to one knee, his back and chest protesting the movement, he shouted again... and finally slapped Ellison across the face.

But nothing seemed to be getting through to the apparently zoned Sentinel...

"Don't do this," Simon groaned, biting his lip, wondering whether to call an ambulance - knowing they'd not have any more luck than he was having in recalling the dazed man to conscious awareness. "Jim, please, Sandburg wouldn't want you to do this..."

"Sandburg's dead," Ellison said dully, surprising Simon, who sat back on his haunches. Slowly, Jim's eyes focused as he turned to face his superior and good friend. "He's dead, Simon. His plane exploded," he grated, his voice raspy. "I couldn't get him to stay, and now he's dead."

"Ah, Jesus, Jim," Banks breathed sorrowfully. Swallowing hard, he pushed himself to his feet and then, after briefly gripping Ellison's shoulder tightly, he turned to sink down on the sofa. "I saw the CNN bulletin," he explained quietly. "I'm so sorry."

"I blew it, Simon," Ellison murmured, as he looked away, his face pale and bleached of all emotion except the pain of his loss etched around his eyes and mouth. "He left believing that I don't... didn't trust him. I never told him how much I..."

But his voice cracked and he had to clench his jaw for control. Heaving a sobbing breath, he whispered, "And now it's too late..."

For the first time since he'd seen the news bulletin, Banks felt the sting of tears in his eyes. Looking away from Ellison, unable to countenance such profound misery, he sniffed and cleared his throat, blinking to clear his gaze. He hadn't wanted to believe that Sandburg was on that flight - had hoped... but Jim's certain grief was too compelling to deny. For a moment, he felt a surge of anger at the waste of life, Sandburg's and all those other innocent victims. Anger at the terrorists who had planted the bomb and at the lax security that had allowed the plane to be destroyed - and at Jim, for having hurt the kid so badly that Blair had seen no option but to get away as fast as he could. But anger was just a defence against his own grief and he knew it. He sighed as he shook his head. It was all so massively unfair, so pointless. So hideously tragic.

"Is there anything I can do to help you?" Simon asked quietly.

Jim shook his head as he closed his eyes and sagged against the chair.
"What about... your senses?" Banks persisted.

"What about them?" Jim rasped.

Wearily, Simon leaned forward, his elbows on his thighs as he replied, "Jim, whenever you're emotionally... upset, your senses become erratic..."

"I'll manage them," Ellison grated as he turned empty eyes on his boss. "He was always so excited about them - thought they're some kind of 'gift' - said I was 'special'. He always trusted me to use them to the best of my ability, to remember everything he taught me. Hell, he wrote that damned paper just so you or Megan or Joel could better understand how to help me if I got into trouble without him. The only thing on this earth that I can do to honour him is manage these senses. Believe me, I'll find a way or die trying."

Looking away, his gaze distant and his voice cracking, he added, "And the day I do die, his paper about Sentinels will be made public. I want you to make sure that happens, Simon - so the world will finally know he was no fraud, but a brilliant, decent, brave and very honourable man."

Simon stared at his friend, uncomfortable with the assumption that he'd outlive Jim, and even more worried that Ellison's tone seemed to suggest that day might not be long in coming...

Simon kept his appointment the next day with the Chief and the Commissioner. He and Jim had decided that Sandburg deserved the truth about the contributions he'd made, and the sacrifices he'd given, to be known. Both senior officers were astonished to learn that Ellison was a 'sentinel' and had incredibly enhanced sensory capacity. Neither was pleased to have been kept in the dark for the last several years, and both insisted that Ellison's cases had to be reviewed, to ensure the convictions would withstand any scrutiny that might one day be given to them.

They were also shocked to learn that Sandburg had died in the Mexican flight bombing. Sadly, they reflected that, knowing what they now did, they would have supported a civilian consultancy position for him, as an 'expert' resource with his PhD qualifications. "Such a waste," the Chief mumbled.

It didn't take much to persuade them that the Police Department should put out a press release explaining that Sandburg had never lied about his dissertation - that the so-called 'sentinel' paper had been misrepresented by the publisher and the media. All they had to say was that Sandburg had allowed the misconceptions that it was his PhD dissertation to stand and had made the claim that he'd lied about its validity simply to draw attention away from Detective Ellison, in order that the Detective could get on with his job in apprehending the notorious assassin, Klaus Zeller. They would refer to the paper he'd defended as his real dissertation, the sentinel paper being a draft, something he was speculating about concerning the sensory capabilities of the police officers he'd been working with. The PD would formally state that they owed Dr. Sandburg an immense debt of gratitude. Since his death had not yet been formally confirmed by the State Department, they would only indicate their profound regret that Dr. Sandburg had left the country to undertake anthropological research elsewhere.

The press release went out that very afternoon, and would likely make the headlines of the next morning's papers.
Simon hadn't been able to bring himself to announce Blair's death to the MCU team. He doubted he could do it without breaking up. There was no hurry, no need to rush them into grief and mourning. Bad news could keep. Once it was official, and Jim had decided how he wanted to handle it all, they'd let the others know.

Ellison spent a restless, sleepless night. Repeatedly, he found himself pacing around the loft, trying to find traces of Sandburg. But the kid had stripped virtually every vestige of his presence from the apartment. The candles and incense were gone. There were no pictures or masks or remnants of pottery or weaving anywhere. All his personal products had been taken from the bathroom, and the kitchen shelves were bare of teas, spices and algae shake mixes. All his special herbs were gone. All that was left were the cleaning products he'd bought with an eye to Jim's special needs.

The cleaning products... and the silence. The huge emptiness where once there had been energy, laughter, and light. The place felt chilled without the warmth of Sandburg's personality filling it. Some traces of the scents still lingered - vanilla and lavender, citrus - but they were ephemeral and fading fast. Without really being conscious of what he was doing, Jim wandered into Blair's bedroom and grabbed up one of his pillows, breathing in the scent of his best friend...

Later, as dawn broke, he drifted aimlessly out onto the balcony. Ellison found himself staring down at the spot where Blair had turned to look up at him before disappearing into the taxi. His throat was tight, and his chest ached. Every once in a while, nausea would spike, but he forced the bile back down. Jim hadn't cried, but his eyes felt scratchy and too dry. He felt he should weep, but he couldn't. He felt too empty; the pain was too raw for tears, too overwhelming. If they came, he didn't know if he'd ever be able to regain control again. His hands trembled with emotion, and his head throbbed, too filled with memories and grief.

When Simon phoned to tell him about the meeting earlier that morning, he had to bite his lip to stop its trembling. It would have been so easy to have done this before, to have had a job offer that Blair might well have accepted. God, why hadn't they moved more quickly? Oh, sure, they'd been in the hospital, but they could have spoken with the senior officers, could have gotten that press release out a lot sooner, if only they had thought about it, felt some sense of urgency to make things right for the kid. Too late... it was all too late. Without realizing it, they'd just taken Sandburg, and his gift for forgiveness and his resilience for granted; hadn't thought enough about how he'd been hurt or that his expansive spirit had its limits. And now that spirit, the laughter and wisdom, the brilliance and warmth were lost to them forever.

For the rest of the day, Jim let the machine pick up the calls.

Jim hadn't made any effort to find Naomi; wouldn't even have known where to start looking for her, though he supposed he could find her if he honestly tried. He figured she'd call in a few weeks or a month, wondering why she hadn't heard from her son, and asking if Jim knew where to reach him. Ellison couldn't begin to imagine telling her; his mind flinched away every time he tried to figure out what words he'd use to let her know her only child was dead. God - like him, she would blame herself for the rest of her life for her part in the events that had led Blair to be on that damned plane.

There were a few calls from the media wanting his comments on the press release, and wanting to talk with Sandburg, that Jim just ignored and then erased. He wasn't ready to pretend that he'd been party all along to some elaborate hoax to distract them from the business of capturing Zeller; wasn't ready to claim the press conference had been no surprise or to answer any more questions about his
alleged sentinel capabilities. Not that he cared anymore who knew - but Blair had wanted him to keep it quiet, had given everything he had to protect the secret, and Jim wanted to honour Blair's wishes, at least for now.

Late in the afternoon, another call came through, from the US Embassy in Mexico City, asking him to call as soon as possible about Blair Sandburg. Jim shuddered as he listened to the message being left on the machine, but just couldn't pick up the phone or call back. He figured that Sandburg's passport information in some official file, or maybe his airline travel documentation, had listed him as the person to call in an emergency and they needed to verify Blair's death with him.

And he couldn't do it. Just couldn't talk to some administrator somewhere, with cool, collected tones and impersonally discuss the death of the best man he'd ever known - the best friend he'd ever have.

Tomorrow. Maybe he'd be ready to face it all tomorrow.

Simon was puttering around his house, still on injury recovery leave, when Joel called the next day. First, Taggart was warmly enthusiastic about the newspaper headlines that morning. When Joel innocently speculated that this would make a real difference in convincing Blair to come back to work with them, Simon's throat closed up and he wasn't able to respond. In the silence, Joel went on to relay the primary reason for his call. A Captain Ortega from the Sierra Verde Constabulary had called, wanting to speak with Simon urgently about Blair Sandburg. Joel mused that he hadn't realized Blair had decided to return to Mexico, but allowed that it made sense that the kid would want to study that temple they had found.

Simon had no idea why Ortega wanted to talk with him - maybe simply to express condolences, though that seemed unlikely. In any case, he took the number and, as soon as he'd ended the call with Joel, he dialed the long distance exchange. It took several tries, as the telephone system in Mexico appeared to be either blocked or overloaded. When he finally sought the assistance of an operator, he was told that the only reason he was able to get through at all with her help was because he was calling on official police business, in response to Ortega's urgent call to him.

When he was finally connected, he identified himself and asked why Ortega had called him about Sandburg.

"Well, I am concerned for him," Ortega replied, his voice heavily accented. "This is not a good time for him to be here alone. The Cartel, they remember he was one who helped bring down Arguillo and, while Arguillo is in prison, he is still masterminding their activities to defeat El Presidente..."

Simon frowned as he listened, feeling a little as if the world had tilted or he had fallen down a rabbit hole. "What are you talking about?" he interjected. "Sandburg is dead..."

"Dead? Oh, no, he is very much alive! At least, he was when I saw him an hour ago - one of my men at the airport recognized him when he arrived on the first flight this morning from Mexico City, and brought him to see me," Ortega exclaimed. "There is much unrest right now. You no doubt heard of the atrocity two days ago. The Cartel wants their own man in the Presidente's chair, and is vehemently opposed to the current Presidente's law and order agenda. It had been rumoured that El Presidente would be on that flight, so it is assumed..."

Simon sank into the chair by the phone. "Sandburg's alive?" he echoed, stunned by the shock of the
news. "We thought he was on the plane that went down."

"Oh, I am sorry," Ortega replied, apparently sincerely. "I knew nothing of that. Perhaps the angels delayed him or he was bumped from that flight. It has been chaos here, with the Army shutting down communication and transportation systems in an effort to contain the Cartel's actions and to round them up for questioning. Señor Sandburg is staying at the Hotel Sierra Verde, but whether you can get a call through to him, I don't know. He told me he plans to head into the jungle tomorrow. Again, Capitan Banks, I must repeat my concern about him being here alone. If others learn of his presence, as they surely will, they may well seek revenge upon him."

"I see," Banks murmured. Giving himself a shake, he continued, "Thank you for getting in touch with me. I need to think about what you've said and get back to you later today."

"Very good, Capitan," Ortega replied. "I felt I owed you and your friends for your help several months ago. And for your understanding. I will do what I can to keep an eye on your colleague, but my forces and authorities are limited. I cannot forbid him to do the work he has come here to do for the University of Mexico."

When they'd terminated the call, Simon sat staring at the phone for a long moment. But he finally decided that this was news that he had to deliver in person.

Despite the apparent danger that Sandburg was still in, Banks couldn't help the smile that lit his face, or the sheer joy that filled his heart, as he grabbed his jacket and left the house.

Jim looked like hell when he opened the door before Simon could knock on it. He was unshaven, and his eyes were red-rimmed, his face so pale he almost looked gray. Banks wondered if he'd slept or eaten since Sandburg had left.

Ellison waved Simon in and turned away. For a moment, he seemed confused, having to make an effort to think of what to say or do. Finally, he asked if Banks wanted a beer.

"No, that's all right," Simon replied, his voice low with concern as he studied his friend. "Jim, I think you should sit down. I've got something to tell you, something good - but it may be a shock."

Frowning in confusion, Ellison stared at Banks. "What news could possibly be so good as to be a shock right now?" he asked bitterly.

Shaking his head a little, Simon took Jim's arm and drew him toward the sofa. When Ellison resisted being pushed down upon it, Banks took a breath and couldn't stop the grin twitching on his lips as he said, "Blair's alive."

Jim stared at him, his expression slack, and his mouth slightly agape. "What?" he gasped.

"I just had a conversation with Ortega in Sierra Verde - you remember him, I'm sure," Simon explained. "Blair arrived in Sierra Verde this morning. He's alive, Jim. He's fine."

Looking away, Jim began to tremble and he sank down on the sofa. His throat tightened and his eyes blurred with tears as he struggled for control. Alive? Blair was alive! Turning his gaze back to Banks, he swiped at his eyes and cleared his throat before asking, sounding stunned, "But... what happened? I mean, why wasn't he on that flight?"
"I have no idea," Banks replied as he sat down beside his friend. "Ortega says the country is in chaos, what with the drug Cartel trying to sabotage the upcoming election and the threats against the President who is running for another term. But - Blair is still in danger. Apparently, Ortega is worried that Arguillo will try to exact revenge for our actions there six months ago. Ortega doesn't think it's a good idea for him to be there right now, certainly not alone..."

Jim was still trying to take it in - and trying to figure out why Sandburg hadn't called to say he was all right - when the phone rang. At first, he was just going to ignore it again, but then Blair's voice echoed through the loft as the machine picked up.

"Jim?" Sandburg called out. "Jim, if you're there, pick up the phone!"

In a flash, Ellison was up and lurching across the loft to grab the receiver. "Sandburg?" he asked reflexively, though he'd recognized the voice immediately with a joy so sharp it twisted in his gut.

"Yeah, it's me..." Blair began.

"What the hell took you so long to call?" Ellison bellowed. "God damn it! I thought you were on that plane! What? You had better things to do than let me know you aren't dead!"

There was a tight silence, and then Sandburg snapped, "You think I haven't been trying? Man, I don't believe you! God, do you always have to assume that I'm some thickheaded, insensitive dolt? For your information, it has been impossible to get an international call through before now! I tried for hours after I got back to the airport and heard about the crash. I'd decided to go the University to meet with the professor overseeing the grant when my original flight was delayed, and had rescheduled for a morning flight yesterday, but that got cancelled. Hell, I've been trying to get in touch with you for the better part of two days! I even went to the American Embassy and refused to leave until one of the attaches there called you, 'cause they at least could get a line out - but you weren't home. I figured you would have called him back by now! Dammit, Jim - why can't you ever give me the benefit of the doubt?"

Chastened, Jim replied more temperately, "Look, I was just..."

But Blair cut in angrily. "Forget it. I'm sorry you were evidently so worried. I just wanted to let you know I'm finally in Sierra Verde and I'm heading to the temple tomorrow," he said sharply. "Look, this call is costing a fortune and we're likely to get cut off anyway. I have to go -"

Cursing under his breath, having heard both sides of the conversation as the machine was still recording, Simon unceremoniously wrenched the phone from Jim's grip. He didn't have time for their usual dance of miscommunication and hurt feelings. Glaring at Ellison, he snapped into the phone, "Sandburg, listen up."

"Simon?" Blair exclaimed, surprised by the intervention.

"Uh huh," Banks grunted. "Look, first, in case you have any doubts about how your presumed death affected Ellison, let me assure you, he was a wreck until I told him I'd found out you were alive just minutes before your call. He's still in shock, I think. Second, Captain Ortega called me, and he's worried about you being there alone - as I'm sure he explained to you. I think you should come back..."

"Simon, I appreciate your concern, but I have a job to do..."

"It's not worth getting killed over!" Banks shouted back, too worried and impatient to deal with Sandburg's stubborn courage.
"I doubt I'm in any real danger," Blair replied, making an effort to retain his own calm. But he was
damned tired of other people telling him what he should or shouldn't do, as if he was too stupid to
make his own decisions. "The Cartel has a lot bigger fish to fry right now, and their attention is
focused on getting rid of the President, not some inconsequential anthropologist."

"I don't agree," Simon countered. "And you need to know the situation here has changed. The Police
Department put out a press release taking responsibility for your press conference, indicating that you
were acting to support our work in the apprehension of Klaus Zeller. The Chief and the
Commissioner are prepared to offer you a civilian position with the department. You could take a
leave of absence later, if you still want to explore that temple."

There was a long, shocked silence on the other end of the phone, and then Blair replied quietly,
"Gosh, Simon, I don't know what to say - or how to thank you. I, uh, I'll need to think about it,
though. I mean, nothing's really changed in terms of working with Jim. He just doesn't trust me, not
deep down; you know that, as well as I do. And without trust, a partnership just can't work in the
long term. Honestly, I think I'm okay here, I really do. And this work is important, too. I mean, if I
can find evidence of sentinels here, I can publish something that might help others like Jim..."

"Blair," Simon interjected, to continue arguing for the younger man's immediate return.

But the line went dead as their call was arbitrarily cut off.

"Dammit," Banks snarled as he slammed the phone down and turned to look at Ellison. "Did you
have to yell at him?" he demanded. "Couldn't you just have said you were God-damned glad to hear
his voice?"

Jim shook his head as he looked away, shrugging helplessly.

"You know, I think you need help," Simon said then, grimly. "You carry around so much anger and
resentment that it's the first thing that surfaces when you're upset. And you take it out on him - and
now he really doesn't believe you want to work with him. If you ever expect to see him again, you
need to decide, and you need to decide now, what you're going to do to convince him otherwise."

Ellison swallowed, and his jaw tightened defensively. So he'd sounded off - how was he supposed to
know that it had been impossible for Blair to reach him or that the call from the Embassy had been
Sandburg's desperate attempt to alleviate his concerns? Hell, he'd told Blair that he wanted him to be
his partner. What was he supposed to do? Beg?

When the silence lengthened, Simon grated, "Well?"

"It sounds like he's pretty much made up his mind," Ellison growled as he paced restlessly. "He
doesn't listen to anything I say anymore..."

"Maybe you're not saying the right things," Banks challenged, but then sighed. Sniping at each other
wouldn't solve anything. His eyes narrowed as he considered the situation. The main issue at the
moment was Sandburg's vulnerability in Mexico; they could deal with the rest once they had his
security sorted out. "I'm going to Sierra Verde," he said abruptly. "You coming with me?"

"What?" Jim exclaimed, startled and concerned. "Simon, you just got out of the hospital - you're in
no condition to head off to the jungle!"

"I'm in better shape than the kid was when he headed out after us six months ago," Banks asserted.

"But - you heard him," Jim argued. "He thinks it's safe enough. Sandburg isn't stupid."
"Neither am I," Simon snapped back. "And I thought it was perfectly safe to go fishing for a weekend in the Peruvian mountains. I was wrong, and he is too. As I recall, neither of you hesitated to come after me, even though you'd been told Darryl and I were likely already dead."

Jim paused at that and looked away. "He said it was about friendship," he murmured in recollection.

"Well, he was right about that," Simon asserted. "That's exactly what it's about. So - you coming or not?"

In response, Jim turned back to the phone and punched in the number to arrange their flights.

Blair grimaced in frustration when the call was abruptly cut off. For a moment, he considered trying to reconnect, but then decided there really wasn't much point. So he replaced the receiver and looked sightlessly around the hotel room he'd taken for the night as he thought about the conversation. The essential information had been communicated, and he needed to think about Simon's offer. God, he wanted to jump at it so badly that it was a physical ache in his chest. But...

...but Jim didn't really trust him. Even after everything that had happened, Jim's first instinct was to assume he had been wantonly thoughtless and callous. Impotent anger wrangled with despair, twisting in his gut, and flaring in his chest, clashing with the hope that Simon had held out that, maybe, things could work out and he could go home again.

'Home,' he thought bitterly. 'Like I have one.'

Simon had said that Jim had been 'a wreck' at the thought that he'd been killed. Sandburg sighed. He knew Jim cared about him, but he was also convinced that the next time something blew up, Ellison would once again push him away - and Blair just didn't think he could stand being told a fourth time that Jim didn't trust him and that their partnership was 'over'.

Flopping down on the bed, staring up at the ceiling, Sandburg wondered if he was being unduly sensitive. No one knew better than he did that, when threats were too close, too real, Jim had a tendency to react first and think later. Blair could understand that, given Ellison's background. Emotionally, the guy had been severely traumatized, over and over, ever since his childhood. Whether it was his mother taking off with no explanation, a father who put competitiveness and resilience ahead of love and support, the loss of his whole team as a result of a criminal betrayal by his superior officer, the deaths of those few he'd let get close, like Danny Choi or Jack Pendergast - not to mention the women in his life - an international assassin, a woman who murdered her spouse and tried to pin it on Jim, a jewel thief, and an ex-wife who had thought him too cold. Reflectively, Blair thought that was an interesting complaint coming from Carolyn who, while undoubtedly competent and courteous, was brisk, almost brittle, and sure wouldn't win any awards for Miss Congeniality. So, emotionally, Jim's basic instinct was to be wary and suspicious, to withhold trust. Perhaps he didn't even know how to trust anymore, let alone want to risk letting anyone that close again.

Physically, Jim's training both in Covert Ops and in law enforcement also reinforced his tendency to react quickly; if he didn't, he'd've been dead a long time ago. Blair grimaced at that thought, and figured he was grateful that Ellison had lightning-speed reflections and reactions - it made the young man nauseous to think he might never have met Jim otherwise and he couldn't bear to even think of Jim being killed in the line of duty. Rubbing his forehead thoughtfully, Blair also wondered if there
might be something inherent within Jim's physiology as a sentinel that made him more attuned to threats, more quickly reactive on an instinctive level. Certainly, a watchman would have to be suspicious if he or she was to safeguard the tribe from intruders who might either be friends or foes. Sighing, Sandburg had to concede that he had noted this tendency for most of Jim's reactions to be 'fear-based' a long time ago.

Therefore, intellectually, Sandburg reflected, he should not have been at all surprised by Jim's reaction when the paper got leaked. In fact, if he was perfectly honest with himself, he'd expected the reaction, and had tried to avoid it by dealing with Syd Graham in the hope that Jim might never have to know there'd been such a serious breach of his trust. Which, Blair acknowledged, made him culpable in complicating the problem. He should have told Jim immediately, not tried to hide the fact that they had a potentially major problem on their hands. That had been his second mistake - the first having been to leave his mother alone with his laptop and the information that he'd finished his paper. Stupid. So incredibly stupid. But though his mother had a tendency to be invasive when she showed up for a visit, she'd never before accessed anything, ever, that he'd written. It just had never occurred to him that she might pull such a stunt. God, if only she'd sent the other paper, the one on the law enforcement community sub-culture... if only...

Pulling himself back from the brink of despair and the distraction of what his mother had done, Blair returned to his analysis of why he was taking Jim's reactions so personally. It wasn't the first time that... and, maybe, that was it. It wasn't the first time. Not even the second. In the last year, Jim had struck out at him several times. Some of it had been clearly an instinctual reaction, like packing up his stuff when Jim sensed Alex's presence not only in Cascade but, no doubt, on the person of his best friend. But, even before that, Jim had made such a stink about the draft chapter that had to go his committee. Swallowing, Sandburg reflected that it had been that incident which had made it crystal clear to him that he could never use the sentinel material in a dissertation. Instead of handing in the draft chapter that eventful day, he'd begun his mission to get acceptance of the new subject, and then had worked his butt off, hardly sleeping for the last six months, to get the second paper written. Mistake number three. He should have told Jim right off that he'd never submit the sentinel dissertation.

Grimacing, Blair rolled to sit up on the side of the bed. So far, he was making a pretty good case for Jim. Ellison had acted in predictable, even natural, ways and the mistakes that had led to the fiasco were all Blair's responsibility. From Jim's perspective, he'd done nothing wrong. No wonder he was confused by Sandburg's anger and bitterness.

Bowing his head, he rubbed at the nagging ache of loss in his chest. God, it hurt. And, he supposed, that was the problem, at least from his perspective. It wasn't an intellectual issue - it was all emotional. However much he could justify Jim's actions and reactions in his own mind, he couldn't get past the fact that after having given his best for four years, Jim still didn't trust him. Didn't believe his word, or even his actions. Hell, nearly a year ago, he'd allowed himself to be beaten to a pulp and left for dead rather than betray Jim - and had told Jim that he'd never betray him. But Jim hadn't bought it then, despite the circumstances, the reality of the massive trauma that lent credence to Blair's claim of ultimate loyalty.

Blair jerked his head to the side and closed his eyes, a reflexive attempt to resist the flood of memories than swamped him. He'd never forget that day and night. First, everything that had happened in Clayton Falls, from Jim's hostile reaction when he and Simon had showed up, to thinking he was going to die alone in that awful isolation tent. And then the exhaustion of trying to keep up while Jim foiled the plot to rob the money train. And when he'd finally arrived home, exhausted and dispirited, those three thugs jumped him when he'd gotten off the elevator, in the hall outside the loft.
The rest of the evening had been pure hell. That bastard had enjoyed beating him, terrorizing him, strangling him to the point of asphyxiation and then backing off, over and over. Punching and kicking until his whole head and body was one pulsing agony that made it almost impossible to breathe, let alone think. Blair had never known such pain before that night; even being murdered by Alex hadn't been as physically painful.

It was somewhere in the middle of the beating that he realized that they weren't just going to rough him up and take off; they were going to kill him if they didn't get what they wanted. He was going to die. But, then, he was going to die regardless, as they wouldn't likely leave him alive to act as a witness later. For one terrible moment, when the pain had eclipsed all else, he'd teetered on the brink of making them a bargain to tell them where Jim was and when he'd be back, if only they'd kill him quickly and put him out of his misery.

But he just couldn't do it. Couldn't betray Jim. Not even to end such horrific agony. Being stabbed was almost a relief, because it meant the beating was finally over, or almost. They'd given him a few more kicks for good measure. When they'd left, he'd wanted to just let himself sink into oblivion. He'd thought then, and knew now, that death was a good deal easier and far less painful than what he'd suffered that night. But he knew he couldn't allow himself to die, couldn't let go, not without warning Jim first and giving him the little information Sandburg had to help Ellison defend himself against those hoods. So he'd tried to drag himself to the phone to call for help, but the pain and the weakness engendered by his wounds and loss of blood defeated him. And then he'd tried to write a message on the floor, using his own blood, but he hurt so bad he could hardly move, couldn't lift his arm far enough from the growing crimson pool to write anything that didn't keep getting covered by more and more blood. He'd struggled for hours, drifting in and out of consciousness and, finally, on some level, he realized he had no choice but to hang on until Jim came home, so that he could warn him. He couldn't let go, couldn't succumb, not until Jim knew he was in danger. During that long, lonely, desperate night, it had seemed as if the hours of darkness would never end and he would always and forever be curled on the cold floor, every breath an agony, desperately trying to hold on...

It still amazed him that he had survived, not only to warn Jim, but also to actually live and have that agony fade into the stuff of surreal memories and nightmares.

But, later when he was recovering, it had hurt to realize that, even after all that, Jim really didn't know, didn't believe, that he'd never knowingly, let alone maliciously or wantonly, betray his best friend. In a strange way, that had hurt more and lingered longer than his physical injuries. And it had hurt that Jim had thought what he'd written in the draft chapter was a betrayal of trust - this after Ellison had betrayed Blair's trust in reading the damned thing in the first place! Jim had taken that opportunity to remind him then that he lived in Ellison's home; it had been painfully obvious that, in no way, did Jim see it as Blair's home, too, though Sandburg had long ago come to feel that it was. His first real home. The lesson that it wasn't had sure been made crystal clear when he came in one night to find Jim had packed up all his stuff and wanted him gone - no discussion, no reason at the time - Jim just couldn't stand to have him around any longer. And that had really hurt. Just as it had been shockingly painful to see Jim kissing and caressing, lusting after and protecting Alex, after she had murdered him... and then to be pushed further and further away, week after week, month after month.

One hurt piled on another, while Blair tried to rationalize, theorize, extemporize... whatever... to distance the pain, to understand the reasons, to intellectualize the problems between them. Tried to convince himself that Jim would never have brought him back at the fountain, if Ellison hadn't truly wanted him around. But, as time went on, that miracle seemed less and less something profound and personal between them, as much as it was an act of mercy or guilt or regret. Until, finally, the pile of hurt was a mountain that unexpectedly exploded in a mighty cataclysm when his paper was leaked.
and Jim assumed he'd done it deliberately for personal gain. It would have been kinder if Jim had just pulled out his gun and shot him or, more primitively and symbolically perhaps, torn open his chest and ripped out his heart.

Instincts and training and past history and learning be damned! How could Jim have thought he would do something like that to his best friend? How? Why? What was so terrible or so offensive or so rotten about him that Jim could actually believe that, after four fucking years of the best friendship Blair had ever known?

And why, even after he'd known the truth, had Jim still not wanted him around any longer? Had told him it was over and time to move on. At that point, Jim knew that it wasn't his fault! Was he that hard to get along with? That much of an annoyance? That insufferable? That the facts hadn't mattered a damn - it was just time to be rid of him?

There was nothing Blair wanted more than to be Jim's backup and his friend. It hadn't started out that way, and sure hadn't been his life goal for all the years he'd invested at Rainier - it was crazy and made no sense to want a life as Jim's shadow - but that was all he really wanted. Sandburg seriously wondered if he was taking complete leave of all his senses... or was just plain seriously nuts. They were adults, had different life missions, different objectives. But for almost a year, his other dreams of a future in an academic setting, as a professor, or even as a researcher, had faded even as his awareness that Jim didn't really need him grew, making him feel helpless, increasingly useless and not a little desperate. Leaving Ellison had been the hardest thing he'd ever done, and it took all he had not to turn around and run right back... but how dumb was it to feel a need to take care of a guy who had absolutely no need of a protector? He had to get it through his thick skull that Jim didn't trust him! Hell, Ellison would likely laugh himself silly at the idea that Blair, the academic geek who didn't like violence, wanted to protect him. It was lunacy to even imagine such a life.

And it was impossible.

Not because the mess in Cascade couldn't be cleaned up; Simon had proven that.

But because he couldn't be whatever Jim needed him to be.

Sighing, Sandburg shook his head. He didn't know what to do to get past Ellison's walls of suspicion and distrust. Didn't know what else to do, to try... hell, didn't know how to be the man that Jim might actually trust unconditionally - whatever manner of man that was. It was all just so... sad. Jim had clearly been upset when he left - had seemed to genuinely want him to stick around and become a cop. But Blair knew, deep down, it was only a matter of time until another situation came along and Jim would, once again, say he didn't want Sandburg as his partner anymore. And what then? If his heart had already been crushed, what was left? Would his soul be shredded and left in tatters? How would he pick himself up then and move on?

Okay, maybe that was a little dramatic, but he knew he wasn't the only one who had felt destroyed in those moments of confusion and conflict. He could see in Jim's face and eyes the pain Ellison had felt when he'd thought Blair had betrayed him. Underneath the veneer of being terminally pissed off, Jim had looked utterly wasted.

Swallowing the lump in his throat, Sandburg just couldn't face the inevitability of it all happening again. It was too damned hard - on both of them. Better to end it now, while they still had something of themselves and their friendship intact. Much as he wanted nothing more than to go home and take the job Simon was offering, he couldn't. It would be a futile act of desperation, destined to fail. Besides, Jim didn't need him. They were all just reacting, feeling badly, and resisting change. But change was natural and inevitable. Nothing lasts forever. Though it left him feeling hollow and empty inside, Sandburg was certain he'd made the right choice in leaving. It was time for both of
them to get on with their lives.

And it wasn't as if this project wasn't potentially important. With all his heart, Sandburg hoped he'd discover things that might be of use to Jim, as well as to those shadows - the strangers, people neither of them even knew - who might be helped if the information about sentinels could be brought into the public domain. Maybe Alex wouldn't have ended up a raging psychopath, if someone along the line had recognized how special she was, and if she'd gotten the support she needed a long, long time ago. God, he hoped there weren't any others like her out in the world. Way too scary to even think about...

Restlessly, he pushed his fingers through his long, thick curls that were heavy and dank with the humidity. Standing, he grabbed his pack and left the room. He had things to do before heading into the jungle. Hard as it was, he had to accept that it was time to build a new life for himself, and let go the hopes that somehow there was a way to restore the easy camaraderie of the first three years he and Jim had worked together. No one knew better than he did that life was about change and moving on.

Very early the next day, before the sun had risen, he set out for the temple on foot. It was a good, long hike but he'd packed lightly. Most of the weight in the pack on his back was from the three cameras, rolls of film, his notebooks, a flashlight and batteries, some water and basic food supplies and cooking equipment. He'd forage for fruit and other foods, and he recalled there was a clear stream near the ruins. He was weighted down more by memories and regrets than by anything physical as he pushed his way through the heavy growth of rainforest. Despite his careful reasoning and reaffirmation of his decision the day before, his thoughts kept whirling round and round, repeatedly pulling him back to the past and his despair. He kept hearing Jim's words about wanting him to stay, Jim's voice condemning him with reflexive anger - and Simon's voice telling him how the possibility of his death had impacted upon Ellison. He couldn't help thinking about the incredible job offer, the second time that Banks had blown him away with an opportunity to remain Jim's partner. There was nothing on this earth that Sandburg wanted more; as he'd told his mother, weeks ago, he'd discovered that he'd had everything that really mattered to him. But he'd had to give it up. In part for Jim's sake, but also because he'd come to realize that he'd believed in illusions.

The illusion of having a home, a real home, where he belonged and was wanted, when all he'd really been was a temporary boarder in Jim's home.

The illusion of having a best friend who really knew him and cared about him, for all his foibles - who trusted him and relied upon him - but it was clear Jim didn't trust him and no longer had any real need of him.

The illusion that achieving a PhD was the culmination of everything he'd striven for over the past more than dozen years, and that it would be something meaningful, important, necessary - not something hollow and even bitter.

The illusion that he'd made an essential difference to Jim - that his presence mattered in the older man's life. He still wanted to believe so much in that illusion, and part of him knew that Jim wanted to believe in it, too. But the wanting of something, and the reality that was, were two different things.

The illusion that he wasn't really alone in this world - but he was alone, and it was long past time that he learned again how to be responsible for himself. Being loved wasn't essential to living, not on a day to day basis. It was possible for him to have a good life, though a solitary one. Many people lived successful, even joyful, lives alone - they just didn't usually live as long as those who shared their lives with others. Wearily, Blair wondered when he'd let go of his dream of having a wife and children but he didn't really know; he just couldn't imagine such a future, any future for that matter,
anymore. Maybe once he wasn't so tired, and got some perspective, life would seem to hold such possibilities again.

Lots of illusions - too many for a grown man to keep cherishing. The harsh truth was, he'd never had a home of his own, had only lived in someone else's home. And yes, he had helped Jim, at least in the beginning, had made an essential difference when they'd first started. But Jim didn't need him anymore. Hadn't needed him and had felt crowded by him, for a long time. And, sure, Jim had liked him well enough, better than most, but the love of one brother for another had been on Blair's side, not Jim's. Jim had a brother and really felt no need for another. And his PhD felt like a sham. Oh, he'd earned it, done the required work, could have achieved it years before... but he'd always dreamed that his work would have lasting and important meaning. That document he'd cobbled together when he'd finally realized there was no way he could actually write the sentinel paper without ultimately compromising Jim, was academically adequate but certainly not exciting. He'd earned the degree, but it was an empty triumph and had passed uncelebrated by anyone, least of all himself.

And the bottom line was that he really was alone in the world. Not that that was a new experience, nor was it the first time being alone felt so lonely. But it was the first time that the loneliness really hurt, a deep and abiding ache in his chest and a thickness in his throat that he had to constantly swallow. He loved Jim as he'd never loved anyone in the world, not even Naomi. And he'd trusted Jim more than he'd ever trusted his mother. At first, he'd loved the extraordinary sentinel, had even been more than a little in awe of him. But over time, he'd come to love the irascible man who hid so many hurts and still strove to be the best he could be. Jim had become the centre of his universe. And now his world was spinning aimlessly, with no purpose and no joy.

His throat tightened and, stumbling to a halt, he leaned his shoulder against a tree for support. "Damn it," he cursed brokenly. He bit his lip and fought for control. Love. "Shit," he swore again softly as he looked helplessly around the forest, completely alone and having to admit to himself if to no one else, ever, that he not only loved but was also hopelessly in love with James Joseph Ellison. It was the bitterest irony of all. Him. The inveterate Casanova, who'd only ever chased after women, had fallen for a man who would never love him back. God, Jim would be appalled and disgusted. And he didn't know how or why or even exactly when it had happened; hadn't even realized it, until he'd seen Jim on the beach with Alex. Bile burned in the back of his throat at the memory and he grimaced as he forced the nausea back down. For months, he'd tried to deny it to himself, tried to reason it out, and make sense of it. But it made no sense. It just was. And after Alex, there'd been Veronica. God, all he'd wanted to do was reach out and offer comfort, in whatever form Jim would take it, but Ellison had shut him out. For months, he'd told himself he could live like that - wanting more than he could ever have; wanting, even needing, to give more than would ever be accepted. But, at the end, when Jim had turned on him, he'd known with poignant certainty how utterly hopeless his love was.

Tears pricked in his eyes but he wouldn't give way to them, refused to let them fall as he vigorously blinked them away. Weeping for what was lost wouldn't change anything or make it better. Crying for what could never be was an exercise in futility. Besides, he didn't feel he really had the right to weep; he'd been a fool all the way down the line, and he'd brought his sorrow upon himself. At least Jim had never known, and for that Blair was thankful. He'd been able to leave with some vestige of dignity and he was grateful that, at the end, they had been able to part friends. It was done, over. He had to move on. There was no other choice.

Taking a deep breath, he straightened to continue his journey as he resolutely tried to turn his thoughts and speculations forward. The last time he'd been in the temple, there'd been no time to explore it or even begin to understand the secrets it held. The last time, he'd still been reeling from the after-affects of having been drowned, struggling to keep up, and desperately trying not to feel
abandoned - when Jim had left Cascade without him, when he'd found Jim kissing Alex on the beach, when Jim had deserted him and Megan in the night - and even when Jim had failed to cut the bindings around his wrists before going again to Alex, because her need of him outweighed Blair's need of him. At least, that's the way it had looked and felt to the man left bound on his knees, who had no recourse but to watch the man he loved once again passionately kiss the woman who had murdered him, and listen to Jim begging her not to sink into a void of insanity...

Muttering to himself, Blair jerked his thoughts back from the past and once again determinedly focused them on the future. Who knew what he might learn at the temple that could be of valuable use yet, not only to Jim but also to others like him as well?

By the time he finally saw the silent stone jaguars that kept watch over the forecourt, and had passed under the crumbling arch to climb the broken steps hewn from the rock, dusk was falling. He pulled out his flashlight to illuminate his way inside. Moving past the entry portal, he barely glanced at the pools, but lifted his light to the Eye of God, and couldn't help but wonder what Jim's visions had been. Ellison said they'd made everything make sense, but he claimed to not be able to remember them and refused to try hypnotic regression to dig them out of his subconscious mind. Whatever they were, whatever he'd learned, he'd sure been more remote and a lot more self-sufficient afterward. Blair figured the ritual had been the final step in Jim's development as a sentinel - the step that removed his need for a guide.

Fighting back the emotions that again threatened, he moved further inside and found a chamber he could use for his workspace. There was a large window carved out of the stone that would let in sunlight during the day, and a table of rock that he could use as a makeshift desk. He forced himself to eat some fruit and a granola bar, and then he continued his ramblings through what had once been a magnificent temple. The faded frescoes and worn carvings took his breath away, both with their artistry and with the information he was beginning to suspect they held. Finally, deep into the night, he returned to his work and living space, to roll himself in a light blanket against the dampness.

The temple around him was silent with the ages of ruin and neglect, empty of life and voices, though the jungle never slept and he could hear rustlings and the calling of hunting beasts, both winged and four-footed, as they searched for food. He'd spent enough time on fieldwork projects to be unafraid of the dark or what it held, knowing his scent didn't appeal to the wild creatures. But he'd taken the precaution of stretching out on the table, or was it an altar of sorts, with the hope that snakes wouldn't bother climbing up to find his warmth.

It was a long time before he fell asleep, his thoughts returning to the place he'd known as home and the man who'd come to mean everything of value in his life. "Jim," he whispered into the night, his voice aching with loss. "I really, really miss you, man."

But, finally, he did doze off, only to have restless dreams of a dead shaman, who kept asking him where his sentinel was, and why he'd come to the temple alone. "I have no sentinel," he called back, time and again. 'I am alone."

Incacha only shook his head sorrowfully. "You are on a quest, but you have become lost," he chided gently. "Why have you not used your powers? Why do you deny them and turn away from them, young Shaman?"

"I have no powers," Blair muttered in his sleep. "I'm not the one who's special..."

The next morning, as he began to examine some of the frescoes and pictograms in earnest, the remnants of his dreams and his protests resonated in the back of his mind. And for the first time, he began to wonder if he was wrong, had been wrong for a long time. Burton had mentioned guides or companions, but had barely noted their presence, unwittingly diminishing their role and necessity
and, unconsciously, Blair had pretty much discounted their importance as more than basic supports, if and when needed, to the sentinel. But, in every painting, in every pictorial representation, a sentinel stood with a companion by his side...

...and in many of the references he was beginning to understand, it appeared that the companions had shamanistic powers...

Had he been wrong to leave Jim? Was he Jim's 'guide'? Or just a convenient source of information and the guide was someone Jim had yet to find? Was that why Ellison had never been able to truly trust him? Because Jim needed someone different, someone with better skills and understanding and talents than Blair felt he had?

Had he been wrong to leave... or absolutely right to have gone?

Shaking his head, he castigated himself for turning everything back to Jim and himself. Sure it was personal, but he also had a professional job to do. He was here to do work for the University of Mexico and it was time he set his emotions aside and turned his intellect to the task of figuring out the hieroglyphics and pictographs. But he frowned as he interpreted the various references on the walls of the main chambers, and then his breath caught in his throat as he began to really understand what the ancient ruins were telling him...

Dazed, Blair blinked and then stared sightlessly into space, thinking hard. If he was reading the texts right, the implications were beyond anything he'd imagined. Frowning as he absently rubbed at the persistent ache in his chest, he swallowed hard. 'Well,' he thought wryly, 'at least this explains why I've turned into such a basket case.'

The hot, humid air slapped them like a wet, wool blanket as they stepped out of the plane and descended the metal steps. Ortega was waiting for them, having been advised of their travel plans by Banks, and had an official four-wheel drive, supplies and weapons with ammunition requisitioned and ready for them, so that they could head directly into the jungle.

"There are rumours," he told them as he briskly led them across the tarmac to their vehicle, "that Señor Sandburg's arrival was noticed by the Cartel. I'm afraid it may already be too late..."

"We'll find him and bring him out," Jim asserted grimly, unable to consider any other outcome. His emotions had been whirling in his head and gut like a dervish for days now, leaving him feeling slightly disoriented. Reflexively, he pushed everything but the mission away, out of his immediate conscious focus. Come hell or high water, he'd drag Sandburg out of the jungle by his hair, if need be. At that thought, a sardonic smile danced over his lips. No doubt, Blair would have some choice comments about how that would be highly disrespectful. Well, they could work the niceties out once he was safe.

In less than half an hour, Ortega had cleared them through immigration and they were on their way. He'd given them a surveyor's map that showed a route that would allow them to take their vehicle to a point within a mile of the temple. It would be rough, but it was better than the original long trek through the jungle six month ago. Jim figured that since both he and Simon were both still recovering from bullet wounds, that was undoubtedly a good thing.

They were already a day and a half behind Sandburg... the sooner they got to the ruin, the better.
Jim's radar was 'up', as Sandburg would have described his state of maximum alertness, as Simon drove through the thick, humid, jungle. He could hear the slight breeze in the boughs high above, though little of it disturbed the heavy air around them, and the sounds of animals prowling, snakes slithering, birds chirping, even over the sound of the jeep's engine. Sandburg would have been proud of the way he'd isolated the loud rumble and shut it away, ignoring it. And, as they drove, he sniffed the air, disregarding the scents of oil and gas, of metal, and the normal scents of jungle vegetation and its inhabitants, seeking the scent that didn't belong - that of other men. He scanned the jungle ceaselessly, looking for colours or movements that were out of place, shadows where there should be light, not that much light penetrated the murky green. It was hard, exhausting, to maintain such tight control of his senses on his own but, with some relief, he found it easier the closer they got to the temple. So far as he could tell, there were no two-legged predators in their immediate area when they got as far as they could go with the jeep, and both dared to hope that they were lucky, as opposed to being too late.

It took longer than it would have, had both of them been at full strength, to traverse the mile or so to the temple ruins. They were weighted down with the Kevlar vests they were wearing, with the belts of ammunition slung over their shoulders, and the automatic rifle each carried, fully loaded and primed. Jim also carried a spare vest for Sandburg. Simon remained silent, casting a look at Jim every once in a while to ensure he was alert and not losing himself in one of his senses. Finally, about thirty minutes after they'd left their vehicle, they reached the ruins.

"You picking up anything?" Banks murmured as he looked around, warily.

Jim shook his head as his gaze continued to rake the rainforest. "Just Sandburg."

Nodding, pleased, Simon led the way up the broken steps of the temple. Inside, light filtered in through the entry portal and through chinks in the stone walls, but that uncertain and limited illumination was aided by torches that had been hung in the ancient brackets around the walls. When Simon turned to Jim, the detective pointed down one of the corridors and took the lead as they strode through the temple, their footsteps echoing against the stone that surrounded them.

Jim heard Sandburg's heartbeat pick up, obviously having heard their approach, and evidently nervous to know he was no longer alone. "Chief?" he called out, just loudly enough to be heard. "Don't worry. It's just me and Simon."

Blair appeared from one of the chambers halfway down a long corridor and, from the expression on his face, he didn't seem to know whether to be astonished or annoyed. "What are the two of you doing here?" he asked. "Has something happened?"

But he wasn't the only one surprised. When he appeared, the other two men stopped in their tracks and gaped at him.

"What did you do to your hair?" Jim demanded, trying to reconcile the man before him with his memory of his best friend. The long locks were gone and Blair's hair was now much shorter, curling softly around his forehead and collar.

"What?" Sandburg muttered, confused, but he impatiently ran his fingers through the shorter locks, grimacing as he replied, "This'll be easier to deal with over the next few months - it's too hot here to wear it long." He wasn't about to admit that he'd cut his hair as a kind of symbolic gesture, to signify
he was really leaving everything in Cascade behind him, as he began the difficult process of reinventing himself and his life. Looking from Jim to Simon, he repeated, "Why are you here?"

"To get you out of here before someone shows up to shoot you," Simon grunted. "Let's go."

Confusion gave way to irritation as Blair shook his head. "Man, you guys just don't give up!" he exclaimed in disbelief that they'd ignored his wishes and had come personally to haul him away from his project. "I told you -"

"I know what you told me," Simon cut in, his tone repressive and stern. "But it's too dangerous. Ortega met us at the airport and told us that he's heard the Cartel is coming after you. This ruin isn't going anywhere; you can come back when things cool down, maybe in a few months."

"No," Blair retorted. "Look, I appreciate your concern - but I accepted a grant to do this work and I have a professional obligation to see it through. I can't just walk away."

"Fine, then we'll stay," Ellison grunted but, catching Simon's expression of disbelief, he amended, "At least, I'll stay. I'm not going to leave you out here alone and unprotected."

While Sandburg gaped in consternation at Jim, Banks shook his head. This was quickly deteriorating from the bizarre to the ridiculous. He didn't have Ellison's senses, but he didn't need them to know trouble was coming. Blowing out an impatient breath, he asked sharply, "Exactly what are you doing here, anyway?"

"I'm studying the pictographs, carvings, hieroglyphics and frescos, as well as the statuary, to try to figure out the rituals and meaning of this temple," Blair replied. "Look, I know you think I'm just being stubborn, but this is important, Simon. I've already found enough to know that I'll be able to write a cogent paper about the 'mythology' of sentinels, about how their senses worked and how they were selected and trained to be the watchmen of their tribes. This will let me get information into the public domain. That may not seem important to either of you, but it could make a huge difference in the lives of potentially hundreds, even thousands, of people around the world. People like Jim, who currently think they're going crazy, or are maybe already institutionalized and medicated out of their minds, unable to function, because nobody realizes what they are or what they really need. And, well," he hesitated, still struggling to accept his interpretations and preliminary analysis from earlier in the day, "it might make a real difference to Jim... and to me... too."

Banks chewed on his lip for a minute and then, noticing the camera slung around the anthropologist's neck, he asked, "How many cameras did you bring with you?"

"Uh, three, actually - two digitals and a thirty-five millimetre, with about ten pounds of batteries," Sandburg replied, giving Simon a narrow look of consideration.

"If we take pictures of the stuff you think is most important, couldn't you study them somewhere else, and then come back later if you still have questions about what you've found?" the captain asked, looking for a compromise that would work for all of them.

Blair looked away, and then he nodded. Returning his gaze to the older men, he said thoughtfully, "Yeah, that could work - you really think I'm in serious danger here, don't you?"

"No, we just came to look at the scenery," Jim replied sarcastically. "Give us a couple of the cameras and tell us what you want pictures of. Between us, we should be able to work through this place in a couple of hours, max."

"One hour, no more," Simon amended.
The older men slung their weapons over their shoulders while Blair led them back to where he'd set up a workshop of sorts in another chamber. Once they all had fully loaded cameras and supplies of digital photo sticks and batteries, he led them quickly from one chamber to another, pointing out what each should shoot as they worked their way rapidly through the temple complex. Just over an hour later, Simon called a halt and they returned to the workshop to gather up Sandburg's journals, equipment and clothing, leaving the food and water. Jim insisted that the younger man put on the vest and then, packs over their shoulders, they left the ruin. Blair lingered only for a few seconds at the bottom of the broken steps to take a couple of exterior shots.

A few seconds too many...

Jim jerked to attention as he caught the scent of gun oil and the sweat of heavily perspiring men. Launching himself toward Sandburg even as he fired in the direction of the intruders, he yelled, "Get down!"

Simon dropped behind the shelter of a tumbled stone pillar, while Jim shoved Blair to the ground and then crouched over him protectively. The quiet of the jungle was shattered by the racketing sound of automatic weapons as the gunmen from the Cartel opened fire, and the two police officers returned it.

They could tell from the sound and direction of the attack that they were up against at least three mercenaries, hired guns employed by the drug lords to do their dirty work. Jim took out one, and Simon got another before Jim grunted at the powerful punch of a bullet, and then another, one in the side where the padding of the vest was thinner, and the other just below the protection of his Kevlar vest. Even as he fell back, he twisted so that his body covered Sandburg's, continuing to protect Blair from the barrage of shots.

Simon's gun exploded as he trained his weapon on the attacker who had just shot Jim, taking him out - and then there was a sudden silence as the battle ended.

Blair eased himself out from under Jim's inert body, gently turning the older man to support his head and shoulders while Simon loped across the overgrown cobbled courtyard in a crouching run, still alert to further possible assault.

"Jim?" Blair gasped, as he swiftly checked out his best friend's wounds. They both looked bad, and Jim was losing blood.

"You... okay?" Ellison panted as he fought to hold onto consciousness. He could feel and hear the blood bubbling in his chest as he breathed, and the wound in his gut was an agony of searing fire.

"Yeah, Simon and I are both fine, but you're not doing too good," Blair grated as he lifted frightened eyes to Banks.

Wordlessly, Simon quickly pulled off his vest and then his shirt, to tear it into improvised bandages, and then he swiftly dressed the two wounds - but he knew it was only a stopgap measure that might slow the blood loss a little, if they were lucky. It was all too clear that, without medical attention, Jim wasn't likely to make it.

When he finished, he said quietly, "We've got to get him back to the jeep, and then to town as fast as we can. You stay with him, and help him manage the pain. I'm going to build a stretcher so that we can carry him."

"There's a machete up in my workshop," Sandburg told him and then turned his attention back to Ellison as Simon raced up the temple steps. He could see the pain lining Jim's mouth and shadowing his eyes, could feel the rigidity of Ellison's body as the older man fought the agony spiraling through
his body. And the blood bubbling on Jim's lips terrified him.

"Jim, you need to focus on your pain dial and turn it down," Blair said as steadily as he could, his voice tight with fear.

Ellison blinked as he tried to concentrate, squinting as he focused on the hazy dial in his mind. Laboriously, he managed to nudge it down a few notches, and sighed at the instant relief as the raging fire banked to a lower burn.

"You're going to be okay," Sandburg insisted, his voice shaky. This was his fault... his stupid, stubborn resistance to their advice and urgent warnings to leave, his blind determination to be independent again despite what he'd learned.

Struggling against the darkness that was smothering him, Jim grated. "Want you to know... I, uh, I do... trust you..."

"Shh, don't talk now," Blair whispered fervently as he held Ellison tighter. "Just focus on breathing, okay?"

But Jim shook his head. He wasn't sure how much time he had, and he'd put off saying some things that had needed to be said for far too long already. He couldn't stand the idea that he might die and Blair would never know...

"It was all..." he gasped, determined to make things right between them, but a spasm of pain stole his breath away, and he had to begin again. "Afraid you'd be hurt... or leave... didn't want to be so... dependent... not your fault," he panted. "'Fraid of being... a freak. You're the bes' frien' I ever had... better'n I deserved..."

"Jim, don't, please," Blair choked, tears blurring his eyes. He knew Ellison thought he was dying, and Sandburg couldn't bear to think about that possibility. "We can talk when you're stronger..."

"No... time," Jim sighed, blinking rapidly as he tried to focus on Sandburg. "After Alex... felt ashamed. And scared. She k-killed y-you... almost lost you," he grated. "Realized... couldn't keep you... safe. Tried to... push you away... out of danger... failed." Desperately, he panted for breath, swallowing the blood that clogged his throat. "Fear made me... angry. But my first instinct... always... was to protect... you."

Simon had loped past with the machete, and Blair could hear him hacking at trees and vines nearby. "Jim, stop, please. You're going to be okay. We're going to get you back to Sierra Verde," he pleaded. "You just have to hold on..."

"When I thought... the plane crash... hated myself," Jim wheezed, his eyes losing focus. "So glad when Simon told me... so... happy you were... alive." He swallowed again, and his voice fading, barely audible, as he whispered, "Chief... have to understand. Nobody... nobody means more to me - you're... my fam'ly. So sorry... I hurt you..."

A tear streaked Blair's cheek as he clutched Jim to his chest, and gently stroked his best friend's face. "Shh, it's okay," he murmured brokenly. "Just don't die on me, please? Jim? Hold on."

"Come home..." Jim whispered, no longer completely conscious. "Want you to..."

"I'll come home," Blair cut in to assure him, unhesitatingly - even desperately. "Please, Jim - hang on."

"...be my partner..." Ellison murmured on a wisp of air as his grip on consciousness slipped away.
"Nobody better... nobody I trust... more..."

Simon rushed back with an improvised stretcher made of tree boughs, leaves and vines. Together, they shifted Jim onto it, but when Simon bent to lift one end, Blair stopped him. "No... not with your back and chest wounds still not fully healed - you'll rip yourself open again, and I can't haul both of you. I'll pull him. His head needs to be higher than his body, anyway, to help him breathe. You clear the way with the machete..."

Reluctantly, knowing the kid was right but hating the fact that it would take longer, Simon hauled their packs over his shoulder and nodded as he set out in the lead.

Sandburg lifted the end of the improvised travois, his fists tightly gripping the rough wood, and leaned his weight forward as he hauled Jim as gently and as quickly as he could over the uneven ground. He'd not gone far before his shoulders and back started to ache, his arms and hands prickling, then cramping before going numb. The wooden ends of the stretcher kept catching on the vines tangling over the earth, so no matter how fast he wanted to go, it seemed to take forever.

Though Jim seemed to be unconscious, every once in a while, he'd groan when he was bumped over a rock or hauled roughly from the morass of vines that seemed to cling maliciously to the stretcher, dragging him back. All the while, Blair kept up a low patter of encouragement, cajoling and even begging Jim to keep breathing, to not let go...

And every step of the way, Blair was sick with fear that Jim was going to die...

Finally, they made it to the jeep and Simon helped lift Jim into the back, where Blair cradled Ellison's head and shoulders against his chest. The makeshift bandages were sodden with blood, and Simon cursed the fact that they hadn't thought to bring even the most basic medical kit with them. He got behind the wheel and set off back to Sierra Verde as quickly as he could go through the thick forest. The vehicle lurched over the uneven terrain, jarring the two men in the back with merciless regularity, but there was no way to make the ride any smoother and still maintain any kind of speed.

Ellison moaned and then began to cough, struggling to breathe past the blood clogging his throat. Pain seared through his chest and gut, rousing him back to restless semi-consciousness. Over and over, he mumbled in a kind of delirium, "Sorry... so sorry..." He didn't seem to hear Sandburg's assurances that it was okay, they were okay - that all that mattered was that he live.

Simon listened to the low murmurings behind him, his throat tight and his chest aching both from exertion and pity. He'd never known two men who were closer friends, who needed one another more or who meant so much to one another - nor two people who could hurt each other so badly through misguided good intentions, misunderstandings and a massive failure to communicate. Together, they were an unbeatable team but, separate and alone, neither seemed quite whole. He cared deeply for both men, considered them family though he rarely exhibited the depth of his own affection for them. They frustrated him, infuriated him, when they ended up tearing each other apart, both too stubborn in their own way, both too intent on protecting the other so that they lost track of their friendship and partnership. Dammit, they'd come out here afraid for Sandburg's life - and now Jim might well be dying.

And none of it needed to have happened. It was all so damned pointless and tragic. God, he hoped they'd make it back to Sierra Verde - that Jim wouldn't die back there in Sandburg's arms.

Blair held Jim as tightly as he could, trying to cushion the journey as much as possible. He pressed Jim against his own body, hoping to keep pressure on the wound in Ellison's side, as he kept one hand pressed down hard on the bullet hole in his best friend's abdomen. He could feel the warmth of Jim's blood soaking his shirt and jeans, and see it seep between his fingers and from under his palm, hot and sticky.
"Shh," he murmured, trying to calm his friend, to reassure Jim. "Don't talk - please, Jim, don't quit on me." Desperately, Sandburg willed his own strength to Ellison as he closed his eyes and tried to picture the wolf supporting the jaguar, keeping him warm as the big cat shivered with weakness and chills. "Live, Jim," he breathed. "You have to live, you hear me?"

The jeep lurched again, hard, and Jim cried out, the sharp agony rousing him. "Where..." he mumbled.

"We're taking you to the hospital in Sierra Verde," Sandburg told him, his voice low and soothing. "It won't be much longer. I'm sorry it hurts so bad. Try to see the dial, Jim - try to turn it down."

Nodding weakly, Ellison did his best to deal with the pain, to focus on the dial, but it kept slipping away from him. He could feel Blair holding him tightly and, blinking to clear his vision, he could see the tracks of tears on Sandburg's face, the fear in his eyes. "'Long as you're fine... s'okay," he sighed. "No, it's not okay," Blair choked, his voice breaking. "Don't you dare give up!"

"Tired," Jim whispered. His body felt heavy and he was so cold. The pain was fading - everything was fading but the feel of Blair's arms and hands, the sense of being cradled like a much-loved child. It had been a long, long time since he'd felt so beloved... so wanted...

"I know," Sandburg murmured sorrowfully. "But you can't let go - you have to fight, Jim. You have to. I... I need you. Please don't leave me."

A weak smile hovered over Ellison's lips as he gazed up at his best friend. "Proud of you," he rasped, blood trickling from the corner of his mouth. "You do... everything right. So smart..."

Sandburg's lips trembled as he shook his head. "No," he replied brokenly. "I screwed up so badly. I'm so sorry, Jim. I never wanted you to be hurt, never wanted to hurt you..."

"I know," Ellison sighed, his eyelids again growing heavy. "Told Simon - if something ever happened... want your paper... published."

"Nothing's going to happen to you," Sandburg protested vehemently. "You're going to be okay. Stop with the negative vibes, man - you're starting to scare me here."

Jim started to chuckle at the words and tone, then choked and coughed on his own blood. "Meant what I said," he panted as he tried to get his breath. These might be the last words he'd ever say, and he had to say them. "L-love you... more than... than anything... in my life."

Sandburg bent his head to rest his brow on the top of Ellison's head, unable to hold back a sob of fear and despair. "Ah, Jim," he rasped as he held the older man tightly. "I love you, too, man. More than anyone or anything..." But he didn't know if Jim had heard him, for Ellison had once again slumped into unconsciousness.

The ride smoothed out when Simon finally reached the road, and he pressed down hard on the accelerator. This journey was taking too damned long...

"Hurry, Simon," Sandburg called urgently from the back seat. "I'm losing him..."
By the time they reached the small hospital, Jim was barely breathing. His skin was waxen, cold and clammy with shock, his lips and fingertips tinged blue. Simon laid on the horn as he rounded into the drive, to attract attention, so by the time he pulled up in front of the emergency entrance white-garbed staff were already coming out to lend assistance. Ellison was lifted hastily onto a gurney and rushed inside, Blair and Simon loping behind.

The trauma team did little more than strip the injured man, type and cross match him for transfusion, clean the wounds with orange disinfectant and get quick x-rays before they rushed him into surgery. The bad news was that he was barely alive, requiring intubation and oxygen immediately, as well as fast blood replacement. From the sound of his uneven breathing, one lung seemed on the verge of collapse. The good news was that they had plenty of experience with gunshot wounds, and knew very well what they had to do as they moved him briskly into the operating theatre.

And then the long wait began.

Simon called Ortega, to tell him what happened and about the three bodies back at the temple, and then he joined Sandburg in the waiting room outside the operating theatre. Blair seemed unaware that he was drenched with Jim's blood until Simon pointed out that he should clean himself up before he scared someone and handed him one of the backpacks that Banks had retrieved from the jeep.

Stumbling a little, dazed with worry and fear, Sandburg went into the men's room to wash and change. When he looked at the blood on his clothing and hands, he felt nausea curl in his belly; he was drenched with Jim's life and it felt weirdly symbolic. Jim had given all he had to protect him. God, Blair hoped to the depths of his soul that Jim hadn't given so much that he couldn't recover. Sandburg would never forgive himself if the choices he'd made ended up costing Jim's life.

Ortega came to the hospital shortly after Simon had called him, two police officers in tow. A third took possession of the loaned vehicle, weaponry and equipment. After taking Simon's statement and expressing his regret over Ellison's injuries, Ortega ordered his two patrolmen to stand watch before leaving. Just because they were in a hospital didn't mean they were completely safe from the Cartel, not when Arguillo himself was seeking revenge for having been captured and imprisoned.

As time dragged on, Simon became increasingly worried about the kid. Sandburg was too pale, too quiet. He just kept staring at the doors to the operating room beyond, scarcely blinking, let alone moving. The stillness and silence were unnatural in a man who was perpetually moving with exuberant energy and was almost always chattering on about some damned thing or other. The older man wished he could offer some reassurance, but he was too afraid himself that Ellison wasn't going to make it. And, God, he was tired. The not yet healed wounds in his chest and back ached relentlessly, and he was stiff and sore all over.

About two hours after they'd arrived, Simon finally got up enough energy to go down to the cafeteria to get coffee for both of them. Blair accepted the Styrofoam cup with a distracted air, but then he looked up at Banks and studied him, seeing the fatigue and the lines of strain on the older man's face. Frowning with concern, Sandburg said, "You should check into a hotel and get some rest. It won't do Jim any good if you collapse in exhaustion." When Simon just shrugged and looked away, Blair continued, "You know your doctor would have your hide if he knew all that you've been doing today..."

"You're probably right about that," Banks sighed wearily. But much as he would love nothing better
than to stretch out and sleep, he wasn't about to leave Sandburg alone. Shifting to a more comfortable position in the uncomfortable chair, Simon added, "Don't worry - I'm doing all right."

"Yeah, sure you are," Blair mocked gently. His eyes darkened, and his expression was very somber as he continued, "I'm really sorry about all this, Simon. I thought by leaving that I was protecting him - I never thought anything like this could ever happen..."

"I know," Banks replied quietly. "Just do me a favour, okay? When he's up and back to normal, promise me the two of you will work things out. I'm too old for all this excitement."

A sad smile curved over Blair's lips as he hung his head and nodded. "I promise," he murmured, meaning it - hoping desperately that he'd have the chance to work everything out with Jim.

"I told you on the phone, there's a job for you in Cascade, if you want it," Banks said then. "I hope you'll take it."

His throat thickened with emotion, and his jaw tightened, as Blair fought for control. Blinking rapidly, he sniffed and said softly, "Let's just take this a step at a time, Simon. First, Jim has to survive his wounds."

"He's strong, kid, you know that better than anyone," Banks cut in, hoping he was right and that Jim would live.

"He's not some invulnerable super hero," Blair cut back, very afraid for Jim's life, "though he and everyone else seem to believe he is." Swallowing, he continued, "If he lives, I'll come back to Cascade, at least for a while, to see how things go. Simon, I have to finish the study I agreed to do on the temple. That'll take me weeks..."

"Jim wants you back as his partner..." Banks pushed.

"I know," Sandburg murmured, looking away. "But... wanting and needing are two different things. And, well, as much as I know he wants to trust me, I think we both know that 'wanting' isn't enough. One day, he'll turn on me again; I'm convinced of it. I'm not certain I'm the best one to back him up..."

"If you aren't, who is?" Simon demanded wearily. For all his brash confidence, Blair was amazingly uncertain and vulnerable. Was it his youth? Or was all that cockiness they normally saw a facade?

"I don't know," the younger man admitted with a helpless shrug. "I just know that he needs a partner he can trust without doubt or question when the chips are down... and, honest to God, Simon, I don't think that's me." Pausing, he looked away and sighed. "I wish it were, you know. I wish he did trust me that much. But I can't figure out how to earn it - I don't know what else I can do or be. And, well, frankly, it hurts to know I'm not good enough, somehow. That there's something about me that makes him believe, time and again, that I'm so totally self-centred that I'd sell him out, or betray him, or just plain hurt him deliberately." Turning back to Simon, he asked with painful solemnity, "Do you know what it is that I'm doing or not doing? So that I can stop or start or... just fix this thing between us? Because I don't know how many more times I can pick myself up and say, 'hey, it's okay, you can think I'm a schmuck, if that's what you want'."

"Maybe you shouldn't take it - maybe you should push back," Simon suggested.

"Push back? I do, but he doesn't listen when he's erupting," Sandburg retorted with no little exasperation.

Sighing, Simon lifted a hand for patience as he continued, "You both just sorta fell into this sentinel
thing without really understanding it. You both need to learn more about what it means for the two of you. Maybe it isn't anything you're doing or not doing. Maybe it's something about Jim..."

Blair's lips compressed as he thought about what else Simon had suggested. "Maybe it does have something to do with the sentinel/guide thing," he mused thoughtfully. "The pictographs and some of the hieroglyphics I had time to decipher before you guys arrived indicated that there are rituals of selection and bonding... rituals that we sure didn't engage in, not in the traditional sense, anyway."

Looking away, he shrugged before he continued, "And maybe it is more Jim than anything I'm doing. God knows, pretty much everyone he ever loved or trusted since he was a kid has betrayed him, left him or died on him. Maybe he just isn't willing, consciously or unconsciously, to trust that much anymore."

"So, where does that leave you?" Simon wondered.

"Back to where I started, I guess," Sandburg said dryly. "Studying the pictures we took, trying to make more sense of what we are, what our partnership means. One way or another, either I have to accept that this is just the way it is and live with it, or I have to find a way to help him trust me more fundamentally than he does... or help him find the guide he will trust." Looking up at the wall clock, he swallowed heavily, and then said bleakly, "More than anything, all I want is for him to be okay, you know? Nothing else really matters except that..."

"I hate to push you, kid, but Jim needs a partner, and you're the only one he wants," Banks cut in, returning to the original point of discussion.

Stiffening, Blair said quietly, "Just give me a little time, okay? If Jim lives, if we can work some of this out and if he still wants me to be his partner, I swear I'll be the partner he needs, because that's really what I want to be. I'll even take the weapons training and..."

"You don't have to do that," Simon interjected, "though it might be a good idea if you did. But, basically, we just want you back doing what you've been doing for the past four years."

"Thanks, Simon," Sandburg said, his voice rough. "God, I hope..." But his voice broke and he turned his face away.

Banks reached out to grip his shoulder consolingly as he murmured, "So do I, son. So do I."

It was seven hours before the surgeon emerged to tell them what was going on and for all of that time, all they could do was hope that the more time that passed, the better chance Jim had of surviving. When the short, stocky, doctor with grizzled, gray hair entered the waiting room, they both stood, hope mingled with dread on their faces.

"Your friend is alive," the physician told them in heavily accented English, having been told they were waiting for word. "But, as you know, he was very badly injured."

"He'll be all right, though, won't he?" Blair asked, his voice unsteady.

"It is too soon, I'm afraid, to be certain of that," the surgeon replied regretfully. "I'm sorry, I am tired and forgetting my courtesies. I am Doctor Miguel Sanchez."

"I'm Simon Banks, Jim's boss, and this is Blair Sandburg, his best friend," Simon replied.
Nodding, Sanchez waved toward the chairs, "Please sit, while I explain to you..."

Once they were settled and leaning toward him with intense concentration, he elaborated on Ellison's injuries and prognosis. "You know that he lost a great deal of blood, si? Well, that causes severe shock and affects a body's resilience and recovery ability, so... well, we have replaced the blood loss and his blood pressure is closer to normal - but he is very weak, you understand. The Kevlar vest he was wearing slowed one bullet, but it still pierced his right lung, and it had collapsed by the time you got him here. This put stress on the other lung and his heart. I'm sorry, but he, how do you say, arrested - his heart stopped - twice during the surgery." He paused as he watched them pale at his words. "Of course, we revived him, but such incidences can have impact upon the brain. He is in a coma, and we do not know if there was any damage."

"Oh God," Blair gasped as he sat back, feeling physically ill.

But the physician held up his hand. "It is also too soon to assume there is damage," he encouraged. "We simply do not know. In any event, we repaired the lung and reinflated it. We have him on a respirator, to ensure that lung inflates fully, to allow it to heal, but I am hopeful that he will be able to breathe on his own within the next few days. The other wound lacerated his intestines, and with such an injury there is a very grave danger of infection. We have repaired that damage, as well, and have him on powerful antibiotics. It will be some weeks before he can eat more than soft, bland foods that do not irritate his system, but I am hopeful that this wound will also heal well. So... for now, we need to wait."

"I'd like to see him," Sandburg said then.

Shrugging, the doctor demurred. "He is, as I said, in a coma. He may not wake for days. It would be better if you both got some rest..."

"No, please," Blair cut in, desperately. "I have to see him, even if only for a few minutes. And you should know that he's very sensitive to sedatives of any kind, and anesthetics - I told them that when we brought him in. I... I have his power of attorney, and I'd like to know what medications are being given to him."

"I'm aware of his sensitivities - the doctor in Emergency noted your advice in his chart," Sanchez replied reassuringly, "and, certainly, we will respect your legal rights in his care." Sighing, understanding that these men likely would not rest until they had seen their friend, he stood as he told them, "Mr. Ellison will be taken to the Intensive Treatment Centre within the hour. You can wait there, just down the hall at the far end of this floor - and the staff will permit you to see him briefly. But then, I must insist that you get some rest. You will not help him if he senses your fears, or if you are too exhausted to be strong for him when he wakes."

"Thank you, Dr. Sanchez," Simon replied as he stood, as did Blair. "We're very much grateful for all your help."

"De nada, Señor," Sanchez replied with a tired smile. "I am only sorry that he was so badly wounded in the first place." Nodding to each of them, he concluded, "If you'll excuse me..."

For the next forty minutes, Blair paced back and forth across the small waiting room floor, his expression tight and closed. Whenever Simon would encourage him not to buy trouble with worry
about brain damage or infection, he just nodded and kept moving. He felt sick - terrified actually. And guilt lodged in his gut like a stone. He kept wondering what he might have done differently. What if he'd never left Cascade? What if he'd never written the damned paper? What if he'd left Mexico when Simon had first told him to, on that call when he'd just arrived in Sierra Verde? What if he'd left as soon as they'd come for him instead of delaying to take the stupid pictures? What if he hadn't been so consumed with his own hurt and had paid more attention to how much Jim had been hurting, too? What if he hadn't been a damned fool in so many inexcusable ways? What if... what if...

It all came down to the fact that Jim was hurt and could die because of him.

What if Jim died?

Blair stopped pacing and sagged against the wall, sliding down against it until he was sitting on the floor, his arms crossed over his raised knees, and his head bowed. Simon watched him, concern etched on his face and in his eyes.

"Blair... are you alright?" he asked quietly, not sure what to do or say to help the younger man.

Sandburg shook his head as one hand came up to cover his eyes. The thought of Jim dying left him breathless, and a great, hollow, horrible anguish filled him, overwhelming him as it ripped through his chest. He felt as if the whole world was dimming into darkness and swirling him into a vortex of emptiness. Forcing himself to swallow and to take deep breaths, he tried to push the anxiety away - the last thing that would help Jim right now was to lose control of his own emotions. He had to be strong, had to...

If Jim died, he'd never forgive himself - *never*. He couldn't even imagine life without Ellison somewhere in the world.

His shoulders tightened and then shuddered as shards of pain and grief shredded his heart.

"Hey, kid, take it easy," Simon coaxed as he came to stand over the young man.

Sniffing, Sandburg blew out a long breath and shakily drew in another. He had to get himself together. Couldn't fall apart like this, not now... not when Jim maybe still needed him.

"I... I'm just so scared, you know?" he stammered, swallowing again when his voice cracked. "I'll be okay. It's just that... that I wish I could do so much over... differently... so that he wouldn't have gotten hurt..."

Sighing, Simon nodded. "I know," he rumbled. "But we can only play the cards we're dealt - and it's 'way too soon to fold, Sandburg."

"Yeah, you're right," Blair said quietly. Looking up, he forced a facsimile of a grin, as he added, "As usual. Guess that's why you're the Captain, right?"

"Absolutely," Banks affirmed. "Now get up off that floor and pull yourself together."

Though Simon's voice was rough and his tone tough, Blair could see nothing but compassion in the older man's eyes. Nodding, he pushed himself up and rubbed his arms to chase away the cold of the void that had so nearly sucked him in. "Sorry," he mumbled. "Guess I lost it for a minute there... won't happen again."

Smiling sympathetically, Banks looped a long arm around the anthropologist's shoulders. "You're allowed to be worried and scared. Hell, I am, too. I'd be more concerned if you didn't care about
what happens to him." Simon gently pushed Blair down onto a chair and then sat beside him. For a long moment, he studied the younger man intently, debating whether or not to say anything more. He bit his lip, undecided.

Aware of his scrutiny and the hesitation in his eyes, Blair asked, "What?"

Sighing, Banks looked away as he asked, hesitantly, with evident discomfort, "I was just wondering if, well, if part of the tension between the two of you might be..."

But his voice died away. Shit. It wasn't any of his business.

"Might be what?" Sandburg prompted. "Simon, if you've got some idea of how I can - "

Simon bowed his head and then looked back up at Blair. "I wonder if some of the tension might be sexual," he finally admitted quietly.

"What?" Blair gaped and then turned quickly away, helpless to stop the flush that crept up his face. Oh, God, surely he hadn't been so pathetically obvious! "Why would you think something like that?"

Clearing his throat, Simon replied quietly, "Lots of reasons, I suppose. The two of you have lived in each other's pocket for almost four years and, well, you may not realize it, but you lean into each other..."

"Lean?" Sandburg echoed.

"Yeah, you know - there's no personal space or separation between the two of you. You both touch each other a lot, stand in close proximity, bicker like a married couple, fight off anyone who threatens the other." Banks struggled to explain his gut-level perceptions. Sighing, he allowed, "Maybe it's the sentinel thing, I don't know."

Shaking his head, Blair replied dryly, "Simon, you know Jim's fiercely heterosexual and everyone knows I chase just about anyone in a skirt."

"You chase 'em, all right, or you used to," Simon retorted with telling acuity, "but you never hold onto them for long. And in the past year, I haven't seen you do any looking, let alone chasing." When Sandburg's lips thinned and he looked away, Simon continued carefully, "As for Jim? Well, he doesn't have the best track record with women, either."

"And you do?" Blair thrust back, defensive on Jim's behalf, if not his own.

"Point taken," Banks sighed. Swallowing, he leaned forward as he said earnestly, "Look, I'm just trying to help here - you two love each other, right? All I'm saying is that maybe it's not brotherly love. Maybe it's more..."

Blair snorted derisively, trying desperately to dissuade Simon from his only too accurate musings. "You want to make that suggestion to him? If so, you're a far braver man than I am."

Chuckling sardonically, Simon replied, "No. No, I'm not." Then, having had four years of experience working with Sandburg, and spotting the signs of obfuscation when he saw them, he sobered, as he continued, "Frankly, I just hate to see the two of you tear each other apart, over and over and over again. If this is part of what's going on then, well, it has to be dealt with. Ignoring it isn't the answer."

Blinking in astonishment at Banks' persistence in pursuing the difficult conversation, Sandburg gaped, "I can't believe you're suggesting this! I mean - as Jim's Captain, how could you offer me a
job as his partner if you think - "

Shrugging, Simon replied. "As his Captain, and hopefully yours someday, I wouldn't want to know, nor would it be my business to know."

Blair rolled his eyes. "This is ridiculous. I can't believe we're having this conversation or that you, of all people, could even suggest such a thing," he said sarcastically, bluffing for all that he was worth.

"Why? Do you think I'm a bigot? That I'd judge such a relationship as wrong or perverted," Banks snapped, offended. "If that's the case, Sandburg, I guess you don't know me very well at all."

Stung, knowing he'd gone too far, Blair swallowed and closed his eyes. "I'm sorry," he murmured, his voice tight. "I just..."

Seeing the stricken look on the kid's face, Simon softened his tone, certain he was on the right track and trying to make it as easy as possible for Sandburg to talk about it. God, who else was there for him to discuss any of this with? "Blair, love, all love, is precious. And just about the most powerful and wondrous force on this earth. I know you believe that, too. You know I'd never condemn anyone, let alone friends, for whatever love they can find in their lives."

Sandburg's throat closed up and he bowed his head and took a deep breath. "I'm sorry," he started again, and lifted his gaze to Simon's. "I do know better than that. You're a good man, Simon - and a very good friend. I guess I'm just surprised and... and I wonder why you're asking me..."

"Well, I wasn't sure I should, because it really isn't any of my business. But, I thought with your background and upbringing, you might at least consider the possibility without being offended."

When Blair cut him a wry look, he hastened to add, "Don't get me wrong. I'm not being critical or anything. I think Naomi did an outstanding job of raising an exceptionally decent, brave and honourable man."

Surprised, Blair blushed at the awkward sincerity in Simon's voice and eyes. "Uh, thanks," he stammered, more than a little staggered by everything that Banks was saying. Raking his fingers through his hair, he leaned back, his gaze drifting around the room as if seeking some refuge and finding none. With a weary sigh, unable to persist any longer in what amounted to lying to Simon, he admitted softly, "The truth is... is that maybe you're right, partly anyway. But only on my part. Jim... Jim wouldn't ever want..."

"How do you know, for sure?" Simon cut in, his tone gentle.

Before Blair could respond, a nurse came out of the restricted-access ward and waved at them to follow her; both men leapt to their feet and hastened after her. Beyond the double doors, the light was muted in the open treatment centre. Beds stood out from the wall around a wall-less square office/supply centre in the middle of the room. Only two of the eight beds were occupied that night. Moments later, they were standing on either side of the narrow, raised bed that supported their friend, neither of them quite knowing what to say. It wasn't natural to see Ellison so pale or so helpless. The intravenous lines, and other tubes carrying away waste and the bloody discharge from his chest, the respirator pumping monotonously to inflate his lungs, the patches on his temples that linked to the EEG in the corner and the wires from his chest to the machine monitoring his heartbeat, all seemed to bind him to the bed, holding him hostage to danger and possible death.

Sandburg tentatively reached out to grip Jim's wrist and then leaned forward to stroke his brow gently. His best friend's skin was cool to his touch, and he figured that was a good thing, because no fever meant no infection, at least not yet. But he was afraid Jim might get a chill, so he quietly asked Simon if he could find a light blanket somewhere.
"Jim," he called softly, his voice low and steady, as was his touch, though he quailed inside to see Ellison so weak and hurt. "I don't know if you can hear me, man, but they say people in comas hear more than we think. I want you to know you're safe here. You've gotten through the surgery, and now you just have to get well. You were hurt badly, but nothing that can't heal. You hear me? You're going to be okay. You just need to rest and, uh, keep tabs on your pain dial. Keep it turned low... you're going to get better and we're going to go home. That's all you need to think about... going home. Okay?" He paused as he studied Jim intently, wondering what else he could do or say that might somehow help. He wanted to beg Jim not to leave him, wanted to order him not to give up - but those were negative messages that carried a world of fear and pain, the last things that Jim needed to contend with now.

Simon returned and carefully draped the white cotton blanket over Ellison's body. The nurse came with him, signaling it was time for them to leave. Blair took a shuddering breath and nodded. He glanced up at Simon and then back at his partner. "They won't let us stay with you right now, because you need to rest. And, frankly, so does Simon - he's so stubborn, you know?" Ignoring Banks' snort, perhaps unaware of it, Sandburg continued, "He wouldn't go to a hotel when I told him to leave - insisted on waiting here with me. So, um, I'm going to get him straightened away and make sure he rests, too. But I'll be back as soon as I can. You're not alone - you're safe. Just... just rest and concentrate on getting better... ."

He stroked Jim's brow again, and squeezed his friend's arm before finally, reluctantly, letting go to turn and follow Simon from the unit. They walked wordlessly out of the hospital, escorted by one of the police officers, and remained silent in the patrol car on the ride to the hotel. After they checked in, and were escorted to their adjoining rooms by their official watchman, Banks muttered anxiously, "He looked like hell..."

"Yeah, I know," Blair agreed despondently. But he stiffened his back and lifted his head; his jaw was tight and his gaze determined, as he added, "But he's going to get better - I won't let him go, Simon. I won't."

A river of pain, sharp waves with every breath, burning agony in his gut... time had no meaning, there was no other reality. Just pain...

From time to time, in the far distance, he could hear voices, feel hands probing at him, but he paid no attention. They couldn't get over the river of pain, were somewhere else, on distant banks, out of reach, irrelevant...

But there came one touch, a steady sure grip on his arm, the brush of flesh over his head - calming, restorative, bringing strength. One voice, clear and pure, like cool water...

He struggled to hear that voice, to make out its words and caught some of them before they floated by. "Safe", he was safe... but how could he be safe when he was drowning in pain?

"Surgery..." He'd been hurt? "Be okay..." It hurt, but he'd heal. He held onto those words, that voice, like a life preserver, letting them buoy him up from the pain but God, it still hurt so damned much!

"Pain dial..." What? Dial? Oh, yeah... struggling he brought the dial into fuzzy focus and grappled with it, frustrated by his weakness, almost giving up... but it moved... and the pain diminished from sharp lacerations and hideous fire to a low burn that flared, but not so brightly...
"Rest... just rest..." Rest. Safe. Not alone. Rest...

When the touch left him, he felt bereft, lost, but he tried to hold onto the wisps of words. Safe. Not alone. Rest...

Barely five hours after he'd checked in, after sleeping fitfully at best, Sandburg rose and showered. Minutes later, he slipped into Simon's room to leave a note. Out in the hallway, he told the police officer standing watch to remain there to ensure Banks' safety, and then he headed downstairs to grab a taxi back to the hospital. Dawn was breaking over the jungle, the sky above crystal clear.

He nodded at the police officer still on duty outside ICU, remembering him vaguely from the night before, and then continued on into the closed ward. One of the nurses rose from her desk, intending to send him back to the waiting room, but Dr. Sanchez recognized him and waved her back. Warily, the surgeon looked him up and down as he observed, "You look like you got little sleep..."

Shrugging, Blair glanced over at Jim. "How's he doing?"

"I've just arrived myself and was checking his chart," Sanchez replied. "There is no fever, and that is a good thing. But he has not awakened."

"I want to sit with him," Sandburg said, adding hastily, "I know that's probably unusual, but I wouldn't expect the nurses here would speak English... I mean, why would they? We're in Mexico. It's just that, if he wakes up, he'll be confused. Jim understands Spanish, but wouldn't it be better if I could be here to translate or something?"

With a small smile, hearing the desperately hopeful tones underlying the rationale for staying close to his friend, Sanchez nodded. "No doubt, you may have a point. Go, sit with him while I review the information from the encephalograph and cardiac monitor, and I will think about your suggestion."

Hoping he'd won the anticipated battle over visiting hours, Sandburg moved to stand beside Ellison and quietly studied his best friend for a long moment, trying to find evidence that Jim was improving... but he couldn't find any. Swallowing, he wrapped his fingers around Jim's hand and said, "Hey, sleepy-head. I thought you'd be awake and tormenting the nurses by now. Guess you just need a little more rest, huh? Well, okay, I won't argue with you - sleep all you want. I'll just sit here and flirt with the nurses before you get a chance to impress them all with more than your muscles."

Blair stroked Jim's cheek, and tried to take heart from the lack of any evidence of infection or fever. And then, while still gripping Ellison's hand, he sank into the chair by the bed. Pushing back his own fears, he began to talk in a low, encouraging voice, trying to sound cheerful and positive, as he told Jim about how Simon was still sleeping over at the hotel and the doctor was encouraged with his progress... mostly, he just talked, so that Jim could hear the sound of his voice.

If he could hear... if he was listening...

Blair didn't notice Sanchez pause as he reviewed the long thin printout of the EEG readings for the past seven hours. His eyes narrowing, the surgeon flipped through the chart to check the nurse's notes from the night before, and then sat pondering what he'd observed. Curious, chewing on his inner lip, he rose to cross the tiled floor, first to check his patient's reflexes and reaction to light stimulus, and then to review the long printout flowing silently from the machine that monitored Ellison's brain waves. After a brief glance, he checked his watch and then again studied the sheet of
Watching him, Blair asked anxiously, "Is there something wrong?"

"No, Señor, not wrong - just... intriguing," Sanchez replied thoughtfully as he studied Sandburg and then looked again at his patient. "The police outside - they are here to protect him, sí? Because you and your friends have had confrontations with our infamous drug Cartel? Not just yesterday, but some months ago?"

"Yeah, that's right," Blair admitted, wondering what that had to do with Jim's medical condition.

Nodding, the physician rubbed at his lip. "And, I heard that some of these... confrontations... took place at the ruins of an old temple in the jungle?"

"Yes," Sandburg acknowledged, clearly puzzled. "Why?"

"I could ask you that as well, Señor Sandburg," the surgeon countered. "Why have you been at that temple twice in less than a year? It has been long forgotten..."

"Well, I'm an anthropologist and I've studied the cultures of Latin America, amongst others..." Blair replied, truthfully enough. "I've got a grant from the University of Mexico to study those ruins."

"I see," Sanchez murmured. "You are aware, I'm sure, of the ancient legends about the temple? That it was a holy place to our ancestors - a place dedicated to our tribal watchmen and their companions?"

"I'm aware of the legends, yes," Blair agreed, treading carefully. "But I haven't had time yet to research the local mythology..."

"Hmm," the surgeon muttered to himself, nodding vaguely. "Your friend, he is a police detective, sí?"

"Yes, he is," Blair replied, beginning to feel uncomfortable with the questions and the way Sanchez gazed at him, as if he was being weighed and measured.

"How long have you been guiding Señor Ellison?" Sanchez asked directly.

"What?" Blair exclaimed, as if he didn't understand the question. "I don't know..."

"I ask, because these graphs, from the EEG, are very interesting," Sanchez cut in. He lifted the strip of paper, pointing to various lines that meant nothing to Sandburg.

"I don't understand," Blair protested, looking up at the doctor.

Shrugging, the doctor let strip of printout fall. "It is not complicated," he explained, "though, as I said, it is intriguing. Your friend was in a deep coma following the surgery. But, at the time of your visit last night, the graphs show that the coma lightened, so he was very close to consciousness for a brief time. Then, when you left, he drifted into deeper unconsciousness again... but not so deep as he'd been. Now, this morning, the graph again shows him approaching conscious - from the moment when you arrived and began to speak to him. It seems clear to me that you can reach him, when others cannot."

"But..."

"Given your interest in the temple, his profession and yours, together with this very unusual medical
response to your presence, well, I must confess, I don't think it is a coincidence," the doctor went on consideringly. "I am no expert - I only know the legends my grandfather told me long ago, when I was a child. But I have never forgotten those stories of the watchmen, the sentinels." Sighing, he looked away as he admitted softly, "I have often wished that they still guarded our communities..."

"I'm hoping to learn more about those legends, from my research at the temple," Blair cut in, trying to direct the conversation down the academic path and away from Jim.

"Sí, so you have explained," Sanchez replied steadily as he again studied Blair. "I like to know who I'm treating, and I was curious about Detective Ellison - wondering how he came to be shot by the Cartel's forces here, so far from his home in Cascade, Washington. So... I took a few minutes last night, to see if I could learn anything about him from the computer. I wondered about the bullet wound in his leg that has not yet fully healed... I found some newspaper stories from not quite a month ago. There were references to a paper you apparently wrote..."

"Oh," Blair sighed and shook his head. "That was all a huge misunderstanding. You see, I was writing an article about police officers..."

"Please, do not feel you must explain," Sanchez interrupted, brisk but kind, "especially if you are only going to give me the fairytale version. Let's leave it that I believe you have a good effect on my patient. Accordingly, I will order the nurses to let you remain with him for as many hours a day as you choose. I only ask that you not exhaust yourself... I want you to remember to eat and to get some sleep every other day or so." He smiled as he gently teased the young man. "Perhaps, in time, you might do me the honour of telling me a story about a sentinel and his companion, his guide - a story that is not hundreds or thousands of years old... that I might continue to dream that the sentinels will one day return."

"Dreams are important," Blair murmured as he turned his gaze back to Jim. "And when they come true, it's... beyond describing how awesome and wonderful..." Swallowing he looked back into the surgeon's eyes, he said simply, "Thank you, for letting me stay with him." He paused a moment, and then added, "I hope, someday, I'll be able to tell you such a story..."

Sanchez patted his shoulder and made to move away, but Sandburg asked anxiously, though he kept his voice low as he studied his friend, wondering how much Jim could hear or understand of their conversation, "He will wake up soon, won't he? I mean - the information shows there's no damage, right? Nothing permanent? And he'll be able to breathe on his own?"

"Sí, I think he might well wake today," the surgeon replied as he turned his attention to Ellison. "He will be in considerable pain, however, and he will likely sleep more than he will be fully conscious for a few more days. As to the respirator, as I explained last night, I want to give his lung a chance to heal somewhat, before I let him breathe on his own. But, so far, I am encouraged by his progress."

Blair blew out a breath of undisguised relief, and the smile he bestowed upon the doctor warmed the older man's heart.

The touch and the voice were back, steady and reassuring, cutting through the darkness and pain, bringing relief. As the sunflower tracks the passage of the sun, he found himself reaching toward the voice, striving to make out the words. The pain flared, but he pushed it back as he struggled, as if climbing a long staircase out of the emptiness and torment toward the light.
"The Doctor says you're doing good, Jim. You're going to be fine..."

Ellison blinked and grimaced against the sudden stab of light.

"Hey, you waking up?" Sandburg exclaimed softly, hope in his voice. "Just take it easy, okay? Check your dials, man. Turn them way down... pain first. Can you picture it?"

Blair gripped his arm and stroked his brow as the words flowed gently, guiding him to his dials and through the struggle of adjusting them. But there was something hard in his mouth and throat, gagging him - making him feel as if he were choking. He grimaced in extreme distress and tried to lift his hand, but his arm was caught and lowered gently back to the bed.

"It's a respirator, Jim; don't fight it," Sandburg explained quickly, knowing all too well from personal experience how godawful the sensation was. "You need help breathing, so your lung will fully inflate and heal faster. Dial down the pain, way down, to deal with it, okay?"

Desperate for relief, Ellison urgently focused on the dial, lowering it almost to zero. Then, frowning, trying to understand where he was and what was going on, Jim blinked again and then shifted his confused gaze to Blair.

"You don't understand or remember, do you?" Sandburg murmured with a sad smile. "You got shot when you came to get me from the temple. We're in Sierra Verde. You'll be okay, but you need time to heal."

Shot? Temple? Jim frowned as he tried to piece the fragments of memory together, and then he nodded weakly as recollection returned. His eyes clouded with concern as he lifted his gaze back to Sandburg's.

"I'm fine, and so is Simon, don't worry," Blair told him firmly. "Okay?"

Ellison's lips twitched, as if amused that Sandburg had answered the question he'd not been able to ask, before again nodding weakly.

"Jim, do you want anything for pain?" Blair asked then, concern shadowing his eyes. "I know it must be pretty bad..."

But Ellison shook his head. They both knew his reactions to sedatives could be unpredictable and exaggerated. He'd manage with his dials. His eyes drifted shut as he slipped into sleep.

Sandburg held Ellison's hand, and gripped his friend's shoulder, as he fought to control the relief that swelled in his chest. Jim had awakened and been alert, remembered, and was managing his dials. There'd even been a trace of humour on his lips and in his eyes.

Jim was going to be fine.

Trembling, Blair closed his eyes and took one deep breath after another to calm himself - and then, exhausted but finally able to relax, he leaned forward, his brow resting against Jim's arm, and he let himself drift off to sleep.

Simon arrived a few hours later, carrying a good-sized paper sack. When he came into the unit, Blair
looked up and his smile gave Banks the information he sought; though Jim didn't look a whole lot different than the night before, he must be doing fine. Nearing the bed, he cocked a brow as he asked, "He's better?"

"Getting there," Blair replied. "He woke up for a while this morning, and he seemed okay - hurts but, well, he remembered, I think, and didn't seem confused."

"That is good news," Simon nodded, and then held out the bag. "I had some of the pictures developed. Figured you could start work on them while we're here... something to do when Jim's sleeping."

"Hey, thanks, Simon," Sandburg exclaimed, surprised and pleased. But then he cast a teasing look up at his friend. "You probably think the sooner I get the assignment done for the University, the sooner I'll be available to work for you."

"Not at all, Sandburg," Banks replied blithely. "You underestimate me. I figure that since you were able to handle both jobs before, you can probably do the same thing again."

"Oh, you do, do you?" Blair laughed as he shook his head.

"Damn straight," Simon said briskly, but then he, too, chuckled. "Take what time you need, Blair. But remember you've got a job waiting."

At noon, Simon left to get some coffee and sandwiches for them, while Sandburg continued to study the photographs, murmuring softly to the sleeping Jim as he did so. "You know," he muttered thoughtfully, as he examined one after another, "I think I've been missing something pretty important; we both have..."

Just then, a swarthy, thin, man in a lab coat came toward them and, when Blair looked up, he could see the stranger was carrying a syringe.

Narrowing his eyes, he stood between the advancing man and the sleeping Ellison. "Uh, did you want something?" Sandburg asked, warily eying the needle.

"Sí, I am Dr. Luis Montoya, and it is time to give my patient his medication," the stranger replied briskly, shifting to move around Blair.

But Sandburg moved with him, despite the fact that the man was crowding him so that he inadvertently banged lightly into the bed - not hard, but enough to bring Jim awake with a groan. Blair cast his unconscious friend a quick look of apology, but returned his attention to the doctor. "What medicine is in the syringe?" he asked briskly, all business. He thought the claim of being Jim's doctor odd, but figured Sanchez must have consulted with a colleague, or maybe this guy had also worked on Jim the night before.

"Just something to relieve his pain," the man smiled, though there was something about him that made Sandburg's skin crawl.

"He's fine - doesn't need anything for pain, but thanks," Blair countered, lifting his hands in an unconscious motion, as if he wanted to push the man away.
"I am the doctor, Señor," the stranger argued, now impatient. "I will decide - "

"You're not Jim's doctor, and I said, 'no','" Sandburg insisted, not yet really suspicious but becoming seriously annoyed.

Behind him, Ellison frowned as he struggled to be alert, fighting the drowsiness that plagued him and the pain that burned in his body. There was something wrong... his gaze focused on the stranger and he unconsciously cocked his head a little. The man's heartbeat was up and Jim could practically smell of the adrenaline rush of either fear or excitement...

"Get out of my way," the man ordered Sandburg, lifting a hand to push him aside, "or I'll have security remove you."

Blair slapped the hand away, now angry himself. He could hear Jim shifting in the bed behind him, and was not pleased that his partner had been disturbed. Trying to resolve the unnecessary conflict, he suggested, "Look, why don't we call Dr. Sanchez, and get his opinion."

"I have the authority I need," Montoya jeered, his eyes glittering coldly.

Jim grunted, cursing the tube that blocked his throat, and the weakness that tied him to the bed. He tried to rise, tried to get Sandburg's attention, to warn him that something was wrong... but he groaned again, unable to push himself up or reach far enough to grab Blair's arm.

"Just back off, Dr. uh," Blair growled, his gaze flickering to the nametag that said 'Martinez'. But he was sure the guy had said his name was 'Montoya'. Blinking, he looked back up at the stranger, suddenly realizing the danger, as he charged, "You aren't a doctor, are you?" Lifting his voice, he shouted to the nurses to get the police officer who was still standing guard outside the ward.

Even as he called out, the stranger lunged at him and they grappled briefly. Blair grabbed the arm holding the syringe, but the man elbowed him sharply and then punched him, breaking his grip. As Sandburg staggered back, the thug plunged the syringe into his shoulder. Enraged, Sandburg pushed him away, hard, so that the villain slammed back onto the floor.

Simon walked in as one of the nurses screamed, and saw a stranger scrabbling back to his feet - and Blair, pulling a syringe from his shoulder with a look of fury that was melting into dread.

"What's going on here?" Banks snarled, and yelled for the cop outside the door even as he grabbed the assailant and punched him hard, then bounced him off the nearest wall. When the stranger crumpled to the floor, Simon flipped him onto his stomach and planted his knee in the middle of thug's back. The man now restrained, he looked up, a chill rippling down his spine at the look of appalled comprehension on Sandburg's face.

The kid swayed, half turned toward Ellison and sighed, "Jim..." The needle fell from his nerveless fingers as he grimaced in pain and clutched at his chest, and then he crumpled to the floor.

Ellison was frantic, pulling at the intravenous tubes and tearing at the adhesive that secured the endotracheal tube to his mouth. Simon left the stranger for the police officer to deal with, and charged across the floor toward Sandburg, shouting for a doctor as he lunged forward and dropped to his knee beside his motionless friend.

"Sandburg!" he called out, as he turned the younger man. There was something..."Dear God, he's not breathing!" he grated - and when he reached for Blair's pulse, he was shocked to not find it. "His heart's stopped!" he gasped, and then yelled, "Help me here!" Swiftly, he bent to blow into Sandburg's mouth and then he began chest compressions. In moments, someone was there, many...
people, pulling Sandburg away from him, lifting the young man onto a stretcher. Someone intubated the kid, while another hooked up oxygen - and someone else picked up the syringe Blair had dropped.

Sanchez raced into the ward, having heard the code called, fearing for Ellison, clearly shocked to see the staff working over Sandburg. Scowling, he demanded rapidly to know what had happened, and then took the syringe, sniffing at it. Snapping out orders in Spanish, he sent a technician to the lab with the empty vessel to find out what it had contained even as he moved to examine Sandburg, listening to his heart with a stethoscope. As soon as a nurse handed him a syringe of medication he'd ordered, he tied off a vein in Blair's arm and injected it. When he again listened for a heartbeat, his lips thinned as he shook his head in frustration. There were more orders in Spanish, and then he was ripping open Sandburg's shirt, and a nurse was handing him paddles. One shock convulsed the young man's body, and then another, but his heart, now monitored by the EKG machine, remained frighteningly still and silent. Sanchez plunged a long needle directly into Sandburg's heart and then shocked the muscle a third time... and, finally, the heart began to beat. Sighing, Sanchez watched the monitor, not entirely happy with the rhythm, but it was better than nothing.

Unnoticed by the medical personnel, the police officer handcuffed the still unconscious would-be assassin and hauled him away.

Simon had moved to stand by Jim, forcibly having to restrain Ellison from pulling out his respirator. "STOP IT!" he yelled. "You'll do Blair no good if you rip yourself open again - SETTLE DOWN!"

As soon as he could, Sanchez joined them, raising his hands for calm. "I think he will be all right," he soothed. "He is breathing on his own, his heart is beating again. Let us see how he manages in the next hour or so..."

"What was that stuff?" Banks demanded, irate and trying hard to contain his fury at the attack.

"I do not yet know - I have sent it to the lab," Sanchez shrugged, his expression revealing his own anger at what had happened. "Once that is determined, I will have a better idea of what else to do for him."

Banks blinked and looked away, swallowing hard. Damned Cartel! But he was also cursing himself for not being there to protect his people - for having arrived too late. Wordlessly, he gripped Ellison's shoulder, knowing Jim had to be feeling even worse than he did.

Ellison's own gaze was locked on the still too quiet man on the bed across the floor, his eyes dark with anger and frustration. Blair had needed help and Jim had been unable to warn him, let alone protect him...

He'd heard Sandburg's respirations catch and had known when Blair's heart had stopped beating. It had seemed to him an eternity of time before that pulse had been restored, and it was still uneven and too slow. Unable to speak words of encouragement to the younger man, unable to even touch him, Jim struggled to contain his emotions. When Sanchez turned to restore his intravenous line, Jim caught his eye and waved to the respirator. He wanted it out, and he wanted it out immediately.

But the surgeon shook his head. "Not for another two days, Señor Ellison - without such assistance, you'd likely end up with pneumonia. That would help no one."

His eyes smoldering, Jim fought the pain that nearly convulsed him and the darkness that swirled on the edge of his vision as he again turned his gaze toward Sandburg. The kid was too quiet, too pale and Ellison was afraid to stop watching him, scared to sleep, lest he wake and find his best friend
Jim's eyes narrowed as he wondered how often and in how many different ways Sandburg had to be hurt to protect him... and the detective began to wonder if the price Blair kept paying wasn't just too damned high.

Banks watched, feeling furious and helpless, and just plain worried sick about both his friends, as Jim lost his battle against the darkness and slipped into unconsciousness.

Sanchez reviewed the information from the lab and nodded to himself, relieved that what had been in the syringe wasn't something worse. He'd feared cocaine or heroin, either of which could have caused irreparable brain damage in the young man, but it was simply digitalis, poisonous to be sure in such large quantity, but it had already done its worst. There might be some residual damage to Sandburg's heart, but the quick treatment had restored oxygen swiftly to the cardiac muscle and, with adequate rest and medication, the young man could well have a complete recovery.

The surgeon briefed Banks, who blew out a breath of relief as he, too, had dreaded worse news. Looking up, he saw Ortega enter the treatment unit and, after thanking the doctor for again saving one of his friends, the tall man moved across the floor and waved the police captain out into the hall.

"What the hell happened here?" Simon demanded. "How did that assassin get past your man?"

Ortega let the fury wash over him, having expected it and shook his head. "I'm sorry - but my subordinate believed the assailant to be a doctor..."

"We need better protection," Banks insisted.

"You are already getting the best I can provide," Ortega sighed. "I am sorry, Capitan Banks, but you should have all stayed out of Mexico."

His hands on his hips, Simon gritted his jaw and looked away. He couldn't disagree, but the fact was they were in Mexico and he hated the feeling of being a sitting duck. Sanchez had followed them out of the ward and, having listened to their brief discussion, moved forward to join them. There was a determined look on his face as he asserted with barely contained anger, "You have no need to fear further attacks, Señor Banks. At least not here, where you and your friends are under my care and protection. I will see to that."

And then he turned to stride away down the hall, his back straight and his gait decidedly determined.

Startled, Banks turned to Ortega, as he asked, "What did he mean? How can he..."

Ortega smiled grimly as he shifted his gaze from the retreating doctor to Simon. "Dr. Sanchez is one of the best, most famous surgeons in this country. Normally, he works in Mexico City, but this is his hometown, and he was back to ensure his youngest daughter had no complications during the birth of her first child, three days ago. You were lucky that he happened to be in the hospital when you brought Ellison here."

"What does that have to do - " Banks began, impatiently.

But Ortega held up a hand to stem the protest. "Dr. Sanchez is not happy about the choices of husbands made by his two daughters. One is married to our current Presidente. The youngest is the wife of Arguillo."
"Oh," Simon exclaimed softly, his gaze dropping as he thought wryly that he wouldn't want to preside over the Sanchez family reunions.

"The Doctor feels they are both corrupt and has little to do, personally, with either the Cartel or the Government. However, he has made it plain in the last few years that hospitals must be 'neutral territory' if both sides want to be sure that their wounded will receive excellent care. He has the support of the medical establishment in Mexico, such that if one side violates this neutrality, this 'zone of safety', then it will be closed to them. And 'violation' would include threatening any of the families of the medical community, or even offering bribes to subvert care. Despite their medical oath, the doctors will refuse to care for the wounded from the aggressor's side, because their unity is all that protects their families. The Cartel made a serious mistake when they brought their fight into this hospital. Likely, it only happened because Arguillo, himself, wants revenge." Looking back down the hall, Ortega shook his head, "Believe me, Capitan Banks, the good doctor has the power to ensure no further attacks take place within these walls. If I read him correctly, I suspect he will extend his personal guarantee of protection until you are safely back in the United States. He has evidently taken a liking to all of you - and he is obviously very angry that you were attacked while under his care."

Crossing his arms, Banks chewed on his lip and then nodded. The respect and confidence in Ortega's voice were convincing. It was an odd way to maintain peace, of sorts, in a troubled nation, but an effective one. Sighing, he went back into the ICU, to watch over his friends.

"Nngghh" Sandburg muttered, hours later, as he regained consciousness. Sniffing, he blinked and his brows furrowed as he squinted against the light. Simon could see confusion in the younger man's eyes.

"Easy, kid," Banks said quietly, as he held a glass of water to Blair's lips and supported the anthropologist's head as he drank.

Swallowing, Blair murmured, "Thanks," when Banks took the glass away and lowered his head. "I feel like I was hit by a truck," he sighed, wincing as he rubbed at his chest and struggled to remember what had happened.

"You were poisoned with a digitalis overdose - stopped your heart for a few exciting minutes," Banks told him dryly.

Sandburg gave the older man a quizzical look, reading concern in the dark eyes, and retorted, "Then I'm glad I don't remember the details." But his humour faded as he looked past Simon toward the bed across the room. "How's Jim doing?"

"He's been unconscious since, well, since you were attacked," Simon replied. Looking away, he admitted the more worrying news, "And his temperature is up - they're concerned about infection. Sanchez has modified the antibiotics that he's on."

Sandburg's lips thinned and he started to push himself up, but Banks restrained him. "What do you think you're doing?" the big man demanded. "Your heart may have been damaged and needs absolute rest, dammit! Settle down."

Blair ceased his futile struggle, but was no less determined. "I have to get to Jim." When Banks just
shook his head, Sandburg took a deep breath to calm himself, and then explained, "I know you don't like the 'mumbo-jumbo' Simon, but the fact is, I need to be able to touch him - he needs to hear my voice and know I'm okay. Please, help me to get to him."

Banks snorted, but he looked around for a wheelchair. Despite the protests of the nurses, and against his better judgment, Simon helped Sandburg out of the bed and into the chair, and then pushed Blair up close to Jim's side.

"Hey, man," Sandburg murmured, as he reached out to grip Jim's wrist. "I hear you're letting things slip - what's with the fever, Jim? I'm okay, you hear me? I'm right here. And you need to focus on getting well. C'mon, big guy - fight!"

Jim didn't wake, at least not fully, but he turned his face toward Sandburg's voice, moaning a little.

"Shh, it's okay," Sandburg said quietly. "Everything is going to be okay. Just get better, Jim. Don't you give up on me now, you hear me?"

The troubled look on Ellison's face eased somewhat and his arm shifted, his fingers twitching. Smiling softly, Blair took his best friend's hand in his own. "That's it. Just take it easy. I'm right here, where I'm supposed to be..."

When Sanchez came in a while later, he frowned to see Sandburg sitting up. Directing that Blair's bed be moved close beside Ellison's, he and Simon helped Blair to lie back down, and then the doctor examined him, his eyes narrowing as he listened to the still erratic heart beat. "You must remain on bed rest until I tell you differently," he cautioned the young man.

"I need to - "

"Sí, I understand or, at least, I have some idea," Sanchez cut in. "You can reach his arm to touch him, and you are close enough for him to hear your voice. It will have to be enough, at least for the next day or so. Comprendez?"

Sighing, Blair nodded. His chest ached, and he knew he was too breathless when he was sitting up. "This is temporary, though, isn't it?" he asked with a quick glance toward Ellison, wondering how much his friend was hearing and understanding.

"I hope so, but you need rest more than anything right now and..." but the physician paused as he, too, glanced at Jim, "in time, you may need other treatment. But we can speak of all that later."

Simon, sitting on the far side of Jim's bed, crossed his arms as he studied the doctor and listened to the conversation. He didn't know how the physician had figured things out, but it seemed pretty clear to him that the surgeon understood there was something beyond the norm in the friendship between his two patients. Though that concerned him a little, Banks was basically just grateful that the guy was being as helpful as he was; neither Jim nor Blair needed any more battles, not right now, at any rate.

It was a day before the low fever broke, and another before Jim drifted back toward consciousness. During that time, Blair studied the photos and did a lot of hard thinking - when he wasn't talking to Jim, or undergoing first an ultrasound and then a CT scan of his heart. Sanchez remained concerned about permanent damage to the muscle, but the scarring revealed appeared minimal.
Still, he cautioned Blair, privately and away from Jim's bedside at the anthropologist's insistence, that the young man would need to be careful during recovery. No sudden strenuous or prolonged exercise until he underwent a full 'stress test' back in the United States. Sanchez insisted on knowing the name of Sandburg's doctor and undertook to mail the reports so that they would arrive even before Blair made it back to the States. It would be at least another week before he would even consider releasing Ellison for transport back home.

"Thank you for all your help," Blair said sincerely, as the consultation concluded. "We are so lucky you happened to be here."

"The attack should never have happened!" Sanchez grated as he waved away the gratitude. But, giving Blair a coy sideways look, he grinned as he said, "Besides, it's in my own interest. I love a good story - and still hope to someday hear one from you, my friend."

Simon looked up as Blair was wheeled back to his bed. Standing to help the younger man, Banks murmured quietly, "He's restless - I think he may be waking up."

"Finally," Blair replied, hopefully. Rolling onto his side, he asked Banks to crank up the top of his bed, as he reached to grip Jim's arm. "C'mon, big guy - let's see those baby blues..."

Ellison grimaced and moaned softly, his head turning toward Sandburg's voice. He blinked, and took a moment to focus, and then looked at Blair, with worry clear in his eyes.

"Hey, welcome back from the land of Morpheus," Sandburg grinned. "How're you doing?"

The tube still blocking his throat, Jim grunted in exasperation. He struggled to lift his hand toward his chest and then pointed at Blair, as he watched Sandburg intently.

"Oh... right. You can likely hear something's off," Blair murmured softly. "I'll be okay, really. Do you remember the attack a couple of days ago?"

Frowning, Jim thought about that and then nodded, frustration again glinting in his eyes.

"Well, the medication in the syringe was digitalis, and it, uh, stopped my heart briefly," Blair told him. Jim just nodded sharply - he remembered those moments all too clearly. "So, uh, it's taking a while for my heart muscle to recover, but the test results are pretty good. Don't worry."

Ellison narrowed his eyes, not sure whether to believe Blair or not. But the kid rarely out-right lied to him, and never about anything really important. Wordlessly cursing the tube in his mouth, he gestured toward it.

"Dr. Sanchez says it can probably come out tomorrow," Sandburg explained.

Jim nodded and then looked around the area, spotting Simon. Jerking his head toward Blair, he cocked one brow, clearly asking for confirmation of what Sandburg had just told him. Sandburg shook his head, not happy that Jim wouldn't take his word without back-up, but he wasn't surprised. Simon merely grunted and nodded, as he replied, "What Blair said. The tube comes out tomorrow - and, yeah, it looks like he's going to be okay, too."

Jim's gaze unfocused and he tilted his head unconsciously as he listened to Sandburg's heartbeat. He
didn't like the unevenness of it - it sounded rough, almost mushy, and it was still too damned slow. When Blair squeezed his arm, he blinked and looked up at his best friend, honest concern shadowing his eyes.

"Stop worrying," Sandburg chided gently. "I'll be okay."

'You'd better be,' Ellison wanted to say, but he had to content himself with a slight nod. God, he'd be glad when he could talk again.

But, when the tube was finally removed the next day, Jim only demanded details on Sandburg's condition. Blair was as clear and specific as he could be, though he regretted he couldn't simply tell Jim that he was fine. The Sentinel knew better - could hear the truth for himself. Still, he did his best to assure Jim that the damage was minor at worst, and most likely temporary. Ellison accepted the assurance gruffly, wanting to believe it. There were other things they needed to talk about, most specifically his growing concern about the risks Sandburg would face if he did return to Cascade and took the job as his permanent backup. The hospital, though, didn't give the privacy he needed for such a conversation, so he held his concerns and his fears inside - which made him seem more than a little irascible, if not downright surly. It didn't help that the pain was still pretty bad, or that he had the energy of a sloth. He also had the feeling that Blair had something he, too, wanted to discuss but was avoiding - and that was a worry. Had Sandburg decided he didn't want to return to Cascade after all? Or was there something he wasn't saying about the condition of his heart? All in all, Jim felt frustrated and out of sorts when he was awake. Most of the time, however, despite his efforts to remain awake, he fell into sleep after only brief periods of alertness, practically in mid-sentence.

Gradually, Jim did get stronger until finally Sanchez agreed that he could be released for the trip back to Cascade. By then, Sandburg had been given clearance to walk around on his own, and had, officially, been released from the hospital days before - though he still spent all his waking hours with Ellison. All three men were delighted by the Doctor's decision and, the next day, they headed home.

When they arrived at the loft, Jim was caught off-guard when he saw the boxes containing Sandburg’s possessions had already been delivered and were stacked in the back room. He stopped dead in his tracks and gaped at the evidence that Blair really had come home and evidently meant to stay.

"Hope you don't mind, but I called ahead..." Blair explained, a tad nervously. He believed Jim wanted him back, he really did, but, well...

Ellison simply turned and pulled Sandburg into a tight hug. He was trembling as he simply said gruffly, "Welcome home, Chief."

Returning the hug in full measure, Blair's eyes misted. Come what may, he knew now, without any doubt, that he was exactly where he believed he belonged and he was more determined than ever to work out the problems between them. For the first time in a very long time, the persistent ache in his heart was muted, if not entirely vanquished.

However, Sandburg couldn't help but notice that Jim was dead on his feet, literally trembling with exhaustion. "Come on," he said quietly, "let's get you up to bed, big guy."
Pulling out of the hug, Ellison scrubbed a hand over his face and grimaced. "I need a shower -"

"Not with the bandages, Jim," Blair cut in. "And a bath is out, too. Once you lay down, I'm not sure you'll be getting up again anytime soon - and I can't carry you up those stairs."

"But - "

"No 'buts'," Sandburg insisted firmly, steering Ellison through the loft. "I'll help you upstairs and into bed and then bring up a basin of water..."

"You're not going to give me a bed bath!" Jim protested grumpily. God, he was tired - and he hurt all over.

"It's no big deal, Jim," Blair soothed as he slung Jim's arm around his shoulders and steadied his friend up the stairs. "And you'll rest better if your skin isn't all gritty and irritating. You'd do the same for me, and you know it."

Feeling awkward about accepting the help, Jim nevertheless acquiesced with a tight nod and lumbered up the stairs, leaning heavily on Blair. Sandburg was right; he was worn out and needed, badly, to lie down.

Minutes later, Blair had helped Jim undress and ease down onto his bed, reminding Ellison to check his pain dial when the older man groaned.

"You'd think I'd remember..." Ellison muttered as he closed his eyes to focus on the dial.

"You're exhausted, and the pain wrecks your concentration," Sandburg replied mildly and then walked Jim through the process. "Better?" When his friend nodded, he continued softly, "Okay, just relax. I'll be back in a minute."

Downstairs, Sandburg lit a couple of candles with relaxing, restorative scents and then filled a basin with hot water. Grabbing soap and towels, he headed back upstairs.

"Shouldn't be running up and down the stairs," Jim lectured, though his voice was tired and slow. "Heart sounds funny..."

"You think it's got a career as a stand-up comic?" Sandburg quipped as he wrung out the washcloth and gently wiped the sweat and grime of travel from Ellison's brow.

Grimacing, Ellison tried to pin his best friend with a glare, but his heart wasn't in it and worry clouded his eyes. "I'm serious, Chief," he grated.

"Yeah, I know," Blair replied quietly as he began to wash Jim's arm. "But Sanchez said I'm doing fine. I'll call the doctor about arranging a stress test..."

"In the meantime, I want you to take it easy," Jim ordered with as much strength as he could muster. Aware the discussion wasn't helping Ellison to relax, Sandburg refrained from further comment and merely nodded as he concentrated on washing and drying Jim's other arm and hand. But he noticed that Jim was frowning in concentration, his brow furrowed thunderously and his jaw clenched. "Stop listening to it," Blair murmured.

"It's... something's wrong," Ellison muttered, shaking his head.

"Okay, we'll talk about it then," Sandburg sighed as he began to wash Jim's torso, being careful of
the bandages that Sanchez had said should be left in place until Ellison saw his physician later in the week. "What does it sound like?"

Jim's eyes shifted as he concentrated on the sound and tried to isolate what was bothering him. "It's... not quite regular and there's a hitch, like the beat is hesitating..."

"Well, is it better or the same as in Mexico?" Blair asked, curious.

But Jim flinched at the question and turned his head away.

"What?" Sandburg asked, pausing in his ministrations.

Blowing out a long breath, his voice tight, Jim replied, "It's a hell of a lot better than the silence..."

Sandburg gaped at his friend and then winced when he realized that, of course, Jim had been conscious and fully aware of everything during and after the attack. "I'm sorry you had to... witness that," he muttered.

"Sorry?" Ellison demanded, turning an astonished gaze back toward Sandburg. "You're sorry? Jesus, Chief, you don't have anything to apologize for! I... I knew that bastard was up to something, and I couldn't warn you, couldn't stop him or help you... couldn't move. I thought... I was afraid... for a few minutes, I didn't know..."

"Hey, easy, Jim," Blair cut in as he gripped Ellison's arm firmly. "I'm here. Everything turned out okay."

But Jim wasn't convinced. He looked pointedly at Sandburg's chest, and then lifted his gaze to Blair's, one brow cocked, as he asked, "Is it? Sounds like there's still a problem to me."

"Nothing that won't heal," Blair countered. "Look, just let it go, for now. Worrying won't make it sound any better, you know?" Returning to the task of bathing Ellison's legs, he directed, his voice low and reassuring, "I want you to close your eyes and breathe deeply and slowly... you know the drill."

Jim looked as if he was going to protest, and then huffed as he closed his eyes, pointedly following instructions. Blair grinned a little to himself, glad that Jim would still do what he was asked to do, sometimes at least, and then took his time massaging each of his friend's feet. Gradually, he could see the tension ease from Ellison's body. "Okay," he murmured softly. "Roll over on your side while I support your abdominal wound... I want to wash your back."

Wordlessly, Jim shifted, grimacing a little in discomfort, and then muttering, "I know... check the dial."

"You got it, man," Blair replied with a low chuckle. He washed Ellison's back and then gave his friend a massage, digging into still tense muscles, soothing with long, firm strokes, until he could tell by Jim's breathing that he had fallen asleep. For a moment, Sandburg closed his eyes, shaking his head wryly at how pathetically glad he was to be home and to be able to render such care to Ellison. But he couldn't help doubting that Jim would accept such help if he realized the depth of Blair's feelings for him. With a poignant sigh, he carefully propped pillows behind the older man's back to support him, and then headed back downstairs where he called both of their doctors.

Sanchez must have sent the records by express mail, as both offices were expecting the call. Jim's appointment was scheduled in two days, and Blair had been referred to a cardiologist, the stress test with her scheduled in three weeks time, the earliest appointment available.
After he'd unpacked their bags, he began on the boxes in his room. As he replaced the mask on the wall, he told himself he was home, really home... and he smiled. Finally, he was done and the empty boxes had been carted down to the basement. He made himself some soup, checked on Jim but decided not to wake him, and then collapsed on his bed.

Tomorrow, he'd begin sorting through the digital images they'd taken at the temple and scan in the hardcopy photos. As he curled on his side, his last thought was there was a great deal he had to figure out from what they'd brought back - a growing hypothesis that he badly needed to test and validate.

For the next two days, Jim slept more than he was awake, but when he was alert, Blair made sure he ate and drank to keep up his strength. The trip to his doctor was tiring, but encouraging. His wounds were healing well and he was directed to begin a regime of light exercises and walking to build his strength back. Simon dropped in on the third day for lunch, to check on them and to remind Blair of the job offer.

"That's not open for discussion until Sandburg's been checked out by the cardiologist," Jim cut in sharply before Sandburg could respond.

Blair's brow furrowed, as he wondered if Jim was regretting his virtually deathbed request that he be the detective's partner, or if Ellison was just worried and wanted the reassurance of the specialist's opinion. Deciding to assume the latter, he said, "Jim's right, Simon. My test will be in a couple of weeks. And I need the time between now and then to work on my project for the U of M. But - I feel okay and I'm hoping everything will be fine."

Banks had to be contented with that but he wondered, from Ellison's typically arbitrary manner and Sandburg's expression, if the two of them had talked yet about the fundamental issues between them. He'd bet good money that they hadn't. Sighing, he decided that he had to give them time - and that was something they had plenty of, what with Ellison on extended sick leave and Blair working in the loft on his paper. But, as he left, he shook his head. They'd had four years to work things out but hadn't done so. Would a couple of weeks make that much difference? Maybe, he had to hope; each of them had a lot at stake and they both knew it.

After Simon left, Blair went to clean up the kitchen. He knew that he and Jim had a lot of serious talking to do, but Ellison was still weak and in considerable pain. This wasn't the best time to get into a potentially hot and heavy discussion. And Sandburg wanted, even needed, more time to study the photographs they'd taken in the temple. If he was right about what the information seemed to be suggesting, then the choices they made now had even greater import - and would impact on both of them for the rest of their lives. He wanted to be as certain as he could be about what the translations meant before he sprung it all on Jim. Ruefully, he suspected the damage was done in his case, and he had no further choices to make, but he didn't want to force Ellison into something he didn't want or need.

Ellison watched Sandburg from the living room and then stood to stare out of the balcony window. He knew they had to talk about the job down at the station, and about other things as well, but he didn't feel ready for that conversation. One the one hand, he was bedeviled by doubts about putting Sandburg in further danger by dragging him into a permanent partnership; but on the other hand, he couldn't face the prospect that Blair would agree with him, so he put off talking about his worries, too. He needed to be stronger when they talked, in case... in case he won and convinced Sandburg
that he really shouldn't take the job at the PD. Besides, until Blair had the stress test, neither of them knew if he'd even be able to do that kind of work again, at least the physical part of chasing after Jim while the detective raced after crooks. Jim was constantly aware of the off-kilter sound of Sandburg's heart. Though it was getting better, less squishy-sounding, stronger, more regular, it still wasn't right, and Ellison was deeply worried about his best friend.

For the next two weeks, Sandburg worked on his project for the University of Mexico with a diligence and speed that was driven by his need to finish it so that he could move on with his life. He correlated the photographs, and wrote his analysis of what the symbolism meant, citing other sources, like Burton, to lend credence to his own interpretations. He had to take care not to let too much of his experience with Jim bleed into the work, while at the same time allowing it to inform his views. He only stopped to grab sleep when it would no longer be denied, or to take care of Jim, including stocking up their groceries, making the meals, insisting upon cleaning up after, and just visiting while they watched television - basically getting the ease and comfort back into how they dealt with one another. Jim had been given leave by his physician to walk to build up his strength again and, once the wounds had completely healed externally, he was also advised that swimming would be a good idea. So, as Jim became increasingly restless and irritated with being housebound, they went for longer and longer daily walks and, as their second week back in Cascade began, they also went swimming three times a week.

Though Sandburg felt like he was constantly reassuring Jim that he was fine, he knew the Sentinel was still keeping close tabs on him - and there wasn't much Blair could do to make his heart sound normal again or hide his slight breathlessness during their jaunts. Sanchez had told him it would take time for his heart to recover fully, but Blair remained confident that it would, given time and the right care.

Sandburg had just about finished putting the finishing touches on his project report for Mexico, and had also written a solid article for publication once the University accepted his research, when the day came for his stress test. Jim wanted to go with him, but Blair wouldn't hear of it, claiming with a laugh that it would be 'stressful' enough without worrying that Ellison was about to zone on the sound of his heartbeat. Instead, before he headed out for his appointment, he gave Jim the report and article he'd written, to read and think about. It would make their conversation easier when he got home if Jim wasn't hit cold with the information about what Sandburg had figured out about the traditional sentinel and guide relationship.

But Ellison was too restless with worry to sit and read. He paced the loft for the two hours that Blair was gone, caught between anxiety and hope. Hope that his best friend was really going to be fine and worry about what that meant in terms of the job at the PD. If Blair passed the test then he'd be in a position to accept Simon's offer. That would be good, but it would also put Sandburg back into the line of fire, and that would be bad. Around and around, Jim's thoughts whirled as he waited anxiously for Blair's return.

Finally, he heard the familiar steps in the stairwell and couldn't help himself from tuning in immediately to Blair's heartbeat. It was a little fast, and there was still something off, but nothing as bad as it had been in Mexico. The door burst open and Blair was standing there, grinning ear to ear.

"I passed!" he chirped happily. "The cardiologist says I'm just fine!"

Ellison nodded, but his expression remained guarded.

"What?" Sandburg demanded, his expression clouding, wondering if Jim was reacting to the information in the documents he'd left.

"I still hear something that's off kilter," he replied quietly, trying not to be too worried. If the doctor
said Blair was fine, well, then, he was likely fine...

"What does it sound like?" Sandburg asked, more curious than concerned about the state of his heart.

"Uh, there's still a hitch, sort of - better than it was, but..." Ellison sighed. "You're sure you're okay? Maybe we should get another opinion."

"I'm fine," Blair insisted as he hung up his jacket.

"So, uh, does this mean you'll take the job offer?" Jim asked tentatively.

Sandburg hesitated and then turned to face his best friend. "Maybe," he temporized. "Jim - we need to work some things out..."

Ellison stiffened a bit, still not feeling ready, but realized he likely never would. They'd put it off too long already. "I know," he agreed. Gesturing vaguely toward the kitchen, he asked, "You want a beer or tea or something?"

Blair gazed at his friend and could see how nervous Jim was, and that saddened him. But he smiled softly as he replied, "Sure, I'll get them - you get comfortable. Did you read the stuff I left?"

Grimacing, Ellison shook his head. "Uh, no. I didn't get around to it."

"Ah," Sandburg murmured as he turned away. Now what? Did he just blunder in and hope for the best or wait until Jim had read the information on his findings and analysis?

When Sandburg brought the open bottles to the living room, he handed one to Jim and then sank down on the sofa. "So, do you want to start?" he asked, deciding to begin, at least, with the preoccupations that he could sense were bothering Jim. "What's been worrying you so much for the past few weeks?"

"You mean besides the sound of your heartbeat?" Ellison grated as he took a swallow. Sighing, he cut Blair a look, and then continued uncomfortably, "I... I want you back as my partner, but I'm scared, I guess. I don't want you hurt anymore, and I know only too well that I can't always protect you."

Sandburg studied his roommate for a moment as he sipped on his beer. "Okay, I understand that. I guess it's just something we both have to live with; some measure of danger goes with the job. I don't really like you dodging bullets, either."

Swallowing, Ellison nodded as he picked at the label of his bottle. When Sandburg had started working with him, years ago, there'd been a reason, a payoff for both of them - but Blair had been shorthanded in a very big way. He'd been so hurt and pissed off that he'd moved out without even wanting to talk about it. Jim knew that their friendship counted for a lot, but was it enough to satisfy Sandburg for the rest of his life? What happened when the thrill wore off, or they had another falling out? Ellison wasn't sure either of them could deal with more of what they'd already suffered. "Why?" he asked uncertainly, and then looked up at Sandburg. "Why are you willing to do this? What's in it for you?"

"I beg your pardon?" Sandburg gaped, caught off-guard by the question.

"I mean, well, I know what's in it for me," Jim replied slowly. "You help me with my senses and with the cases. But you never set out to be a cop or even a consultant to the PD. You had other plans. Other dreams. And I guess I've begun to realize that it's all been pretty much one way - my way. You accommodate me and my needs, but what do you get out of it?"
When Sandburg didn't answer immediately, Ellison leaned forward, his elbows on his thighs, as he tried to be as honest as he could be. "Chief, your mother accused me of hijacking your life, and she was right. You accommodated me; I didn't accommodate you. And you pointed out, when you left, that I reneged on our original deal - you were supposed to get your dissertation out of working with me. But you didn't, because I wasn't ready for that. You'd pretty much had it when you left - and you'd found a way to get back onto your own path. But then I went after you and all hell broke loose... and when I was bleeding all over you, I asked you to come home and you agreed, to make me happy. But - does coming back here make you happy? I guess... I guess I need to know what I could do better, or even if this is the right thing for you."

"You've been thinking about this a lot, haven't you?" Blair murmured, unaccountably touched by Jim's very real and honest concern for his dreams and needs.

"Yeah, I have. In the hospital, after you were hurt, I started to wonder how many times you could put your life on the line to protect me before... before you finally decide it's all too much or... or it happens one time too many and I really lose you for good - and I found myself wondering why you do it, why you put your life and your career and your reputation on the line for me, time and time again." Jim swallowed against the lump in his throat and the fear that built in his chest when he remembered losing the sound of Sandburg's heartbeat. "I don't deserve that kind of sacrifice, Chief. And I don't want to keep asking it of you - I don't want to lose you. And I sure in hell don't want you dying to protect me."

"Whoa, easy," Blair exclaimed softly, reading the increasing tension in Jim's body and voice.

But Ellison couldn't contain his anxiety, and he got up to pace as he said again, "I don't know why you do this, why you commit yourself to me. I mean, I know you say it's about friendship, but you pay too high a price, Chief. Way too high a price..."

"I don't really have a choice," Sandburg murmured, his voice low, but firm, uncomfortably aware that the conversation was leading them directly to the heart of the matter, and not at all sure Jim was ready to hear it all.

"What?" Ellison protested as he turned to face his friend. "Of course you do! You can be anything you want to be - you're brilliant and you -"

"Jim, please, sit down, would you? And just listen for a minute," Sandburg interjected. This wasn't the way he'd planned to explain things he'd learned from the temple and had come to understand and accept, but they couldn't stop now. Chewing on his lip, Blair grappled with finding the right words to explain where they stood and the choice Jim had to make. When Ellison plopped down in his chair, his expression intent and expectant, Blair continued, "Jim, this may sound a little weird, but I finally know what I'm living for - why I was born. When we first got started, years ago, our focus was on you - the Sentinel, right? I mean, you say it's about friendship, but you pay too high a price, Chief. Way too high a price..."

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"Get what?" Ellison demanded, a confused frown on his face.

"That I am a 'guide'," Blair replied, "and that a guide has special traits, too... some inherent, possibly genetic, energy or insight, something that meshes with the sentinel." He hesitated, and then continued, a worried look on his face, "More specifically, I think I'm your guide, but I'm still not entirely positive about that - I keep thinking that if I was, you'd instinctively trust me - "

"I do trust you," Jim intervened, exasperated. "I've trusted you from the moment that you pulled me under that garbage truck! Hell, I always did what you asked, went through those damned tests, tried stuff..."

"Yes, I know - you trusted me to help you with your senses, because you didn't have any real choice," Blair countered. "You were pretty desperate, man, and I was the only guy you knew who could make some sense of what was happening to you. But I don't know if you ever really trusted me, the man I am, the person I am in your life. It hasn't helped that I'm ten years younger than you, and between my radically different life philosophy and off-the-wall behaviours, you see me as still wet behind the ears and not really dependable. I think that's why you... you always assume the worst when something threatens you personally - your first reaction is that I willfully betrayed you. But I never have, Jim. I wouldn't. I swear I wouldn't."

Ellison sighed as he leaned back against the chair. Kneading the back of his neck, he replied, "I know I've screwed up - royally. Simon told me he thinks I need help - that every time I'm upset, anger is my first reaction and that I take it out on you...

Blair shook his head. "You've got every reason to be wary of caring about or trusting people, Jim. I know that. It's just that, well, I keep wondering if you found your real guide, if you wouldn't - I don't know - instinctively trust him or her. And that's why I'm not at all sure that I'm actually your guide, the guide you need." He paused a moment as he gazed at Ellison. Swallowing, he added, "But, personally, more than anything, I just...

"What?" Jim prompted when Blair's voice faded away, and the younger man suddenly looked uncertain.

"I know this'll sound crazy. You're the big, strong, tough ex-covert ops, award-winning detective, and I'm just an anthropologist geek, but..." Blair hesitated and then just blurted out, "but I want to take care of you, Jim. While you're out taking care of your tribe, your community, I want to take care of you. That's all I want - I honestly think that's what I was born to do. But I can't, if you won't let me. If you won't trust me - worse, if you somehow expect that I'll let you down and you actively guard yourself against me."

"Take care of me?" Jim echoed as he bristled instinctively. It was his job to protect, his need to watch over others...

"Yeah, I know that probably feels wrong to you," Blair allowed with a sigh. "But that's what guides do, that's why they exist. When I went back to the temple, and looked at all the pictures we took, I saw it in every fresco, every carving, everywhere I looked - the Sentinel stood between his people and danger, and the guide stood by the sentinel's back, standing between the sentinel and any threat. You can't watch out for yourself when you're focused on catching the bad guys - we both know when you're using your senses that you're vulnerable. It's so obvious that we both missed it. I wasn't just a stopgap measure to help you for a period of time, until you learned how to manage on your own - you'll always need a guide. I... I hope that I'm the guide you need..."

When Jim looked away to grapple with the thought of Blair living a life simply to protect his, Sandburg leaned forward. "Jim, I found out something while you were in the hospital - Sanchez..."
noticed it. We're connected, somehow. When I first saw you in ICU, your brain pattern showed that you recognized and responded to me - you got better, stronger, when I was near by, touching you and talking to you. He saw it again the next morning in the printout, when I came back from the hotel. And then I remembered how you were able to bring me back from the dead. Jim, if that isn't some cosmic connection, I don't know what is - I just never realized that it worked both ways. We need each other to survive. We were born to work together. Can you believe that? I mean, really believe it? Trust me unconditionally to never hurt you and be there for you, always?"

Silence stretched between them as Jim struggled with what Blair was saying. It wasn't just a matter of trusting the kid - it was his unwillingness to put Sandburg in constant danger that haunted him. If he accepted Blair's argument, he couldn't always tell the kid to 'stay in the truck' or keep back when things got tense - he'd have to agree to have Blair with him, in the thick of whatever conflict was going down.

Sighing at Jim's hesitancy, Blair regretted having to lay on even more, but he had no choice. Jim had to know where they stood - and had to make his own decision. Quietly, steadily, he continued, "It's more than just being able to trust me. Jim, from everything I've been able to figure out from the temple's hieroglyphics and pictographs, we... er... a sentinel and a guide must make a conscious choice and commitment to partner for the whole of their lives. In the ancient culture, they were inseparable, living apart from the rest of the tribe. They existed on the perimeter, keeping watch on the boundaries, protecting, watching for shifts in game patterns, whatever. I know we're not living in the jungle anymore, but the choices remain the same, I think. If we do this, choose this, it's a life bond - a commitment to one another above and beyond any commitment we might have to other people, ever."

Frowning, Jim's eyes narrowed as he tried to make sense of what Blair was saying. "A few minutes ago, you said you didn't have a choice," he recalled. "But now you're saying we both have a choice."

Shaking his head, Sandburg looked away. "I didn't know what I was doing or what it meant at the time," he murmured. "But the night those thugs came looking for you and beat the crap out of me, I consciously and willfully chose you, your safety, over my life - even over the hope of a quick and merciful death. I made my choice months ago, Jim." Shifting to gaze steadily at his partner, he added, "I can't go back on that choice. It's been made. I don't want to change it - I want to be your guide."

"But, what about if one of us wants to marry - you're still young," Ellison objected, even though he'd pretty much given up any hopes of a lifelong relationship for himself. But it was too much, too crazy. Sure, they were best friends, partners even, but he'd never thought beyond the present, hadn't considered anything like a lifetime commitment. What if one of them changed his mind? What if some wonderful new opportunity arose for Sandburg? What if the kid fell in love? He'd never said much about having a family some day, but he used to date with the frenzy of a drowning man grasping for a lifeline. Ellison had always assumed Blair longed for the family life he'd never had as a child. He gritted his jaw as he thought that the kid was offering up too much, 'way too much, for him. "You can't seriously be suggesting that we have to live together for the rest of our lives? I don't remember making a vow of 'til death do us part."

"That's because you haven't," Sandburg replied, his mouth dry. "I'm saying that I don't think this partnership, this sentinel/guide relationship, allows room for other primary relationships. I think the commitment means that neither of us would marry."

Ellison held up his hands. "Hey, just wait a minute, here. You can't be serious," he protested. Seeking for some rationale that would make sense in Sandburg's terms, he gabbled, "Isn't there a genetic imperative, or something, to pass along the capabilities? You're the anthropologist, but it
doesn't make sense to me that the ancient societies would have risked letting the skills die out."

Nodding, Blair returned, "You're right. In those days, in a different cultural milieu, the sentinels and guides took mates, but they lived in the village, Jim, not with the sentinels and guides. It was for procreation only. Donating to a sperm bank would be the modern equivalent."

"Uh, not quite," Ellison grunted. "There's such a thing as physical and emotional satisfaction..."

"That's why it has to be a conscious choice," Blair replied tightly. Forcing himself to relax, he added, "Like the brothers at Saint Sebastian made choices to live a life of contemplation and service..."

"Somehow, I never pictured you as a monk, Chief," Jim retorted. "Me, either, for that matter."

"I know," Blair sighed. Jim wasn't ready - was fighting the idea too hard. He might never want this kind of commitment, let alone anything more. God, that seemed so utterly impossible that Blair decided not to share anything more of the 'traditional' relationship. Warily, conscious of the heaviness of sorrow in his chest, he withdrew. "All I'm saying is, I don't think this partnership will work, not in the long term anyway, unless we face up to being a sentinel/guide pair and accept what that means. But this isn't something that can be forced or coerced, Jim. It has to be a free choice."

"From what you're saying, you didn't have a 'free choice'," Ellison grated, looking away as he remembered finding Sandburg more than half dead on the floor. He still had nightmares about that night - and about Alex, about the fountain, and so many, many other moments when he'd nearly lost Sandburg. "You should have the chance to change your mind."

"In a way I did have a free choice," Blair countered, drawing Jim's gaze back to his own. "After we'd been working together for a couple of years, I was aware that I didn't want the ride to ever end. That's why I was putting off completing my diss; I told you that more than a year ago. At an emotional, maybe even a spiritual level, I was in the process of making my choice when I was attacked by those guys." Looking off into space, remembering, he continued softly, "It wasn't a hard choice, Jim, not when it came right down to it. I just couldn't ever betray you, period. I would suffer anything rather than put you at risk. I knew I was making that choice, then and there, and I was okay with it." Smiling ruefully, he added as he looked up at his best friend, "I didn't realize it was a lifelong commitment - well, at that point, I guess I figured my life wouldn't last more than the night - but I'm okay with it. It feels right to me.

When Jim just shook his head and looked away, Blair took a deep breath. "Look, this is a lot to digest. I know you need time to think about it all."

Ellison swallowed hard. He didn't want Sandburg suffering, or maybe dying, for him; couldn't stand to even consider that the kid would ever go through anything like that terrible night again. It scared him to think Blair was so ready to contemplate that that might be the cost of their partnership - and humbled him, even awed him. Nobody in his life had cared so much for him, or for his wellbeing and safety. But he couldn't accept it. If that was the choice, then he wanted no part of it.

Not understanding the dilemma that Ellison was struggling with, Blair believed that Jim just didn't know how to tell him that he'd never trust him that much or ever want such a profound commitment. Maybe he wasn't the right guide for Jim - maybe there was an instinctive reluctance because such a commitment to him on Jim's part would be utterly wrong for the sentinel. Blair sighed as he leaned back against the sofa, his heart heavy as he whispered hoarsely, "But if you can't make that choice, then I'm not the right guide for you and we'll have to find someone you can trust to watch your back."

Suddenly, Sandburg felt as if the loft seemed stuffy and he needed air. Shoving himself to his feet, he
headed toward the door to grab his jacket and pull it on. "I'm just going for a walk, Jim, to give you a little space so you can think about all this."

"Wait, uh," Ellison called out, startled by Blair's abrupt action to leave, even if only for a while. With the way the kid's heart sounded, he didn't like to have Sandburg out of his sight. But he was being ridiculous - Blair had made it to the doctor's office and back with no problem, and they'd been walking together every day. Returning his thoughts to their discussion and what he was 'supposed' to be thinking about while Blair had his walk, he asked slowly, "What if I don't make that choice? Can't we just keep going along like we were? I mean - nothing would have to change."

Pausing, his hand on the doorknob, Blair shrugged. "I guess we can try," he sighed. "I'm willing to play this out. But, if nothing changes, then we're likely to hit the same walls. If you can't trust me unconditionally and if I'm not the right guide for you then, eventually, things will fall apart again." Jim's expression suggested that he was feeling cornered, hunted - coerced - and Blair didn't want that. "There's no rush, Jim. Take your time and really think about what you want, okay?" When Ellison nodded, Blair gave him a long look and then left the loft.

Jim stared at the closed door, and then got up to pace around the apartment. It wasn't that he didn't trust Blair or could imagine anyone else being his guide. He wanted Sandburg in his life and home. Wanted the kid to be his partner. But he also wanted to protect Blair and he knew he couldn't, not from everything. And now the kid was consciously ready to take risks, maybe crazy risks, to protect him, so Blair could be in even more danger on the job. A cold ball of fear grew in his gut as he realized there was no way in hell he could protect Sandburg from himself, from pulling some stupid stunt to save his life. And, dammit, the kid deserved better than to chain himself for his whole life to an irascible, aging detective! God, what a mess. Why couldn't it go back to the way things had been in the beginning? They'd gotten along well, worked well together - and he'd been able, more or less, most of the time, to keep Sandburg out of the line of fire. If the kid actually took a job with the PD, either as a cop or as a consultant, Jim couldn't just order him to stay back when things got rough. Could he? Could that be part of their 'deal'? That Blair would stay safe?

Frustrated, Ellison strode out to stand on the balcony. He could see Blair heading down the street to the nearby park and he sighed at the hunched shoulders and the bowed head. Sure, the kid obviously wanted him to choose this commitment thing. But - it wasn't fair to Blair. No. He couldn't just jump in blithely with both feet, and consequences be damned. He wasn't that impulsive or that trusting of the Fates. He couldn't make that choice, with all that it entailed. Not now, that was for damned sure. Maybe not ever.

Besides, Jim rationalized, with no little anxiety, the kid wasn't completely recovered yet. His heart still sounded wonky, and he'd even seemed a little breathless when he'd left a few minutes ago, though they'd been doing nothing but sitting and talking. Chewing on his lip, Jim hoped that Sandburg was right and that his heart would get back to normal. Couldn't happen soon enough, so far as Ellison was concerned. But, for now, Blair had to take it easy - the job could wait.

With a last, concerned glance at Sandburg's retreating back, believing he was right to put off such a profound choice, indefinitely if need be, he turned back into the loft.

Hunching against the bite of the wind off the sea, Sandburg plodded down the street. His body felt leaden and he felt almost too tired to breathe. Absently rubbing at the ache in his chest, once again
raw and demanding, he replayed the discussion in his mind - and came to the same conclusion he had in the loft. For whatever reason, Jim wasn't ready to choose him as his guide. Sighing, Sandburg looked up at the clouds that smudged the sky and wondered if he had failed somehow. Bowing his head again, he shrugged as he tried to accept that maybe he was never destined to be Jim's Guide.

Which meant he had to figure out how to match Jim up with the guide he needed and would accept.

The thought of giving the responsibility and right to protect Jim to someone else twisted in Sandburg's chest and pain radiated from his heart. He felt breathless and unexpectedly frightened, like a child who suddenly realizes he's lost. If he wasn't Jim's guide, then what was his purpose in life? He didn't want any other future! He rubbed at the pain that clenched in his chest and, when he reached the park, he leaned against a tree to catch his breath and calm down.

But the pain just got worse. Gritting his teeth, ignoring it, knowing it would pass as it always did, Blair returned his thoughts to Jim and the necessity of finding a guide Ellison would trust. Hell, Jim was already making noises that the partnership might not work, not if his heart didn't shape up. Damn, there was no time to waste in getting Jim the right backup. But that thought only scared him even more, and hurt so bad that he crossed his arms against the sharp stab of unbearable anguish. What if Jim wouldn't allow anyone that close? Wouldn't trust anyone enough? They'd spent the last four years together, rarely separated for any length of time, and Jim freely admitted he considered Blair the best friend and partner he'd ever had - so if he wouldn't accept Sandburg, then what were the odds of him agreeing to work that closely with someone else? Sandburg knew Jim wasn't at all interested in working with just any partner - if Blair didn't become his official back-up, Ellison would likely go back to working alone. With his vulnerabilities, Jim could be killed so easily... and it would be his fault for not being where he should be, not being the man Ellison needed, the guide he needed. If Jim died... he would have failed Jim completely!

God, he couldn't stand it... couldn't bear knowing he'd screwed up so badly somewhere along the line that Jim would choose to face the world alone rather than accept a guide as a lifelong partner... but he didn't know what else to do, how else to be, and Jim would pay the price for his failure.

That thought swirled and consumed him, over-riding his awareness of everything else, crushing his chest and suffocating him. Doubling over from the pain, Sandburg sagged against the tree and then slid to the ground. Suddenly, Blair felt the empty, hollow void clutch at him, just as it had in the hospital in Mexico when he'd thought about Jim dying, and he gasped as he curled on the earth, darkness fringing his vision...

"Enqueri, why do you reject your Guide?" Incacha asked sternly as he materialized in the room, his arms crossed and his face clouded with frustration.

Ellison's head snapped up at the sound of dead Shaman's voice, and he blinked at the apparition before him. Shaking his head, he protested, "I haven't rejected him! I went after him and brought him home!"

"Yet, you refuse to make the final, conscious choice and commitment," Incacha stated bluntly.

"For his own good!" Jim shouted, not happy about having his decision challenged. "It's too dangerous, and he should have a better life! There are too many risks."
"It is not for you to choose his life path," the shaman growled back, out of patience with the stubborn sentinel. "Have you not learned by now that all life is risk and only death holds any surety?"

"Don't you get it?" Jim grated, his jaw tight. "It's his death that I'm trying to avert. He's too ready to take chances for me. I don't want that."

Incacha stared at him, the shaman's face impassive, but Jim had the uncomfortable feeling he was being assessed and found wanting. "Look," he said firmly, "if you're here to push me into a choice I'm not ready for, you're wasting your time."

"Do you not see that not choosing is also a choice? One that rejects the commitment and rejects your Guide?" the shaman challenged.

Impatient, Jim shook his head and looked away. He hated these cryptic conversations with Incacha and the constant pressure to choose. "I chose to be a sentinel," he grated. "Wasn't that enough?"

"No, it was not. That choice was only the first, to place your feet on the path," Incacha replied dryly. "The commitment to your Guide is the next choice, one that is essential if the partnership is to continue."

"Why?" Ellison demanded. "Why can't we just go on the way we were? I don't understand."

Incacha turned toward the balcony doors and stared out toward the park. Time was growing short. "When the guide makes the choice and the sentinel does not, the guide is lost. They have no other path in this life, no other purpose." Turning back to face Ellison, he charged, "Your rejections have already cost your Guide much, more than he should have to bear. Did he not die, drowned by another sentinel, after you rejected him? Did he not commit a kind of suicide after you rejected him again just over a month ago? Did he not believe that you would never accept him fully when he returned to the temple and would his choice to go to Mexico not have resulted in his death if you had not gone for him? Does he not know, even now, that you will refuse him again? Your silence, Enqueri, is your decision."

"Better he be upset than hurt any further," Jim grunted, as he turned away.

"You are correct," Incacha drawled coldly. "He has been hurt enough. It is clear that you will not change your thinking or risk the choice and the commitment he offers, no more than you would risk it after your spirit guide helped you draw him back from death. His time and effort are wasted here. I will take him back."

"What? Take him back where? What are you talking about?" Jim demanded as he wheeled back to face the dead shaman.

"In each lifetime, the body and mind are granted time to grow and learn, to understand and accept the soul's purpose for that cycle," Incacha replied somberly. "You have been given that time and knowledge, but have chosen to deny the fullness of your path. Alone, you can fulfill part of your purpose in your role as the watchman for your tribe, but your Guide has no other purpose but to safeguard you. He has taught you much, but now, with no further purpose, his cycle is finished. I will escort his spirit back to the jungle." Frowning as he again gazed out the windows, he added softly, "His heart can bear no more rejection and he is in great pain. There is nothing further he can offer, as the choice was yours to make. It is time to end his suffering."

Jim's eyes widened as he began to understand what Incacha was saying. Appalled, he whirled toward the window. "NO!" he gasped. Turning back to argue with the shaman, Jim gaped to find he was once again alone. Incacha had gone for Blair.
"NO!" he shouted then, launching himself out of the apartment and down the flight of stairs to the street. Cursing the pull of his wounds in his chest and abdomen, he loped as fast as he could toward the park. Dammit, he hadn't understood! He couldn't be too late. This couldn't be over - there had to be time yet. Time to make things right.

Reaching out with his senses as he drew nearer to the entrance, he could hear the hesitating, hollow thump of Sandburg's heart - too slow, too faint, almost not there at all. And then he saw Blair curled tightly on the ground, Incacha standing over him. "Get away from him!" Ellison shouted as he ran toward them. "You can't take him!"

Incacha looked up and shook his head. "He is reluctant to leave you, even now. But it is time."

Glaring furiously at the shaman, Jim dropped to his knees and then he turned his full attention on Sandburg. Gently, he rolled the younger man over, supporting Blair's head and shoulders against his chest. The kid was grimacing in pain, his heartbeat fading, hitching and catching, uneven and erratic, and he was gasping softly, unable to get enough air. Ellison felt frantic with helplessness as Blair's heartbeat slowed further, and his best friend's face was already bluish-gray with impending death.

"Sandburg!" he shouted, clutching Blair close, and felt the small shudders of deep and abiding cold ripple through the kid's body. "Chief!"

Long lashes fluttered heavily, and unfocused blue eyes shadowed with pain and a deeper hurt stared up at him. "Jim?" Blair whispered, confused. "Don't leave!" Jim commanded sharply, desperately.

"Leave?" Sandburg mumbled, his gaze flickering around and then coming back to Ellison's fear-filled eyes. Frowning, trying to understand, feeling muddled and so very tired, Blair murmured, "Need to find your Guide. Need a real guide..."

"You're my Guide, Chief," Jim insisted, his throat tight and his mouth dry. "You're the only Guide I'll ever want. You, only you. You can't go."

Weary to his soul, blinded by the agony crushing his chest, Blair shook his head weakly. "No. Don't want me. Never did. Needed me - for awhile." But, desperately afraid for Jim, he reached to grip the edge of Ellison's jacket, as he gasped, "Promise me. Promise me to find your real guide. You could die alone... you need... need backup."

"Dammit, Chief!" Jim grated, terrified. "Don't do this! Don't you quit on me!"

"You still call on him to stay," Incacha charged grimly. "But if you will not make the commitment to him, you must let him go."

"NO!" Jim yelled at the shaman. "I won't let him go. He's mine! I choose him, dammit! What do I have to do? Say? Tell me!"

"The power is in you, Sentinel," the shaman said with maddening obscurity.

Gritting his jaw, Ellison turned again to Sandburg, and shuddered when the younger man slumped in his arms, his breath but a wisp of air, his heartbeat scarcely audible. Acting on instinct, Jim slammed his palm down over Blair's heart and held his Guide as tightly as he could. Blair wasn't quitting on him - he was the one who had failed to make the leap of faith to follow Sandburg into a full, unconditional commitment to their relationship, to what they were - failed to accept that it could be destiny or fate, or something he didn't understand or could control - failed to trust unconditionally -
And it was as if the world tilted and he was back in the pool, where it had all made sense. It had been Sandburg's face he'd seen glowing the darkness - Sandburg's voice that had grounded him, held onto him when he'd been in danger of losing himself forever...

"No, dammit, I won't lose you!" Jim growled, unconsciously echoing Sandburg's words to Simon, weeks before. "I need you too much. I choose you! You are my guide! Sandburg? Chief? Don't do this - don't leave me!"

Ellison pulled Sandburg closer still and pressed hard upon Blair's heart as if he could hold onto his Guide's life and strengthen that fading heartbeat by will alone. "Live!" he ordered. "I choose you! Live!"

For a long moment, they teetered on the edge of forever.

Then, with a rush of overwhelming relief, Ellison could feel, literally feel, as well as hear, the fading heart quicken and strengthen... until even the frightening hitch in its beat was gone, and there was only a steady, strong thump under his hand. Blair's breathing slowed and deepened, and the tension of muscles wracked with pain eased until he was lying quietly, resting against Jim's chest. Ellison gathered him into a tight embrace and bent his lips to Sandburg's curls, and just held him as he sought his own balance.

"You okay, now?" he asked hoarsely long minutes later.

Blair nodded wordlessly, his arms lifting to encircle Jim. "Sorry," he muttered, embarrassed. "I didn't expect that... didn't realize I really can't do this, literally can't live, without you - don't think I want to..."

Ellison swallowed against the tightness of his throat and shivered. "You scared the hell out of me, Chief," he rasped. Leaning back, he looked down into Sandburg's face as he asked, "What just happened?"

Blair blinked and then eased himself back to look up at the older man. "Something that should have happened a long time ago," he said quietly. "You chose me as your guide and I guess we bonded... both of us finally understanding what we were doing, what we are..."

"But you... you were... I thought..."

"Yeah, I know - I thought I was dying, too," Sandburg murmured. "I think I was. We've danced around this partnership, not knowing what it was or why - and it was hard, Jim, on both of us. I began to really understand in the hospital, when you were hurt so bad and I was afraid - I felt like I was being sucked into this void, but I couldn't let go, 'cause you might still need me. But I need you, too." Looking away, he added with a note of wonder in his voice, "I don't think it was the poison I was injected with that was hurting my heart - I think it's been breaking for a while now, and when I thought I might really lose you, that no matter how hard I tried, I only ended up hurting you... I think that's when it really broke, only I kept going, in case... in case we could fix things. But I never wanted to force you into this decision, Jim. I'm sorry."

"This is very scary shit, Chief," Jim sighed as he sat back on his haunches and reached to stroke his fingers through Blair's curls. But his expression softened as he added, "Trust me, kid, whatever it takes - we are going to work this out. I... I didn't answer you earlier, because I'm just so damned afraid of you getting hurt again, not because I don't trust you or... or think you're not my guide. I swear, you're the only one I ever want to partner with - the only person in my life I really do trust to
"Then I guess we should go home and call Simon, and tell him you've got yourself a permanent partner," Blair said with a brilliant smile, incandescent light glowing from his face, his eyes.

"Yeah," Jim grinned, knowing, finally, that this was the right thing, the only thing that could ever make sense, despite the risks to Sandburg. He could feel something ease inside - a tension so much a part of him that he'd scarcely noticed it. He really wasn't alone anymore. Someone in this world honestly and wholeheartedly wanted to take care of him. He was embarrassed by how much that meant - how much he had needed to accept that Blair cared that much for him, however hard he'd defended against what he'd seen as dependency and weakness for so many years. It had been so difficult to believe he would ever be loved so unconditionally. Grimacing ruefully, he added, "But I don't think he's ready to hear about this bonding thing..."

Sandburg snickered. "Are you kidding?" he laughed, as he disengaged himself from Ellison's embrace and pushed himself to his feet, offering a hand to help Jim stand beside him. "Simon's the one who told me we had to figure out this sentinel/guide thing and get it right. He figures we should have sorted it out long ago."

Shrugging, unable to disagree, Jim asked uncertainly, "Just one thing, Chief. How do I keep you safe while you're 'taking care of me'?"

"Just don't push me away, Jim," Blair replied softly. "So long as you keep me close, we'll both be just fine."

Slowly, they walked back toward the loft, Jim's arm draped around Sandburg's shoulders. Still reeling from emotion, Jim asked, "So, that's it? Our problems are solved and everything's good now?"

Laughing ruefully, Blair shook his head. "No, Jim - I don't think it's that easy. But now, I think we have a good chance of working things out. I need to learn what it means to be a shaman. And we've got to deal with your anger and fear responses, especially toward me - those responses are too ingrained and won't just disappear overnight. And the stuff from the temple has given me lots of ideas about your senses. We've got to do a lot more tests, man..."

"Tests?" Jim cut in with a groan of only partially feigned dismay.

"Uh huh," Blair chuckled, sincerely and utterly joyful. They were beginning again, and this time, they'd get it right. "Lots'n lots of tests..."

Sandburg's burst of euphoric energy lasted until they'd called Simon, and then he yawned widely. Ellison grinned at him fondly and ruffled his hair before sending him off for a nap.

But Jim was too enervated by what had happened to settle. He had to consciously fight back the sensation of panic in his chest when he thought of how close Blair had come to dying because he hadn't had a fine clue about the import of the decision he'd been asked to make. Spotting the documents Blair had left earlier on the coffee table, Jim frowned. Tired of being caught unaware, of not understanding the implications of the sentinel and guide relationship - scared of screwing up so badly again out of plain ignorance - he grabbed the thicker, more detailed project report, and sat down to work his way through it.

Sandburg's writing style was clear and cogent, sometimes almost lyrical, so Ellison found the report first, easy to digest and then, increasingly interesting and engaging. Blair had started with 'the legends of the Watchmen', setting out the various cultural and historical myths. Jim found himself
touched by the fervent passion with which Blair described the role of sentinels, and their courage and commitment in protecting their tribes. Ellison tended to take what he did for granted, not really thinking about it much, but he began to see himself through Sandburg's eyes, and he felt humbled.

The report then focused on the specific myth of the sentinels of the Americas, and introduced the background to the Temple of the Sentinels. The document began to include and reference specific pictures of the temple near Sierra Verde, and the pictographs and hieroglyphics it contained. Patiently, Blair had laid out the specifics of the sensory capabilities of sentinels, giving culturally relevant historical examples of how those senses would be employed, occasionally 'speculating' about how such capabilities and roles would contribute to modern society. The role of guides was also elaborated upon, though Jim noticed the language, the fervor, about the importance and contribution of guides was muted relative to the way Blair wrote about sentinels. He shook his head. From his perspective, the guide was the important one in the relationship - the one who made it all work.

Information about the identification, selection and training of sentinels and guides followed - and Jim began to see what Blair had been alluding to when he'd mentioned the need for more tests. There were subtleties about the use and control of senses, particularly when employing several senses at a time, which they hadn't realized.

Finally, the report addressed the fundamental relationship between the sentinel and guide, beginning to reference it as a 'pairing'. He found the information that Blair had shared earlier, about the fact that the pair lived apart from others, and were committed, by choice, to a lifelong relationship. There was a discussion about the 'bonding' that occurred, beginning with the choice, and the formally-stated commitment. Nodding to himself, he could see that Blair really hadn't understood, any more than he had, that there were severe consequences for an unchosen guide, and Jim wondered if there had been anything in the temple about that, or if, in ancient times, the situation was so rare as to be virtually unheard of. Certainly, if he'd known the implications, and the dangers of his hesitation to Sandburg, he'd've made the choice long ago.

But then, he froze, and reread the section that had shocked him to his core.

'The sentinel/guide pair was complete onto themselves, forming a single unit, a whole of two halves. This profound bonding was a union on all levels: physical, emotional and spiritual. Though they mated with individuals from amongst their tribes - as well as with other sentinels and guides - to ensure progeny, the sentinel/guide pair, regardless of gender, were lovers, drawing strength and fulfillment from one another. This relationship was considered a sacred transcendental union of souls, not unlike the Celtic concept of Anam Cara.'

"My God," Jim breathed, and then he looked up toward Blair's room. He stared, absolutely motionless for long minutes, his expression stunned.

Then, swallowing hard, he forced himself to focus on finishing the report.

He couldn't help the dampness in his eyes, or the anguish that twisted in his gut, when he read that a sentinel or guide did not live long after their soulmate had perished. His jaw tight, he shook his head at that, wanting to deny the words. Blair was so much younger than him - that couldn't be right. But he understood, as he never had before, that he had to be more careful of his own life as part of the way in which he protected Blair's existence.

Closing the report, he glanced through the lengthy article, but it didn't give him anything new. It was just a synopsis of some of the key characteristics and talents of sentinels and guides, and an extrapolation of how they might yet exist in society, as well as an elaboration on their potential contributions. The article set out specific suggestions as to how they could be recognized and
supported until appropriate sentinel/guide matching could be accomplished. *This* was the article that Blair had been committed to write, to bring the idea of sentinels into the public forum, and it was compelling.

Jim heaved a sigh and set the documents back on the coffee table. He rubbed at his eyes and then crossed his arms tightly as his thoughts returned to the startling information about the physical relationship between sentinels and guides. Emotionally, he flinched from the idea. He'd never thought of himself as anything but heterosexual, had never looked at Sandburg as anything but a friend... a brother. Once again, his eyes lifted to the doorway to Blair's room. What did Blair feel for him? God, surely he didn't want...

But Jim couldn't countenance the idea, couldn't even *think* it, let alone *picture* it.

It felt anathema and he stiffened in resistance.

Why hadn't Blair told him this? But, at that thought, he snorted humourlessly. No doubt, Sandburg was as uncomfortable with this new revelation about traditional relationships as he was himself. He *knew*, as well or better than anyone, that Sandburg was attracted, *very* attracted, to women, not men.

Jim felt a surge of anger then. This whole sentinel/guide thing took away their choices, their chances for any normal life - the life bond and commitment clearly seemed to prohibit any life apart from one another, or with significant others. Jim could live with that, no problem, though he regretted it for Blair's sake. But now it was infringing on their personal identities as men, and he couldn't accept it. They weren't puppets of Fate, with no will or choice. This couldn't be mandated.

But, once again, he found himself wondering why Blair hadn't touched on this pretty fundamental point when he'd been explaining the life bond implications. And he remembered how poignantly Blair had said he just wanted to take care of Jim for the rest of his life; that that was the only life he wanted. Jim knew Blair loved him; hell, he loved the kid just as much. But - not that way. Jim shivered, and felt a little queasy, as he sat in silence, waiting for Blair to wake up.

The loft had grown dark by the time Sandburg staggered out of his room, his clothing rumpled and his hair mussed. He yawned and stretched, blinking at the darkness and squinting to make out Jim sitting in the living room. The silence and darkness penetrated his still sleepy state of relaxation, and he stiffened with unconscious wariness as he headed toward the kitchen to switch on a light and fill the kettle.

"Contemplating the cosmos, Jim?" he asked amiably, "Or did you fall asleep in your chair?"

Squinting against the sudden light, Jim shook his head. "I've been reading," he replied, his tone carefully neutral.

"Oh, yeah?" Blair returned, as he scratched the back of his head and opened the fridge door, bending to look inside. "What do you feel like for dinner?"

"Chief, we need to talk about something," Ellison said, unable to keep his voice from sounding tight and anxious.

Frowning a little, Sandburg straightened and turned toward Ellison, absentmindedly closing the fridge as his gaze scanned the living room and fell on the documents on the coffee table. He'd
forgotten he'd left them there earlier in the day. "You read the stuff I wrote?" he asked then, his tone uncertain, nervous.

"Yeah, I did," Jim acknowledged, his glance shifting to the documents and then flinching away. Clearing his throat, he continued, "They're, uh, well-written. Interesting. I, uh, learned a lot."

"Uh huh," Blair grunted as he moved into the living room, but he didn't sit down. "But some of it made you uncomfortable, didn't it?"

Nodding, Jim looked away. Taking a breath, he turned back, his expression guarded but his gaze intense. "The bonding rituals and, uh, the physical nature of..." His voice faltered and he had to swallow to moisten a very dry mouth. "We don't have to... I mean - I didn't expect..."

Blair blew out a breath and nodded in understanding, unsurprised. "Jim, the information is about traditional relationships in an ancient culture very different from ours," he explained, his tone professorial as he took refuge in his academic persona. "Centuries ago, the complete union of a sentinel/guide pair was natural, expected, and very much celebrated. There are similar traditions in any number of cultures around the world and throughout time, physical manifestations of spiritual oneness."

"Yeah, I understand that," Jim replied, his muscles tense. "But that's not what I was wanting to know." Looking up at Sandburg, he asked straight-out, "This isn't something, uh, obligatory? Is it? Not something we have to do? I mean, you don't want that kind of thing with me, do you?"

Blair swallowed and a wry smile quirked at the corner of his mouth. "Relax, Jim," he soothed, as he turned back to the kitchen. "Like I said, I was writing about a vastly different culture, with different beliefs and expectations. In that time, such a relationship was sought, desired and honoured. But we live in a different world and reality. A forced and uncomfortable union wouldn't serve any good purpose - sure wouldn't bring any kind of strength or peace, as was the goal back then." Laughing as he cast a quick look back over his shoulder, before attacking the cupboards to begin preparation of their meal, he added, "There's no way that you have to worry about me suddenly jumping your bones, man, and there's absolutely no way I expect you to suddenly crawl into my bed. Okay?"

Jim visibly relaxed as he blew out a long breath. "Uh, that's good, 'cause I wasn't sure what you expected."

Blair nodded as he pulled salad fixings out of the crisper. Moving toward the counter, he replied with the full confidence of the absolute truth, "Jim, I have never expected that you would ever be the least bit interested in a sexual relationship with me. It's just not who you are, man."

Standing, immeasurably relieved, Ellison moved to help prepare the meal. "Great," he sighed. "It's not you, either, Chief." Opening the fridge, he suggested, "We have some chili left."

"Sounds good," Sandburg agreed as he began to slice up a tomato.

Emptying the bowl into a pot to heat the chili, Jim admitted, "I was angry, when I read that stuff. It made me feel that this thing is taking away all of our choices, all of our chances for any kind of normal life. And that's just not fair."

"Yeah," Sandburg grunted as he ripped apart lettuce leaves. "Well, there's always a choice, Jim. And, I know this life commitment thing wasn't, maybe, what you'd ever imagined or thought you'd want, but you're okay with that part of it, right?"

"Oh, sure, no problem there," Jim allowed, obviously sincere in his candour. "I was only worried
about how unfair it was to you. You're young and, well, I always thought you wanted a family of your own."

A smile lit Blair's face then as he looked up at his partner. "I've got a family - it's you. And that's all I want, Jim. All I need."

Ellison smiled back, a sweet, almost embarrassed smile of pleasure, touched by his best friend's words. "Same here, Chief," he rumbled, his voice tight with emotion. Spontaneously, he reached out to draw Blair into a hug, as he repeated, "Same here."

But he stiffened as another thought occurred to him and he lifted his hands to Blair's shoulders, holding him a little away as he looked earnestly down at his partner, concern shadowing his eyes.

"What is it, Jim?" Blair asked, made uneasy by the troubled gaze.

"Something else in the report bothered me a lot, Chief," Jim replied soberly. "The stuff about how sentinels and guides don't outlive one another for long. I'm a lot older than you, and I don't want to think about..."

"Then don't think about it," Sandburg chastened gently. "Old age is a long way off - "

"But the work we do is dangerous," Jim pressed. "If something happened to me, you'd be all right, wouldn't you?"

His eyes narrowed as he studied the older man, and then Blair shook his head. "No, I wouldn't be all right, Jim," he replied with somber directness. "So, you'd better be damned careful, you hear me? I'm way too young to die of a broken heart."

"Shit," Jim cursed softly as he once again drew Blair close. His voice unsteady, he vowed, "I promise you this, Chief - I'll do everything in my power to ensure you live to be ancient."

Blair smiled as he hugged Jim back. "Does that include giving up Wonderburgers?" he teased.

Chuckling, Ellison released his grip. "Don't push it, kid. I love you, but a man's gotta eat."

Sandburg snorted as he turned back to finish up the salad. But he was grinning and shaking his head in good humour. "So much for love," he snickered. "Guess that lets me know where I stand in the order of things."

That night, Blair curled on his side and pulled the covers up over his shoulders to huddle under their warmth. As he thought over the earlier conversation, he was resigned more than disappointed. He had never expected that Jim would ever feel for him, what he felt for Jim. He'd known that Ellison wouldn't want to even think about a sexual relationship between them, so his partner's distinctly adverse reaction to the information in the report was no surprise.

What they had would be enough, or so Sandburg tried to convince himself. It was so very much more than what he'd feared his life would hold only a few short weeks ago. He was Jim's Guide, bonded for life and Jim was okay with the commitment - actually seemed happy about it. They would share a home for all of their days, work together, and Blair could fulfill his life purpose in watching out for Jim, taking care of him. Good care. The best of care.
And so long as Jim never guessed what Blair felt deep inside, then there'd be no discomfort, no uneasiness between them. Nor was Jim ever likely to figure it out, or see it, because people really only ever saw what they were looking for, what they expected. Jim expected to see a best friend, a partner, even a brother, when he looked at Blair, and that's all he'd ever see. And that was a very good thing because Jim would accept help from a friend, a partner and a brother. Whenever Ellison got hurt, as he surely would in the dangerous underworld of the city - or even just driving his truck like a maniac, Blair thought ruefully - Jim wouldn't flinch from his touch when he needed comfort or physical support and help. It was enough.

More than enough.

Sighing as he rolled onto his back and stared up at the ceiling, thinking of Ellison sleeping peacefully in the bed above him, Blair consoled himself with the knowledge that holy men in any number of societies and cultures deliberately chose celibacy to remain spiritually pure. Though that had never made much sense to him. In his view, the body was the earthly home and domain of the spirit, and celebrations of love with the body were physical manifestations of the emotional and spiritual unions of the souls sharing that love. But, as a kind of shaman, he could embrace the concept of celibacy as appropriate, if not fulfilling.

It was enough, more than enough, to know that Jim did love him in the way that Ellison could. So much more than he'd feared, months ago, when he'd believed Jim despised him.

It was enough, would be enough, for a satisfying life.

Had to be enough.

It wasn't as if he really had any other choice.

But that didn't prohibit Blair's imagination from taking him away from his lonely reality to the realm of his desires. Closing his eyes, he pictured himself making love to James Joseph Ellison, with warmth and tenderness in every touch. He could see his hands caressing Jim's body; even feel his lips kissing his beloved. And he could imagine Jim's sensitive touch on his body, loving him, wanting him, needing him, as he wanted and needed Jim. Blair's breath shuddered as he ached for that touch, wishing with all his heart that it could be possible, that Jim could ever love him that much. But a single tear slipped down his face as he opened his eyes to banish the images from his mind, replacing them with the reality of empty, cold darkness. Blinking back the burning moisture swimming in his eyes, sniffing, he again rolled onto his side and forced himself to relax into sleep.

Upstairs, Jim stirred, not quite waking, but made restless by the faint, brief hitching in Sandburg's heartbeat. But, as the beat settled into its normal steady rhythm, the Sentinel relaxed back into deep slumber.

Simon dropped in the next afternoon, delighted to be bringing Sandburg's official letter of offer for a position as a civilian consultant in his Unit. He'd no sooner hung up his overcoat, than he pulled the envelope out of his inside suit pocket and handed it with a flourish, and a broad grin, to Blair.

Blair lit up with a blazing smile as he took the envelope and opened it eagerly, while Jim got them beers and waved Simon toward the living room.

Nodding as he read the letter, his eyes widening in surprised gratification at the stated salary, Blair
sighed happily. "I'll sign your copy right away," he told Simon, as he wheeled to the kitchen to rifle in a drawer for a pen.

"Great," Banks replied as he sank onto the love seat and accepted a cold bottle from Jim. "I have to say, I'm very pleased that you've decided to accept this job, Sandburg. We've missed you, to tell you the truth."

"Ah, thanks, Captain," Blair grinned cheekily, but pleased, as he brought the signed copy back in the envelope and handed it to Simon. "I've missed everyone, too. I can't wait to get back, as soon as Jim's doctor gives him the clearance."

"When's that going to be?" Banks asked, turning to Jim. "I don't mind telling you, we need you back as soon as possible."

Jim scratched his neck and replied, "I'm seeing him in a couple of days, and I expect he'll clear me for duty starting next week. I'm feeling pretty good."

Frowning, Simon looked at him skeptically. "I don't know; as much as we're short-handed, that seems a little soon given the severity of your injuries."

"Simon, it's been more than a month," Ellison protested. "Trust me; I'm fine."

"And if he doesn't get back to work soon," Blair added with a grin, "he's going to go stir-crazy. Give me a break, Simon, and take him back, please!"

Jim snorted as he lifted his bottle for another sip, but his eyes were twinkling.

Simon was immensely relieved to see them so at ease with one another; it had been a long time since they'd teased with such light spirits. Too long. Sighing with satisfaction, he leaned back against the cushions as he asked sardonically, "Do I want to know how you worked things out?"

Jim laughed and pointed to Blair, as he said, "I told the kid that you wouldn't want to know, but Blair says you're the one who told him to get things sorted out."

"Well, it's true, he did," Sandburg asserted with a grin toward Simon. "Basically," he added, "we had to consciously choose to be a sentinel/guide pair, and make a lifelong commitment to this partnership to form the bond between us. It was, uh, a little unnerving before we got it all sorted out, but everything's fine now."

Jim snorted again at the 'unnerving' comment, and shook his head.

Thinking back to his conversation with Blair at the hospital, and genuinely happy for his closest friends, Simon looked from one to the other. "Well, I'm very glad you got it 'sorted out'," he said warmly, with a little emphasis on the euphemism. "I figured the problems you were having had to be related to this sentinel thing." Turning to Blair, he added, "And you're still in one piece, so I assume he didn't react as badly as you thought he would when you talked to him about -"

"Ah, Simon," Blair cut in, stiffening and sending his new, 'official' boss a warning look.

"One piece?" Jim echoed, looking puzzled. "Talked to me about what?"

Blair shifted his gaze to Jim, trying to look as innocent as possible, as he replied, "Ah, nothing, Jim. Just the bonding thing."

Jim shrugged and nodded, but Simon's eyes narrowed as he gazed at Sandburg. "You didn't tell him,
did you?"

"Simon," Blair returned, a warning note clear in his tone.

Ellison, now realizing that something was definitely going on that he didn't understand, sat up and looked from one to the other. "What's going on here? Chief? Simon?"

"Oh, for God's sake," Banks muttered, his lips thinning while Sandburg studiously examined the coffee table. "Blair, you know you have to be completely honest with him, or this is just going to cause problems in the future. Dammit. I'm sorry, I shouldn't have said anything, but from what you just said, I assumed that you had settled all this - "

"Simon, don't," Sandburg muttered, his shoulders tightening.

But Jim's voice overrode his, as Ellison demanded, "Okay, this has gone on long enough. Simon, what the hell are you talking about?"

Banks studied Sandburg for a long moment, sorry that he'd ever raised the subject. But Blair had said it was all worked out. What was he supposed to think?

"Simon?" Jim prompted, losing patience.

Sighing, Banks shook his head and then shifted his gaze to Ellison. "Why you should have to be told, when it should be obvious to you, is beyond me. For a man who can see forever, you can be astonishingly blind when you want to be."

"What?" Ellison exclaimed, looking from Banks to Blair and back again, as his mind conjured up an uncomfortable memory from months before, of a tramp named Gabe asking him what good it was to be able to hear a thousand miles, if he couldn't hear his own heart - and telling him to begin by listening to the hearts of others. "I don't have a clue what you're talking about! Would you just spit it out, already!"

Blair crossed his arms and bowed his head, waiting for the axe to fall.

"I'm sorry, Blair," Simon murmured, as he shifted to sit by the younger man and gripped his shoulder. "This is none of my business, and I shouldn't have said anything, but I just assumed you would have told him, worked it out somehow. You know that it will only come back and bite you if you don't - better now, than once you're on the job. I... I'll have to tell him, if you won't."

Blair swallowed hard and he blushed as he shook his head. "I can't; it's not necessary," he grated. "It's not fair to him. I don't want - "

"Look, I'm sitting right here, and it's obvious that something I don't understand, but that affects me, is going on here," Jim snapped, irritation slipping into a hollow fear that he didn't want to acknowledge. Had Simon and Blair worked out something about the job that he didn't know about and wouldn't like? How bad was it? Maybe Blair just wanted time to also teach at Rainier or something, and had been reluctant to admit he wouldn't be a 'full-time' partner. "I'd appreciate knowing what the two of you are talking about! What's the big deal, anyway? How bad can it be?"

Simon sighed, and then gave Jim a straight look. "Blair loves you, though it's beyond me why," he said quietly, and Blair murmured, "Oh, God," so softly that even Jim barely heard him.

Looking more confused than ever, Jim frowned. "I know he does," he replied. "And he knows I feel the same way. What's the big deal now?" Banks just shook his head and rolled his eyes. Suddenly, Jim's face paled and sagged in shock as the realization of what they were really talking about sank in.
What else could it be? "But..." he stammered, his voice fading away. Swallowing, he turned to Blair, beginning again, as he said hollowly, "But you told me - "

Lifting his head, Blair said softly, "I told you the information referred to another culture and society; that nothing could be forced and that there were always choices. I told you that I had no expectations of any such relationship with you. Everything I told you was the truth."

Jim searched Blair's eyes, and saw the haunted shadows, the fear in them - the shame. "But you didn't tell me all the truth, did you? You let me assume what I wanted."

"Yes," Blair replied tightly.

"You're in love with me?" Jim asked, his voice strained, just to be absolutely sure they were on the same page.

"Yes," Sandburg answered, brief and to the point.

"You told Simon but you wouldn't tell me?" Ellison exclaimed, stunned - hurt.

"Look, Jim," Simon intervened, keeping his tone carefully reasonable, "we were in the hospital in Mexico, and we didn't know if you were going to live or die. I pretty much guessed and didn't give Blair much choice but to admit his feelings. He didn't think you'd ever want to know..."

"I can see that," Jim murmured, his gaze locked on Blair's eyes. Giving himself a shake, he turned to Banks as he continued, "Uh, Simon, I think Blair and I need to talk."

"I agree," Banks replied as he stood. Walking to the door, he grabbed his coat, and looked back silently, wondering if he'd just created another - hopefully not disastrous - mess between them. "I'm sorry, Blair. I didn't mean to violate your trust."

Sandburg's head jerked in a stiff nod, too angry to look at the older man. But he replied evenly, "I know. It's okay, Simon. We'll work it out."

With a glance at Jim, Simon opened the door and left the loft, closing it quietly behind him.

For a long moment, Ellison and Sandburg sat in uncomfortable silence. Clearing his throat, Jim asked, almost plaintively, "Why didn't you tell me? Why did I have to hear it from Simon? Jesus, Chief - I just start to think I've got things figured out when I get blindsided again."

"I'm sorry," Blair replied, his tone carefully controlled as he fought for dignity. "I knew it wasn't anything you wanted, or would be comfortable knowing. I didn't think it was necessary for you to know, and I sure never expected Simon to blurt it out."

Jim blinked and shook his head at the frightened undertones in Sandburg's voice. "You didn't tell me because you don't trust me not to hurt you or reject you again," he sighed. "That's it, isn't it?" Too
agitated to remain still, Ellison pushed himself up to pace. "You still don't trust me? Even after I made the commitment and chose you - I thought... I thought we were okay, you know? But you trust Simon more than you trust me!"

"Jim," Blair interjected, firmly. "Please. I didn't just grab Simon by the arm and say, 'Hey, I really wanna fuck Jim, ya know?!' He guessed. He said we have no personal space between us; that we 'lean' into each other, always touching, interacting like an old married couple. I tried to redirect him. I never wanted anyone to know. But, he got offended, hurt, and I... I admitted he might be right, but only partly. Because I knew you didn't feel anything like what I do."

"Well, we wouldn't want Simon to be offended or hurt, that's for sure," Jim cut back, sarcastically. Pausing, he looked down at Blair as he charged, his tone hard and cold, "But you do want to fuck me, don't you? And you want me to fuck you."

Flinching back from the aggressive tone, Blair's hands came up, palms out, as he shook his head. "I don't want anything from you that you don't want or can't freely give. Don't make this something ugly between us, Jim. I can't help the way I feel. Look, let's just forget it, all right?"

"Forget it?" Jim echoed, astonished. "How the hell am I supposed to forget something like this?"

"Let it go, Jim," Blair replied, his tone sharp. "I felt this way yesterday, and a month ago, and a year ago, and nothing changed in the way I've acted toward you or treated you in all that time. I'm still the same person, all right? There's nothing for you deal with, or solve, or do. Let it go."

But Jim shook his head slowly. "I don't think I can. And I'm not sure you understand why I'm so uncomfortable about this."

"Oh, I think I understand pretty well," Blair snapped back. "You don't want a sexual relationship with me, and the very idea that I might want one appalls you, and I don't blame you, man. You said as much last night. This has all got to be pretty weird from your perspective."

"No, that's not it," Jim replied quietly, his throat tight. "Well, okay, that's partly it. I, uh, do find the idea, uh, disconcerting." Licking his lips, he looked out toward the sky as he continued more softly, "But what upsets me more is that you didn't feel you could be honest with me. You couldn't tell me yourself. And that bothers the hell out of me."

Sandburg shook his head, still not getting it. "Why would I tell you something I know you don't want to hear and that would only 'disconcert' you, if not actually appall and disgust you?"

Jim's gaze snapped back to Blair, but the younger man wasn't meeting his eyes, and so he didn't see the hurt that ached within Ellisons. "Maybe because it's something that's so very important to you," Jim grated. "Maybe because what's important to you is important to me." Turning away, he strode to the door. Shrugging into his jacket, he grasped the knob as he said, "I need to think about all this, Chief."

Startled, Blair looked up, and Jim could see doubt in his eyes, and something that looked like panic. "You don't have to leave your own home, Jim," he insisted. "If you want me to go, just say so."

Flinching as if he'd just been slapped, Jim shook his head. "This is your home, too, Blair," he replied softly. Opening the door, he added, "Don't worry. I'm not going far. I just need some air."

Wordlessly, Sandburg swallowed and nodded, his eyes wide as he watched Jim leave. "I'm sorry," he whispered, knowing Jim could still hear him, though the door had already closed. "I never wanted to hurt you with this."
And then he crossed his arms and bowed his head, wondering if their partnership could survive this - and doubting it. Sandburg felt utterly sick, and could cheerfully have slugged Simon for having barged in so blithely to dump this on Jim. God, how would they get past this?

Blair wasn't sure what he felt, and he tried to sort out all the emotions so that he could deal with them. He had to have himself together before Jim got back. There was shame, not for loving Jim, but for having left Ellison to be embarrassed by learning that Simon knew, by hearing it from Simon. There was deep, deep sorrow, that Jim would never love him back in the same way. Never want that from him. Fear, that maybe Jim would never be able to get past this and accept him, accept his touch, without thinking about it all - and Blair needed to be able to touch him, to ground and guide him. Anger, that his personal, most intimate feelings had been exposed against his will. Worry, that Jim hadn't seemed disgusted or appalled so much as he'd seemed hurt when he left. Hurt that Blair didn't trust him enough to be completely honest with him. Doubted Jim enough to hide his feelings and the truth. And Blair regretted that. In no way did he want Jim hurt by anything, let alone by his own actions. God, what a mess.

Raking his fingers through his hair, Sandburg set about dealing with each of his churning emotions, one by one, trying to calm himself and prepare himself to be steady and sure, supportive, when Jim came home.

In the hall, Jim closed his eyes at the soft words, and bowed his head. And then he clumped quickly down the stairs and outside to his truck. Getting in, he pulled away, driving aimlessly, needing some distance, some space, to deal with his roiling emotions. Jesus. Sandburg wanted to bed him. He'd never expected that! Could scarcely believe it. What the hell was he supposed to do about it? Anything? Nothing? Forget it? Yeah, right. And, shit. The kid still didn't trust him, not really. God, that was scary. Because they needed to trust one another for this to work - hadn't Blair told him that, over and over again, until he got it, understood it, accepted it? It was all his own damned fault - he'd hurt the kid so badly, betrayed him so often, and rejected him time and time again - why should Sandburg expect anything different? Especially about something like this? Sonofabitch.

He couldn't love Blair that way, could he? It was impossible, wasn't it? Sex can't be forced, not and mean anything. He could hurt Sandburg very badly, regardless of whether he tried or did nothing.

Damn it all to hell.

Could he even imagine such a relationship? He shivered, and cranked up the heat impatiently, even though he knew the cold came from inside his own body. Chewing on his lip, unconsciously watching the traffic as he drove along quiet streets, he shook his head. Could he touch Sandburg that way? Be touched in return? Kiss? His throat tightened up, dry as dust. What if this was more of the weird sentinel stuff? What if Blair needed this from him? What if...

How the hell was he going to win Sandburg's trust back? What could he do or say that would heal the wounds? Was it just a matter of time? Or was the damage irreparable? God, it hurt to think the kid wouldn't ever trust him again, not completely, unconditionally. He hadn't realized how much that trust had meant to him until he'd lost it.

The kid had looked scared when Simon blundered into waters he hadn't realized were dangerous. Blair had closed up, shut himself away; wouldn't even look at him. And when he had looked, ah, God, the hurt in his eyes. His first words, "I'm sorry." Like he had to apologize for loving... Jim's
eyes blurred and he had to blink hard to clear his vision. He pinched the bridge of his nose, and
willed his control back. He had to get it together. Couldn't go back a basket case. But what the hell
was he supposed to do about all this?

Jim pulled the truck into a parking spot and looked around, startled to realize where he'd
unconsciously driven. He was staring at the fountain at Rainier, outside Sandburg's old building. He
crossed his arms tightly to hold in the emotion that suddenly flooded him, making him shudder as he
gripped his teeth against the sob that filled his throat. His lips trembled as his eyes blurred, and all he
could think about was Blair, dead on that grass. Drowned. And the memory tore him apart, as it
always did. His lashes were wet, and a tear slipped down his pale, drawn face. God, he loved that
kid; so damned much, it hurt. Filled him, and make his chest tight.

Tearing his eyes away from the fountain, he gazed sightlessly across the grass toward the sea, as
other memories skittered through his mind. Blair chained in Lash's unholy den. Blair shot and in pain
in that damned abandoned mine in the mountains. Blair always there; calming him, guiding him,
teaching him, supporting him. Blair fighting him to bring him under control after Incacha died. Blair
hurt when he was told he wasn't wanted in Clayton Falls. Beaten and dying in a pool of blood on the
floor of the loft. Drowned. Stunned to see Jim kissing Alex, lusting after her. The pain in his eyes
when Jim had lashed out at him over the dissertation, telling him it was over and to move on. A silent
heart on the floor of the Mexican hospital ward. Blair damned near dying again, just yesterday in the
park, Incacha waiting to take him away. The fear in his eyes when he looked up to see Jim walking
out on him an hour ago.

"No," Jim grated fiercely. "I can't lose him. I can't."

Ellison knew he loved Sandburg more than he loved his own life; needed Sandburg to make his life
make sense, to make it complete. He wanted the kid around for the pure joy of his company.
Wouldn't willfully hurt him for the world. Closing his eyes, Jim rubbed at his forehead as he realized
with a sick, sinking sensation that he was hurting Blair every single day, by not being what Blair
needed. God, why couldn't it ever be easy?

What the hell could Blair possibly see in him, to fall in love with him? An aging, balding, irascible
man who was moody and angry too much of the time. Thoughtless and even arrogant. Belligerent
and stubborn. God, what a charming picture. But that wasn't what Blair saw when the kid looked at
him, was it? Or not all of it, anyway. Jim found himself thinking about how Blair had written about
sentinels. About their courage and selflessness, their compassion, strength and fundamental
vulnerability. Was that what he saw when he looked at Jim? Blair wanted to take care of him.
Wanted to devote his life to protecting his partner. Jim sighed heavily, feeling so completely
unworthy of such devotion.

What did he see when he looked at Blair? What did he feel? Jim thought about those questions for
another good hour and, gradually, he calmed down.

Finally, Jim sniffed and wiped his face. Switching on the engine, he pulled out of the lot and headed
back home.

There was a single lamp burning in the living room when he entered the loft, filling the apartment
with a soft glow of light. Blair heard him when he came in, and came out of his room to lean against
the wall by the kitchen. "You okay?" he asked, his posture and tone hesitant.
"Yeah, I'm fine," Jim replied, as he hung up his jacket. "I've done a lot of thinking." He paused as he turned to look at his partner, and then said unsteadily, "There are some things I have to say, and I'd like it if you just listened."

Crossing his arms, unconsciously defensive, Blair nodded soberly. "Okay, man. Shoot."

"I'm, uh, not good with words, sometimes," Ellison stammered. "You know that. So, uh, this might take a while."

"I'm not going anywhere," Blair replied reassuringly. "Take your time, Jim."

Taking a breath, swallowing to moisten his dry mouth, Jim moved to stand closer to Blair, as he began, "I've screwed up a lot, Chief, I guess because I carry a lot of baggage. I took too much out on you that was never your fault or responsibility, and I regret that, very much. I'm lucky to have you in my life and, believe me, I know it, and I'm grateful."

Looking away from the earnest, steady gaze, he continued shakily, "I can't pretend that I wasn't pretty shook up about the idea of... of sex with... with you. You'd know I was lying if I pretended otherwise."

"Jim, you don't have to - " Blair began, but Ellison held up a hand.

"Just hear me out, okay?" he asked again, a note of pleading underlying his uncertain tone. "If I stop, I don't think I'll be able to get through this."

Sandburg's eyes narrowed, but he nodded, holding his peace.

"Like I said, I did a lot of thinking, and remembering," Jim began again, his voice husky and tight with pain. "I remembered all the times I almost lost you because I'd rejected you; rejected what you offered to me so freely. Your help and support. Your friendship and loyalty and love. And... and I remembered holding you, either helplessly watching your life slip away or... or knowing you were already dead. And I can't... can't do that again. I can't, Chief. I'd cut off my right hand before I hurt you again; I swear it. I'll do anything to k-k-keep you s-s-safe. I know you don't trust me now, and I'm really sorry about that and I know it's my own damned fault. But, I promise you - you can depend on me. I want you to know that you can tell me anything. I don't want you to be a-a-afraid of m-me."

Tears glimmered in Jim's eyes, matching those sparkling on Sandburg's lashes. Both men wiped them impatiently away, having no time for them. Sniffing, Jim lowered his head as he murmured, wishing the words weren't always so hard for him to say. "I told you in Mexico - at least I hope I did - I know I wanted to tell you... I l-love you, Blair. You're my family. There isn't anything I wouldn't do for you."

Jim's lip trembled as his voice broke, and he had to drag in a breath as he struggled for control. "I won't ever reject you again. I won't risk losing you," he whispered. "I can't."

Uncertainly, he looked up at Sandburg. "I... I don't know... what to do," he admitted.

"About what?" Blair asked softly.

"Everything," Jim blurted. "I don't know how to be the friend you need, that you can trust. I don't know what to do, or say, to get you to forgive me for all the shit."

Blair took a step forward, reaching out to touch Jim, and then froze, uncertainly. Ellison winced at the hesitation, his eyes dropping away.

"Can I touch you?" Blair asked, unsure.
Closing his eyes, Jim shook his head. "Christ," he muttered. Lifting his gaze, he reached out and drew Blair into a tight hug. "Jesus, Chief. Of course you can touch me. Please don't ever think you can't, or need permission."

"Thank you," Sandburg murmured, his arms coming up to hug Jim back.

"Ah, God, don't thank me," Jim moaned. "I'm the one who needs to be thanking you." Ellison bent his head to bury his face in Sandburg's hair. "I want to be everything you need me to be," he said then, very quietly.

Blair stiffened in his arms, and shook his head. "No," he replied firmly. "I won't ever ask that of you. It's not who you are, Jim. I know that. I'm okay with that."

Jim smiled softly as he lifted his head to look down at the younger man. "You want to know who I am, Chief? I'm the man who's lucky enough to be loved by you, and knows he doesn't deserve it. I'm the man who loves you with all that I am, with everything that I have to give, because that's what you mean to me. Everything."

"Jim, stop, please," Sandburg begged, as he pulled a little away to look up at Ellison. "You're not into men, I know that. I won't do that to you. I can't. I don't want that to be all you see when you look at me; or hear, when I speak to you; or feel, when I touch you - "

"You want to know what I see when I look at you, Chief?" Jim asked as he studied his best friend's face. "I see the best man I've ever known - the strongest, the most compassionate, brilliant man - who is as beautiful outside as he is inside." When a startled look flashed into Blair's eyes, Jim grinned. "What, you don't think I ever noticed that you are physically amazingly beautiful? I'm a detective and a sentinel, Sandburg. I'm supposed to notice little details like that."

"Yeah, well," Blair stammered awkwardly as he blushed.

"And you know what I hear when I listen to your voice?" Jim carried on, not letting Blair pull away from him. "I hear warmth and so much caring. So much love. Your voice grounds me, calls me back when I'm lost. Guides me. Soothes and reassures me. Challenges me, when I need to be challenged. Your laugh..." Jim paused, trying to find the right words. "Your laughter is so joyful, so... magical. It lightens my heart. And makes me happy just to hear it."

Blair was blinking hard, and he dropped his head to hide his confusion - profoundly touched by Jim's words, and tone.

"And your touch?" Jim mused. "Your touch focuses me, gives me strength. I can feel confidence in it, and reassurance. Unlimited support. I can lean on you, and know you won't let me fall."

Sandburg smiled softly, and sniffed as he looked up at his best friend. "You know, Jim, when you put your mind to it, you can say the nicest things anyone has ever said to me. And it really means a lot to me, that you told me, and showed me, how you feel - to let me know we're okay. I needed that from you tonight. Thank you."

"You need more than that from me," Jim replied, his tone determined.

"No," Blair repeated, shaking his head as he again tried to shift away from Ellison's grip. "I won't trade on our friendship to compel you into acts that would repulse you. I won't do that, Jim. Period."

Ellison's eyes narrowed as he gazed at Sandburg's earnest face. Lifting his hands to grip Blair's shoulders, he asked very soberly, "How can you even think that I'd be repulsed by being loved by you, or loving you?"
"Oh, come on, Jim," Blair grated sharply as he jerked away from Jim's touch. "You're a flaming heterosexual, for God's sake. In a culture where homophobia is rampant! I'm not saying that you judge or condemn, but don't try to tell me that you're comfortable with the idea of making love to a man."

Swallowing, Jim shrugged. "You're right. I'm not comfortable with the idea of making love to man," he repeated carefully. But Blair's nod of acknowledgement froze when he continued, "But I'm comfortable with the idea of making love to you."

"Jim, I'm a man," Blair retorted. "In case that slipped your notice or you forgot somewhere along the line."

"I know. You're a very strong man, one I respect immensely. One I love enough to cross any boundary to be what you need me to be," Jim replied with utter sincerity. But he blushed, as he admitted quietly, "But, uh, I don't really know what to, uh, do here, Chief."

Sandburg gaped at him, and then he started to laugh. "What?" Jim demanded, feeling wounded. "Look, I know I'm a klutz at this but give me a break, already. I'm doing my best."

"No," Blair snickered, having to reach out to grab Jim's arm to steady himself. "You don't understand," he giggled, on the edge of hysteria. "I'm not into men, either, Jim. Just you. I don't have a fine clue, either."

Jim gave him a quizzical look of bemusement - and then a slow smile bloomed on his face as he looked up and around and shook his head, silent laughter shaking his shoulders. "What a pair we make," he finally laughed. Looking back at Sandburg, he reflected, "It's the sentinel/guide thing, isn't it? That's what's happening to us."

Suddenly sober, Blair shook his head. "Maybe, partly," he allowed. "But, I don't just love the Sentinel, Jim. I really love the person you are. When I... when I want to make love to you, it's to be with that person, to give you pleasure - to show you, somehow, how very much you mean to me. Do you only love the Guide?"

"No, Chief," Jim admitted, as he reached out to stroke his fingers through Blair's curls, and then down along his cheek. "I love you, everything that you are." He felt Sandburg tremble, a little shiver of need, under his touch. And then all his doubts that he could do this vanished. He loved this man so much. Wanted to please him, wanted to show him how much. Wanted to give him pleasure. Wanted to make him happy. Lifting his other hand to cup Blair's face, Jim leaned in to kiss him, softly. Gently.

But when Sandburg moaned deep in his throat when Ellison's lips touched his, Jim shifted one hand to the back of Blair's head, holding him firmly, as he deepened the kiss. "Let me in," he breathed, and Blair's lips opened for him.

Tongues delicately, tentatively met, pulled back and then reached out again. Jim slipped his arm around Blair's back, pulling him in close, as Blair circled his arms around him. Ellison could taste Blair, and he sucked in a deep breath to pull in the scent of the man in his arms. Citrus and vanilla, tangy yet sweet.

"Oh, God," Blair gasped, as he lifted his head and Jim's mouth ravished his throat, and he felt Jim's strength embracing him, holding him so tight. Jim's muscles under his own hands - his solidity and strength. "Please," he whispered. A plea. A prayer.

Jim's hands roamed his back and cupped his buttocks, pulling his hips forward, so that Blair couldn't
hide his erection, his need. "Let me love you," Jim murmured into his ear. "And love me back..."

Blair shuddered with want and need, but he was afraid. Gripping Jim's arms, he looked up into Ellison's eyes as he whispered, his voice hoarse, "I - I want to, so much. But if you find out you can't, really don't want - I can't do this. I can't start and then never have this again. I'm sorry, but I just can't."

Solemnly, Jim caressed Blair's cheek, and then gazed into Sandburg's wide, uncertain eyes. His throat thick with emotion, he implored, "Trust me? Trust me not to hurt you like that."

Blair licked his lips as he searched Jim's eyes for any sign of hesitation or doubt. But all he could see was love and steadfast commitment. A promise to be there for him, always. Struck dumb by the power of the emotion he could see burning for him in Jim's open gaze, he nodded. And then, reaching for Jim's hand, he turned to lead the way up the stairs to Ellison's bed.

Slowly, respectfully, they undressed one another, and then Jim pulled the covers and sheet back, baring the bed. He turned and looked fully at Blair, his gaze sweeping over Sandburg's body. "You really are beautiful, Chief," he murmured. Looking up into Blair's eyes, he added candidly, "I treasure you beyond all else in my life. Do you know that? I promise you, I will never intentionally hurt you."

When he opened his arms, Blair stepped forward into his embrace, and they kissed again, deeply, longingly. And then wantonly.

Jim shifted to guide Blair down onto the bed, crawling in to kneel over him. Very conscious that Blair had not spoken since he'd asked for Sandburg's trust, he said softly, "Speak to me, Chief. I worry when you get too quiet."

Sandburg smiled then, a bright, blinding smile that lit up Ellison's world. And he laughed. "Oh, man," his voice rippled, deep and delighted. "You blow me away, Jim. I never, ever thought - wouldn't even allow myself to dream - that this could be possible." Pulling Jim's face down toward him, he sobered suddenly as he gasped, "I love you so much."

Jim smiled, reassured, and then bent to receive Blair's kiss. Hands, strong, yet delicate in their touch, explored, stroked, caressed. Lips moved to suck and bite gently, teasing, then wanting. Bodies, strong, flushed with arousal, shifted and arced into the touches, the kisses. Heat built, and the touches became more daring, more demanding.

Jim's senses were all fully focused on Blair - his scent and taste. The touch of Sandburg's hands, and the feel of his skin. The sound of Blair's voice as he murmured and moaned softly. The sight of him. So beautiful. Eyes so blue, so filled with love and desire. Hair burnished by the warm light from below, glinting with copper. Full lips, puffy now with having been soundly kissed, Bronzed skin; soft, silky hair. Taut nipples and muscled body, firm, solid. Wanting Jim's touch. Needing it. Legs tangled with his own, as they writhed together on the bed. Blair's erection hard, bold and weeping; filling the air with the scent of his musk. Jim groaned softly as he touched and kissed, licked and stroked, getting to know this Blair - this Blair, who was in love with him.

This Blair, who he needed to love.

And he felt his own erection grow as his need grew.

Blair knew well the body under his hands and lips. He knew the strength and the vulnerabilities; knew every scar. And he rejoiced in being able to touch and love Jim with abandon, having to hold nothing of himself back. But he gasped when he felt Jim's erection rub against his own, and he arced
up, an involuntary spasm of need and want.

Jim's confidence increased as Blair responded to his touch. He might not have ever made love to another man before, but he was no innocent. He'd been in the army. Had worked in Vice. But, perhaps most importantly of all, he knew what a man wanted, needed, to be satisfied. Emboldened by Blair's soft moans of pleasure, and Sandburg's body's response to his touch, Jim shifted to give even more intimate attention to the younger man. While one hand fondled Blair's balls, he bent his head to lick up along the pulsing vein, from the root to the tip of Sandburg's engorged penis.

"Oh, God," Blair gasped, his hips thrusting, his body aching for more.

Jim licked as he clasped the shaft firmly, and then swallowed it.

Blair cried out, his hips thrusting, burying himself in the wet heat. "Oh, man," he moaned as his fingers clutched Jim's head. But when Jim slipped a finger inside, he went wild, writhing with the pleasure exploding inside him. There was only Jim. Jim loving him. Jim...

He came with a cry of passion, his lover's name on his lips, and then he trembled in the aftermath, tears of gratitude and joy blurring his eyes. "Thank you," he whispered, a shuddering sigh.

Jim's smile was achingly sweet and tender, his eyes soft with his love, as he leaned down to brush Sandburg's lips with his own. His hands gentled Blair as he bent to nuzzle Sandburg's throat. "Trust me, Chief," he murmured. And then lifted his head to look into Blair's eyes. "Trust me enough to tell me what you want, what you need."

Blair's eyes widened in understanding before he quickly looked away. Jim was offering so much more. He swallowed and shook his head slightly. Looking back, he whispered, "I don't need anything more than this, Jim."

But Jim's eyes flickered as his head cocked just a little - and he heard the treacherous hitch in Sandburg's heart. Refocusing on the one he loved best in the world, he said gently, "That's not true, is it? You want - need - something more. Please, trust me. Tell me. Do you need to be in me, or do you need me inside you?"

Sandburg's lips parted in awe of what Ellison was offering with such gentle insistence. To be whatever he needed Jim to be. To do whatever he needed Jim to do. Taking a shaky breath, daring to trust fully, he murmured, "I want to feel you inside. And I want to watch you fill me. So, that I see us, together. United."

Nodding, Ellison's gaze shifted as he thought about what was needed, so that he wouldn't hurt Sandburg. Remembering when Blair had last given him a massage, when they'd just come back from Mexico, he shifted to pull open the drawer in the bedside table, and plucked out the tube of lotion. Opening it, he drew in the restorative scent of vanilla and the refreshing aroma of mint. As he warmed the lotion in his hands, he gazed down at Blair and smiled. "I don't want to hurt you, so we're going to take this slow and easy. If it's too much, too soon, or too fast, you tell me, okay?"

"Uh huh, yeah," Blair murmured, his eyes wide with wonder, his chest and belly tight with anticipation. "Jim, are you sure you want - "

"I'm sure," Ellison cut in. "I don't want you to have any doubts, none whatsoever. I choose to do this - just as I chose to bond with you for the whole of my life - because I love you." Looking down at himself a little ruefully, he added, "It seems pretty obvious to me that I want you as much as you want me."
Blair's gaze flickered down, and then he smiled widely at the sight of the fully erect and weeping penis that he'd only, up to that moment, felt against his body. Reaching out tentatively, he cut a quick look up at Jim, who grinned at him, and then he wrapped his sturdy fingers around Ellison's shaft. He curled down and around to lick his tongue over the slit - and Jim gasped.

"Easy, lover," the older man groaned, as he carefully moved Blair's head away from his, uh, own. "We don't want to blow the main event."

Blair snickered at the pun, and looked up devilishly, even as his fist stroked up and down, slowly, enticingly. "You're mine," he said, with infinite satisfaction. "You belong to me."

"Yeah, I finally figured that out," Jim chuckled as he gently pushed Blair back down flat on the bed. "And you know, I think I'm going to really enjoy being your boy-toy."

"Jim!" Blair gaped, and then giggled. "Boy-toy?"

"Uh huh," Ellison grunted wickedly, as his fingers slid under Blair's scrotum and traced along the sensitive skin to their target. "Of course, you know that you are my toy, and that I plan to play with you a lot. A whole lot."

Blair gasped as the sensation of Jim's touch spiraled up through his body, and his hips lifted, his legs parting spontaneously to give his lover better access. "Play with me, Jim," he murmured, and then moaned as he felt one finger push past the ring of tight muscle to enter the heat of his body. His fingers fisted in the sheets, and he closed his eyes, his chin lifting, baring his throat, and his lips parted as he lost himself in the sensations.

Watching him, glorying in the sight of his wanton beauty, Jim felt tenderness and desire twist in his belly, and his erection throbbed. But he took his time. Stroking slowly, more deeply. Finding the small nub that would erase any pain Blair was feeling and turn it all into pure pleasure. Smiling when Blair cried out and arced up and then pressed down on his finger, wanting more.

Blair was groaning with need and want by the time Jim judged him ready. Quickly, he coated his penis with more of the lotion, and then lifted Blair's hips onto his thighs. Blair wrapped his strong legs around Jim's body, pulling him forward. "You ready?" Jim asked softly.

"Oh, yeah, Jim," Blair gasped, his hips pushing toward Ellison.

"Tell me if it hurts," Jim ordered.

"Just fill me, man," Blair moaned. "I need you. Need to feel you."

Jim tried to go slow, but Blair was too impatient for the pace Ellison wanted to set. As soon as he felt Jim begin to push into his body, Blair thrust his hips forward even as his legs tightened around Jim, pulling him in tighter.

Jim gasped as he was drawn in deep, surrounded by tight muscle and heat. "God, Chief," he groaned, as Blair arced up against him, taking him all.

"YES!" Blair cried out, a shout of mingled pain and joy as he felt himself filled, felt the hard, thick length of his lover, buried hot and deep - so that they were united. One. And then he rocked back, feeling the drag of Jim's penis against his prostate. "Ohhh, yeah," he panted. "Take me, Jim. God, take me now and take me hard."

Jim was trembling with his effort to hold onto his control. It was the most incredible feeling to be inside Blair. To feel the pulse of his body, his heat. To have those muscles ripple with pleasure and
desire over him, clenching tight. Wanting him. Needing him. Taking a shuddering breath, he began to rock, drawing himself out and then thrusting back inside that heat that claimed him. Long, slow, strokes, but his own need built, a fire in his belly as he gripped Sandburg's hips and, gradually, he thrust harder and faster as Blair arced and writhed against him, soft cries of passion urging him on.

But even as passion tore at his senses, Jim fought to hold some measure of control to ensure he didn't hurt, didn't harm. His gaze lifted to Blair's face, to watch for any sign of pain or even discomfort. And he found Blair watching him.

When Sandburg saw Jim look up at him, a smile burst on his lips and his eyes danced, joy sparkling in dark blue pools filled with passionate love. "Do you feel it, Jim?" he gasped. "Do you feel the joy?"

Jim's throat tightened and he lost himself then. Lost himself in those dark blue pools, and was illuminated by the sparkles of unbridled joy. Lost all sense of his separateness as he buried himself deep into Sandburg's body, joining with him, uniting with him. Lost himself in the whirl of sensations - Sandburg's scents, and sounds; the feel of him, under his hands, and inside Blair, muscles grasping his penis so that they were meshed together, locked for a moment of eternity within the actuality of their consummate, unconditional and unending love. Lost himself to the pulse and the heat inside his own body, resonating with Sandburg's, until their hearts pounded together, and the beat merged into one crescendo of sound. Lost himself to a pleasure so great it was almost painful, exquisite, astonishing, and then was completely lost within a joy so profound and all encompassing; so complete, that it radiated from them, a glow of passion and desire, of want and need, of hope and glory. And it built and built, burning like a bright fire.

They held one another's eyes throughout this most intimate of acts, their souls bare to one another, open, concealing nothing, trusting, being trusted. Until the joy passed all endurance and they arced against one another, Jim thrusting deep and Blair taking him all; heads back, as they cried out with inarticulate completion.

And then Jim bent forward, still locked inside Blair's body, as his lips sought Blair's, open for his lover to thrust his tongue inside. Blair took him, plundering his mouth as Sandburg's arms embraced him and drew him close, holding him tight. Sandburg moaned as he slipped from Blair's body, but Jim gathered his lover close and rolled so that Blair now sprawled over his body, covering him.

"Did you feel it?" Blair whispered, his eyes searching Jim's honest gaze; wanting so badly for Jim to have felt that incredible, indescribable joy, to have known it and know that he'd know it again.

"Yeah," Jim gasped, a tear slipping from the corner of his eye. He'd never felt so complete, as if strength flooded his being even as peace soothed all the hurts in his soul, so that he was made whole. "I can't... I don't have the words..."

"There are no words that can encompass the magnitude of it, Jim," Blair breathed, as he stroked Ellison's face. "This is our bond. This is what our life together will always be."

"You make me strong," Jim sighed, as he drew Blair's head down just under his chin, and he cradled Sandburg in his arms. "And you give me peace I didn't know was even possible."

"I've never been so happy, Jim," Blair murmured back. "You are my home."

Jim smiled as he nuzzled Blair's curls. They settled against one another, sated and content - and safe. Blair's breath slowed and deepened into sleep, and Jim drifted off to the beloved sound of Blair's heart, beating strong and sure, the foundation of his world.
It had been a long journey, sometimes hard and painful, sometimes terrifying. But they'd persevered, unable to give up on one another, or the friendship they shared. They had each made choices: to commit to one another; to choose one another with conscious acts of will, to share risks and adventure, hurts and joys; and, finally, they had chosen to be bound together for the whole of their lives, to love freely and fully, with all that they were and all that they had to give.

And they had chosen well...

FINIS

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