Pennies for the Jungle

by rentgirl2

Summary

A young doctor encounters a mysterious native in the jungles of Borneo.

Prologue

Five years ago.

Captain James Ellison had a bad feeling about this assignment from the get-go.

Sketchy details and taking for granted that information would be doled out on a need-to-know basis was an accepted part of military life. A soldier didn't question orders, he followed them. Still, as he looked out at the miles of open water stretching around him, he had a suspicion this was not a difficult mission, it was a fool's errand.

He and his crew of seven had been given deceptively simple instructions. An American who had been squirreled away in Laos for the last seventeen years had been liberated and was making his way to the coast. Ellison's team was to fly in under the radar, pick him up and fly out.

He knew nothing was that easy.

"Captain Ellison?"

Jim turned his attention to the chopper pilot, Lt. Phil Sarris. "Yes?"

"Wind is picking up, sir. The storm is closing in."

"How bad, Phil?" Sarris was a damn fine flier. If he was worried, Jim was, too.

"Real bad, sir." With that the helicopter lurched and dropped altitude. Sarris fought with the controls
for a moment and righted the craft. "We're going to have to find a place to wait this storm out."

Ellison glanced over Sarris' shoulder; there was quickly darkening sky and rough, metal gray water as far as the eye could see. Ellison's stomach cramped. "Where?"

The navigator, Lt. John Cooper, swung around in his seat. "Captain Ellison, we might be able to get to one of the lesser islands south of here."

"Phil?"

"Maybe, sir. We don't have too many other options right now."

"Head for it then," Jim said. He slipped into the back to let the other five know what was happening.

He hadn't had the chance to open his mouth before another gust of wind caught the tail of the helicopter and spun it 180 degrees before slamming it into the sea.

The fuselage cracked open like an egg, spilling the eight soldiers into the black, churning sea.

Present

Doctor Blair Sandburg stood and stretched. He twisted slightly, allowing his vertebrae to pop and slip back into alignment. He wiped the sweat out of his eyes with the sleeve of his tee shirt and glanced up at the sun. Despite the lateness of the hour, the sun was still high, still relentlessly beating down on the Borneo jungle.

Sixteen hour days for the last four months and Blair felt he had hardly made a dent. He was scheduled to fly out in a week. By the time the worst of the monsoon season hit, he'd be back in Cascade on another endless round of cocktail parties and lecture tours.

Blair urged the next child up on the makeshift exam table and started her physical.

No, the Pennies for the Jungle doctor, as he was known world wide, would prefer to work in the jungle full-time and let some other poor sucker beg for funding. It would never happen; his face had become synonymous with the successful charity.

Chaz Reece, one of the two nurse practitioners working with Blair, helped the girl off the table when her exam was completed and lifted a young boy onto the vacated space. The frightened child scooted back as Blair reached out to touch him.

"Don't be afraid," Blair said in Javanese. "I'm the healer. I won't hurt you."

The boy, still looking doubtful, allowed Blair to examine him. His left leg had an infected welt along the calf, otherwise the boy was in good health.

"Have April give him Rocephin IM. See if she can keep him overnight. That wound needs to be irrigated, too. I'd rather give a long course of oral antibiotics but I doubt they'd be taken."

"Probably not, Blair." Chaz leaned in a little too close to Blair as he helped the boy down. "Come with me," Chaz said in heavily accented Javanese.

The child looked up, uncomprehending.

Blair sighed. In Javanese he told the boy, "Go with him, please. He will clean your leg and give you
medicine."

The boy nodded.

"You've really got to work harder on your Javanese, Chaz."

"It's just my accent that's off, I think."

"Yeah, well, you and April are going to be on your own in another week. You're asking for a world of problems if you have to rely on April or one of the anthropology students to translate every time you have a patient."

"I understand them," Chaz said.

"I know you do," Blair said gently, "but they have to be able to understand you, too." He and Chaz had had this discussion a dozen times in the last four months.

"I could come by your tent tonight and you could, uh, tutor me," the nurse purred.

Blair swallowed hard. "Maybe April would make a better study buddy for you." Chaz shrugged his broad shoulders and led the boy out.

Blair hated the days when Chaz worked in the exam tent with him and April worked in the treatment tent. Chaz was a competent nurse but he'd made his interest in Blair obvious from the beginning.

The twenty-seven year old nurse was an attractive guy and a lot of fun but Blair had learned his lesson about getting involved with people he worked with. If the relationship headed south, and it always did, the two of them would still be stuck in each other's company in the middle of nowhere for the duration of the project.

Not to mention these days he was never sure if someone wanted Blair Sandburg the man or just wanted to fuck the Pennies for the Jungle doctor.

God, way to be a cynic, Sandburg.

Chaz came back into the tent. "That was the last one for the day."

"Thanks, man. Does April need any help?"

"No, she'd just has the last little guy to take care of and clean up. I'll give her a hand after I've straightened up here."

"Okay, great."

"One of the students just told me that Doctor Stoddard wanted to speak to you when you have a moment."

"Thanks. I think I'll head over there now."

Eli Stoddard and Blair had been friends for over a decade. When a teenaged Blair had been an undergraduate at Rainier University, Stoddard had been his mentor and hero. If things had worked out differently, if things had worked out as Blair had dreamed, he'd be with Stoddard as part of the anthropological team rather than heading up the medical team that was attached to the group.

The anthropologists were in Borneo for one year to study what effects modern civilization was having on the local indigenous tribes, the Dyaks.
The biggest effect that Blair had observed was the rampant consumption of Coca-Cola and Marlborough cigarettes.

Oh, yeah, cynical man walks the face of the earth tonight.

Blair stopped outside of Stoddard's tent.

"Eli, you in there?"

"Come in, Blair." Eli sat at a small camp desk, open journals spread around him. The side and back flaps of the tent were tied back, letting the breeze, heavy and wet, flow through. "I just got an email from the university confirming your departure time. Someone will be here Wednesday morning to take you into the city for your flight."

"Great."

Eli looked up. "Aren't you about ready to head home, Blair?"

"Not really. You know if I would have understood years ago all the bullshit that was involved in fundraising, there wouldn't be a Pennies for the Jungle."

Eli chuckled. "All that ass kissing gets old, doesn't it? Even if you'd stayed in academia it would have been the same, Blair. I choke down my share of rubber chicken and humble pie at fundraisers, too."

"I know. I don't mean to sound like I'm not grateful for the financial support, it's just that I don't think I'm really cut out for that part of the job."

"You excel at that part of the job, Blair."

"I know I raise a lot of cash but I hate that aspect of it."

"We all do. It's a balancing act between our real work and squeezing the money out of those that have it so we can continue to do our real work."

"Sometimes, Eli, I wonder why we do it."

"I think we love our work enough to do whatever it takes to make it happen."

"Yeah," Blair said.

"You've done a lot of good in the last five years, Blair. How many clinics do you have up and running now?"

"Four."

"You should be proud."

"I, uh." Blair shook his head. "Thanks, Eli."

"Thank you," Eli said. He took two bottles of water out from under his desk and handed one to Blair. "In the beginning the clinic openings followed the anthropological teams. Now, with your funding from Rainier and the foundation, we're following the medical teams."

"Oh, right, Eli. You and I agreed this Borneo expedition was a good choice for both teams." Blair sprawled on the tent floor. "You wanted to observe the Dyaks and I wanted a clinic on the river. I'm
still hoping the Dyaks further upriver will let their kids be immunized and treated."

"Maybe someday. You're making headway with the Dyaks closer to the coast."

"Well, most of them have had some Western contact. Man, I would have loved to have had an opportunity to go deeper in the jungle."

"It's probably safer that you didn't. Some of the more remote Dyak tribes are still headhunters."

"They headhunt enemies, Eli, not healers."

"As more and more non-indigenous Indonesians move into Borneo, it's getting harder for the Dyak to tell who is the enemy."

"I know there have been some pretty violent outbreaks."

"Yes, there have." Eli finished his water and placed the glass bottle in a bin. The bottle would be sterilized and refilled with purified water later. "If it's any consolation, at least you'll be out of Borneo before monsoon season starts."

"I'll be trading hot and rainy for cold and rainy."

"You do seem to have a propensity for living in the rain forests of the world," Eli laughed.

"Funny thing is, I've always seen myself as a desert dweller." Blair stood and placed his own empty bottle in the bin. "I've got a few things to take care of. I'll talk to you later."

"Okay, Blair, good night."

Blair stepped into the fading light.

In another week he'd be stepping into the spotlight again.

"Is she going to die, Jimelis?"

Jimelis had never seen the chief look so old, so defeated. So frightened.

"I don't know," he answered. He wanted to lie, wanted to comfort the old man who had done so much for him but he could not. The chief's young wife was struggling with the birth of their first child. The shaman and the older women had all but given up on both the girl and the unborn baby. Even now the women of the tribe sat in the longhouse preparing to ease their way into the afterlife. Jimelis looked down at the girl. Her condition had long passed his skills.

He owed his life to the old chief. Budi had taken him in when he had been lost and ill. He had helped Jimelis come to understand that he was not losing his mind, that he had wondrous, special gifts that had to be honed and trained. Budi had made a place of honor for Jimelis among the Dyak.

The open grief on Budi's face was too much for Jimelis to bear.

A few months ago, while scouting, Jimelis had watched as outsiders built a settlement at the river's mouth. He had been frightened by the pull he felt as he saw them, heard them. The desire to go into the settlement, to talk to these outsiders had been almost overwhelming.

Then the man came out of a tent. Jimelis had nearly fallen out of his hiding place among the trees. He
felt a sharp pang in his heart as he continued to watch, to listen. The others now meant nothing. Just this one, the blue-eyed man, drew his attention.

Day after day, Jimelis had made excuses to himself to venture to the river's mouth. He merely observed, he had told himself. He needed to discover what the outsiders were doing here, why the settlement was being built.

It only took a short time for him to figure out the man was a healer, here to help the Dyak. Still, he had come when he could steal away to watch this man from the cover of the jungle.

The pang grew stronger each time he saw the sun shine on the man, heard the rhythm of the man's voice.

This pang, Jimelis had realized, was loneliness. The draw he felt toward this man, this Blair, was dangerous. It had made him neglect his duties to the Dyaks. He could lose his place with the tribe, then what would become of him? He didn't think he could survive living alone in the jungle again. This time he truly would be insane.

So, he didn't return to the settlement again.

Now, he had no choice. If there was a chance to save Wiwik and repay his debt to Budi, he had to take it.

"There is an outsider, a white healer at the river's mouth," Jimelis began.

"The healer would help her?" the chief asked anxiously.

"I think so. I have watched other tribes go to him."

"Bring him here. I do not want Wiwik to be taken out of the longhouse." Jimelis nodded, privately doubting the girl could have survived the trip anyway.

"I will send two of the young men to bring him. If his eyes are covered he will not be able to find his way back to us after we return him to his own settlement."

"Do it then, Jimelis. I don't want her to die."

With a mixture of dread and anticipation, Jimelis went to find the warriors he would dispatch.

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April Dickerson had spent twenty-five years as an Army nurse.

Four years ago, retirement papers in hand, she'd settled in Phoenix, wanting to live close to her daughter, Patty, and granddaughter, Dana. Widowed at thirty, April had struggled to raise her child and serve her country.

The move to Arizona was to mark the beginning of her time for herself. She had planned to golf, garden, maybe take a dance class or two. The most strenuous thing on her agenda was baking for Dana's third grade class.

All that changed in a single afternoon.

Four months into her retirement bliss, Patty and Dana insisted she accompany them to a concert in the park.

"An outdoor concert in August?" April had protested. "Are you both crazy?" She might have spent
most of her years in the military stationed in Washington, DC, but she was well aware of desert heat.

Her family wouldn’t take no for an answer. After three hours of music far too modern for her tastes, of summer sun frying her alive, of trying to quench her thirst with lukewarm, flat soda, April's head was throbbing. She pasted her most persuasive smile on, ready to convince her daughter that enough was enough.

Then the music stopped and he climbed up on stage. Applause thundered through the green.

"Who is he?" April had asked.

"That's the Pennies for the Jungle doctor," Dana whispered, awe in her voice.

"Hi," his voice, smooth and calming to April, came over the sound system. "I'm Blair Sandburg and I'd like to talk with you about a vision I have for health care in some of the most remote areas of the world."

The overheated, under-hydrated crowd settled back on the lawn. April's headache receded as this man, not much more than a boy, really, changed her life.

She wasn't sure how long he talked but she, along with the rest of the assembly, could have listened all night. There was so much to be done, he'd said, so much that each of them could do. And, like the others sitting in the twilight on the grass, April believed him. His dream became hers.

It was the first time she had ever heard of the charity. Looking around her at the mesmerized crowd, she realized she might have been the only one who hadn't known of it.

The concept was simple. Blair Sandburg, an internist, and two nurse practitioners followed anthropology teams from Rainier University into a primitive area. While the anthropologists set up a base camp, the medical team set up a permanent clinic. Blair would stay with the team for up to six months then leave the practitioners in place while he went on to plan and finance the next clinic. The long-range plan included staffing the clinics with nurses born within that country but trained at Rainier.

By the time Dr. Sandburg had finished speaking, April had known she was coming out of retirement.

She had asked Patty why the organization was called Pennies for the Jungle.

"Grandma," Dana had interrupted, "everybody knows the story."

"Not everybody," Patty had said. Dana rolled her eyes and Patty continued. "See the barrels by the stage, Mom?"

On either side of the platform were forest-green, plastic barrels with PFTJ stenciled in red on their sides. Children were lined up behind the containers, taking turns dropping in coins.

"When Dr. Sandburg started out," Patty said, "he had some funding from Rainier University and a couple of corporations but it wasn't enough. He talked about it with some of his friends from school. One was an elementary school teacher. She came up with the idea to collect pennies from her class while they studied some of the groups that Dr. Sandburg had worked with. Pretty soon every classroom in the school had a jar in it to collect Pennies for the Jungle. Now almost every classroom in the United States has one."

"We have one in mine, Grandma," Dana said. The little girl reached in her pink, vinyl purse and produced a nickel and two pennies. "This," she said triumphantly, "is for today. Can I go, Mom?"
"Sure you can." Patty watched Dana getting into one of the lines.

April noticed a line people waiting to talk to Dr. Sandburg. Something shifted inside her as she observed his patience with each person. She could put pennies in those barrels, a hell of a lot more than pennies actually, or she could do something that would really make a difference.

Without having made a real conscience decision, April found herself standing in the group trying to speak to him.

Now, she stood in a tent-turned-clinic in the wilds of Borneo. She spoke Javanese fluently and was confident that with Chaz's help, she could run this place. She felt she'd finally found her place in the world.

Still, she wished Blair was going to stay. She would miss him. The first couple of weeks she had worked with him she'd had a terrible crush on him. Stupid, really. She was old enough to be his, well, if not his grandmother, at least her younger sister.

Over time the crush had faded into protectiveness. For all his outward strength and incredible intellect, she could sense a deep sadness and a vulnerability in him.

Looking back she dearly hoped that she hadn't been as painfully obvious as Chaz and a few of the anthropologists while she had been in the depths of her infatuation with Blair. If she had been, he'd never let on. Thank God.

A rustling of the tent flap caught her attention. Two Dyak stood before her in full warrior regalia. Her heart skipped a beat. No matter that there had been no attacks against the settlement, she knew there had been recent battles between the tribes. The fact that some Dyak were headhunters with poison darts and blowguns was never far from her mind.

"We are here for the healer," the younger of the two said.

"I am one of the healers," she answered in Javanese.

"No," the older warrior said, "Jimelis said to bring the man, not a woman. A blue-eyed man. We must hurry. Where is he?"

April drew in long, slow breath, calming herself. She was a nurse but she'd been a soldier most of her life. "Why do you want him? Are you ill?"

"No. The chief's wife is dying in childbirth. He must come now."

She nodded, satisfied that they were telling the truth. "Follow me," she said, leaving the clinic. She stopped outside of Blair's tent. "Blair," she called through the flap.

"Come in, April."

"I have two visitors with me," she warned as she moved into Blair's quarters.

Blair stood to face April and the two warriors stationed on either side of her.

"You are the healer?" the older of the two asked.

Blair nodded. "I am."

"You must come with us."
"Their chief's wife is having a difficult birth," April interjected.

"Where is your village?" Blair said.

The Dyaks glanced at each other. "Upriver," the older said. "We will take you there."

"How will I return?" Blair became suspicious. "Will I return?"

"You will be safe. You have my word."

Blair hesitated. Most of the interior of Borneo was uncharted due to the harsh terrain: mountains and nearly impassable jungle. The rivers, teeming with dangers of their own, were the only way to navigate the wilderness and were used by tribes hostile to one another. If he went with the Dyak, he would be at their mercy. There would be no way back to the base camp without their cooperation.

He had a duty as a physician.

"I need to get supplies together and then we can leave."

"I want to come, too," April said to Blair.

"No," he answered her in English. "I can't guarantee your safety, April. I have no way of knowing what kind of mess I might be walking into."

"That's exactly why you need me, Blair. Chaz can handle the clinic for a day or two."

"I don't know, April."

"Please. And anyway, if I have to go with a tribe into the rain forest, I'd rather do it with you the first time."

"Okay, you talked me into it. Let's get the delivery kit and the general kit and maybe throw in some vaccinations. As long as we're there we might be able to do a few inoculations." He turned to the Dyaks and switched back to Javanese. "I need to prepare. The woman comes also."

"No. Jimelis said to bring you."

Jimelis? "I need her."

The warrior shrugged. "Bring her then, but we must hurry."

Blair agreed to meet them at their boat. He went to tell Chaz and Eli they would be gone for a few days. Eli wanted to send a student with him but Blair protested. "They didn't want me to take April, Eli, and we're pressed for time." Stoddard backed down graciously. Chaz wasted precious minutes trying to talk Blair into taking him instead of April.

Finally ready, Blair headed to the clinic to help April carry the supplies to the boat. "Better add a kerosene lamp and some drinking water," he told her.

"All taken care of."

He smiled at her as he lifted a pack up and began to walk to the dock. "You're going to be great out here, April. You won't even miss me."

"Well, I might not miss you as much as lover boy will, but I will miss you."
"Lover boy?"

"Chaz," she chuckled. "He hasn't exactly made it a secret that he'd like to be a doctor's wife."

"Jesus, April," Blair laughed.

"I told him he didn't have a chance with you but he's got this crazy idea that he's irresistible."

"There is no such thing as irresistible," Blair said with certainty.

"Oh, Blair," April groaned, "there most definitely is. You just haven't run across the one who you'll find irresistible."

"You really think so?" Blair sounded doubtful.

"I've lived a lot longer than you have. I've been blindsided by someone irresistible a time or two in my day."

"Seriously?"

"Yep, and you will be, too," April promised. "Irresistible will hit you so hard you won't believe that you didn't believe."

Blair kept his cynical retort firmly behind his teeth. If April wanted to keep believing in irresistible who was he to dissuade her?

The flatboat dipped low in the water as the medical equipment was loaded. After Blair and April settled in the craft the younger Dyak handed them each a hood.

"What is this for?" April asked.

"The village location is of no concern to you," the older warrior replied.

Blair sighed. "April if you're not okay with this and want to stay, I understand."

"No, no. It's fine." Blair could tell from the slight tremor in the nurse's voice that it wasn't fine but he said nothing. He slipped the hood over his eyes and waited for the boat to push off.

"I hate these little boats," April confided to him.

"I don't really mind boats," Blair said as he leaned back against a supply pack. "I hate airplanes."

"Airplanes are safer," April answered as the boat slid into the current and began to pick up speed.

"Safer? I don't think so. If there's a problem with the boat, I can swim away. I haven't mastered the art of flying yet."

From the dense forest Jimelis tracked the boat's progress toward the settlement.

The healer and the woman sat near the center, faces covered. He'd seen them both many times before. The woman was small, old. She was no threat. The man was not much taller than her but there was strength in him. He would bear watching.

Then their laughter skimmed the water and rose up to him with the heat of the early evening. A band around his heart tightened.
No, he didn't need to see the healer's face. It had been scorched into his memory months ago. Beautiful, bright-eyed, sweet mouthed.

He heard Blair's voice again, rich and warm, float up. He desired to grab this man, to take him deep into the underbrush and ease his loneliness with him.

He hoped he would be smart enough, strong enough, wise enough to stay away from this one while he was in the village.

Blair tried to sleep. There was no telling how long he and April would be up tonight. He tried not to think about how deeply they were slipping into the jungle.

Once upon a time he had dreamed of being an anthropologist, of living among the primitives and studying the untouched cultures that had managed to survive. All that had changed when he was a junior at Rainier.

Naomi had come to visit after a sixteen-month stay in the South American rainforest. She'd gone to find spiritual guidance with one of the most remote tribes in the Amazon basin and come back a living shadow.

She'd fallen ill while living with the tribe and had allowed the Shaman there to treat her with tribal remedies rather than return to civilization and seek help. Naomi had always scorned conventional medicine.

Blair had insisted that she see a doctor in Cascade, but by then it was too late. Cancer that the doctor was sure had started in her breast had metastasized to her bone and brain.

He was only an eighteen-year-old boy. He watched, feeling useless and helpless, as his mother slipped into a coma two weeks after arriving in Cascade. She had died four days later.

For the first time in his life Blair had felt truly alone. He'd never known his father. He and Naomi had been estranged from her family since he was a baby.

His whole childhood he and Naomi had traveled the globe together. Although she'd often left him behind while she went on retreat and by the time he was sixteen he had lived away at Rainier, he had always known he wasn't really alone. Somewhere, out there searching for her next adventure and a higher level of enlightenment, was his champion, his mother. She was the one person steadfast in her love and devotion to him. She was the one person in the whole universe who didn't judge his worth on his appearance or performance. She loved him just because he was Blair.

When it finally penetrated his grief soaked brain that the lovely light that had been Naomi was forever gone, Blair had been terrified. What, he had wondered at the time, keeps a person tethered to the world? When the one who had shared his memories from first tooth to first step to first broken heart no longer existed, why did he continue to?

He'd never attended school regularly until Rainier so there weren't even old classmates or teachers to recall him as a child. As frequently as he and his mother had moved he was sure he would be hard pressed to find anyone to remember the small, smart boy who followed in the wake of the flamboyant Naomi.

There had been days after Naomi's funeral he had been so weighted down by despair he could barely drag himself to class. Then he had become angry, furious at a universe that would steal away someone so fiery, so full of life.
His alternating feelings of depression and rage hadn't lasted long. He'd been raised by Naomi Sandburg, after all, and he'd learned early not to waste his energy on fruitless, negative emotions.

So, he had started to search for some meaning in the tragedy of his mother's death, to find some way to right the wrong of her passing.

After much soul searching he switched his major from anthropology to medicine.

His life had changed and so had his goals. The desire to explore the wilderness and study the people living in it had been replaced by the desire to make certain modern medical care was available even in that wilderness.

He respected tribal and holistic practices. He'd been raised with them but he'd never been able to shake the idea his mother would still be alive had she come out of the jungle sooner.

Maybe it wasn't true. Maybe she'd lived and suffered and died as she was destined but he was determined to make western care possible for those who chose it.

Blair shifted around, trying to find a softer part of the supply pack to rest his head on. He estimated they'd been traveling for about two hours. The smell of foliage was thick, almost sickening.

A lifetime ago he'd dreamed of being one of the first to make contact with the different Dyak tribes. Now, he thought with surprising bitterness, if he found them he'd inoculate them instead of studying them.

It wasn't his work he found disappointing. It was his life. He would return to Washington State in a week or so and there was nothing there for him except a loft that stood empty most of the time and another mind-numbing round of meet-and-greets.

It didn't seem to matter how many villages he went into or how many presentations he gave or how many lovers he took to his bed, he was alone. Perhaps, like Naomi, he was doomed to wander and search and never be satisfied.

Maybe there really was no irresistible someone out there just waiting for him.

It was late when the boat bumped gently against the shore. Blair awoke immediately and pulled off his hood. "April," he said quietly, "we're here." He turned to the Dyak securing the boat. "Take me to the woman. Have someone bring me water that has been boiled and cooled." He scooped up as much gear as he could carry and followed the older warrior to the village with April close behind him.

The air was acrid and smoky from open cooking pits. The forest, dangerous and alive all around them, was held at bay by the ring of light provided by the village fires. Two huge long houses stood in the clearing. Blair knew a few hundred Dyak lived in each long house and each had its own chief.

"Which one?" Blair asked.

"Here," the warrior said, pointing to the long house on the left.

Blair heard a thin, tired wail pierce the night. The chief's wife, no doubt. The fact she still had enough strength to cry out, to respond to pain was a good sign.

A large group of women milled at the long house entrance, watching nervously as April and Blair approached. When Blair reached them he said, "I am the healer."
A few tittered. One of the braver ones reached out and touched his long, curling ponytail. "Soft," she announced to the others. A burst of laughter broke the tension.

"Wait till they see your big blue eyes in the daylight," April whispered.

Blair ignored her. "May we enter?"

"Come," one of them said and led Blair inside the structure. It was open, airy in the center with partitioned off sections on each side for individual families. The woman pointed to one of the first rooms. "She is in there."

Blair ducked in, April followed. The room was hot, stale and smelled of blood. April lit the lamp while Blair cleaned his hands with alcohol gel. The girl was propped up on a pallet, half-unconscious. Blair squatted close to her. "I am the healer. Don't be afraid."

"Jimelis told me you would come," a voice said from the corner of the room. "You will save her."

"I'll do my best," Blair answered honestly. "Are you her husband?"

"I am," an elderly man presented himself to Blair. "I am Budi."

"How long has she been in labor?"

"Almost two days."

"Her first child?"

"Yes, our first."

"Where," April asked as she set up an IV, "is the midwife? Has no one been with her?"

"The midwife says Wiwik and the baby have already had their spirits gathered up."

"Not yet," Blair said.

"Jimelis said they might live if the outside healer came."

"I am going to try. I told the men to bring us boiled, cooled water as soon as possible."

"Jimelis told us you would need it," Budi replied. "It is already here."

Blair wondered again who Jimelis was. When the name was first mentioned, he had assumed it was the chief. He'd have to puzzle it out later. "Wiwik," Blair said, "I am Blair. I need to look at you and touch you to help the baby come out. I know you are in a lot of pain right now and I will try not to hurt you more. Do you understand?"

"Yes. Help me." Her voice was weak, scratchy. She was young, perhaps fourteen or fifteen, Blair realized, and utterly exhausted. He heard Budi leave the room. Just as well. The next few hours wouldn't be pleasant.

April did vital signs while Blair slipped on gloves to start the pelvic exam. He gently cleansed her perineum, then palpated and examined her as April hung IV fluids. The girl's sunken eyes and cracked lips told of her dehydration.

The girl tensed, then cried out as another useless contraction gripped her abdomen.
"Breech?" April said.

"'Fraid so."

"You can turn the baby," April said confidently.

Blair said nothing. He wished he had some of the unwavering belief that April did. He often wondered how much of that belief was based on the real Blair Sandburg and how much was based on the hype the PR machine had cranked out for the Jungle Doctor.

But he knew he would save the girl and the baby.

It was, after all, what he did.

Jimelis prowled at the perimeter of the village. He could hear the healer's voice, Blair's voice, coaxing and encouraging Wiwik. When she would have slipped away his voice guided her back from the brink.


Long after the time for his patrolling was over, he continued to stalk around the settlement. Blair's voice soothed and excited him. Budi had taught him much about controlling his senses but never had he been as focused as he was tonight with Blair's voice in his ears.

He knew he had always been able to see more stars than the rest of the men but right now, with his vision wide open, the sky was crammed full of bright clusters and shooting lights. The darkness forever held sound for him but right now was heavy with the forest's songs and calls and movements.

And sensations. There had been many times when pain was almost too great for him to bear and pleasure was piercing rather than pleasing but right now, oh right now, he could actually feel the texture of the wind that pressed against his skin. It was amazing, exhilarating. Terrifying.

He had never realized the power inside him was so vast. It wasn't that Blair's presence increased his power. No, it was more as if Blair somehow tethered him to the earth and that allowed Jimelis to flex and stretch and use his senses as he'd never dared before.

Before dawn he heard the tiny cry of a newborn. Finally, the baby had been delivered. Although he was happy for Budi, his heart was heavy.

The baby was here so Blair would leave.

Blair handed the baby to April. She took the tiny boy and began to stimulate it to take a few drops of sterile water.

The first hurdle was cleared; both mother and son had survived the birth. The next 72 hours would be critical. Blair had performed an episiotomy but Wiwik had torn before he'd arrived during her long delivery. Even though he'd carefully cleaned and stitched her after the baby was born, the chance for infection was high. He wanted to run a course of IV antibiotics over the next couple of days and he didn't want her to nurse. He'd have April help Wiwik express milk for now so that she could nurse the boy once she'd healed enough.

"Is he sucking yet?" Blair asked.
"Like a little pig."

"As soon as you get a wet diaper go ahead and switch him to the bottled formula we brought. I'll check with her husband about a wet nurse. She should be able to feed him in a few days."

"Good idea. She's asleep?"

"Yeah. I'd feel better if the two of them could spend a week or so in the clinic but I don't see that happening." Blair pulled off his blood stained sterile gown. "I'll go let Budi know he's a dad and find out what I can about the wet nurse." He gave April a few more instructions about the patient's care and went into the main hall of the longhouse.

Budi sat half asleep among several other men. He stood as Blair approached him. "They live?" he asked.

"Yes," Blair said with a tired smile, "they live. You have a son. Wiwik is sleeping and April is tending to the boy. You can see them both in a little while."

Blair recognized the helpless look on Budi's face. He'd seen it a hundred times on fathers' faces—overjoyed and speechless. "I need to get a little air, Budi, and there are a few things we should talk about."

Budi motioned for Blair to follow him out of the longhouse. They walked a short distance and Budi lowered himself onto a fallen log. The sun was not quite up, the purple sky was streaked with pink and orange. Blair paced before Budi, still too wired to relax.

"Thank you for saving them."

Blair had to clear his throat. It felt as gritty as his eyes. He'd been up way too long and the adrenaline that had kept him going suddenly drained out of his system, leaving him emotionally raw. Budi's simple gratitude made him want to weep. "You're welcome. The baby is very large and wasn't turned the right way to be born. Wiwik is small and her flesh tore. I am giving her special medicine to help her heal. They are both still in danger."

"What can I do?"

"First, I need a wet nurse for your son. Wiwik should rest as much as possible. Second, I would like to stay here in the village for a few more days. I will watch over them, give Wiwik her medicine and perhaps tend to others in your village."

Budi looked just beyond Blair into the shadows of the trees. "What do you say, Jimelis?"

Jimelis was torn.

What Blair requested was reasonable. There was no doubt the healer had saved the lives of Budi's wife and son. Part of him wanted this man close by for as long as he could have him but being near Blair brought back strange feelings. A discomfort that nagged at the back of his mind, that scratched at his brain trying to get free.

The before.

That's what this man represented to him, the before. Jimelis wasn't sure how since he himself remembered nothing before waking on the beach. He didn't know how long he had wandered in the forest, foraging for food, hiding from something he couldn't quite remember.
Then the time of his insanity fell upon him. The shrieking sounds, the blinding colors, the nauseating smells and tastes. He had wished for the relief that death would bring from a world that had become nothing more than bright, biting-sharp pain.

When he could stand no more, Budi had found him and brought back his sanity. The Dyak lived steeped in deep mysticism. Budi had been the son of the old Shaman and the cousin of the new; he had immediately seen the powers within Jimelis.

He had been brought into the village, taught their language and customs and became their Watchman. They were his people now. He had their honor and respect. He was wanted. He was safe among them.

If Blair stayed, if the memories of before became clear, would he have to leave? Would he be able to face what he was before, what he feared before? Would he be given the choice to remain with the Dyak? Would he want to?

"Jimelis?" Budi said when the silence lengthened.

"It is your decision, Budi."

"Then let them stay." The other man rubbed his hand over his eyes. "I am too old for this."

"No, you're too tired, not too old." Jimelis swallowed down his apprehension. "You should not risk your son now that he has fought so hard to be born and Wiwik has suffered to let him live. Perhaps the healer can help some of the others while he is here."

Budi sighed with visible relief at Jimelis' agreement. "Please stay with us," he said to Blair.

"Thank you," Blair said. "Budi, you should be able to see your wife and son now."

The chief hurried back into the longhouse. When Jimelis would have melted back into the jungle, Blair stepped forward and reached out as if to touch him.

"Wait," Blair pleaded.

He stopped. "Yes?"

Shit. Now that he had Jimelis' attention, he wasn't sure what he wanted to say. He just knew he didn't want the other man to leave.

The sun wasn't up very high yet and Jimelis' face was still cast in shadows, but his voice poured over Blair, made him itchy and curious.

Jimelis' body was outlined in the lightening grays of dawn. He was big for a Dyak, maybe six inches taller than Blair and well built. Yards of hard, muscled, silky-smooth skin was displayed. Jesus.

"The warriors who brought us to the village said it was your idea for me to come here. I just wanted to let you know that they are alive because of you."

The man nodded.

Blair wanted to hear him speak again.

"I appreciate you sending for me."
He nodded again.

"I'm Blair but you already know that." Blair's mind began to race. "How did you know that? How did you know to send for me? Or that the clinic was even on the river?" He could tell Jimelis was ready to flee. "Please tell me, how did you know?"

"I saw your settlement when you first arrived."

"You saw us?"

Jimelis shrugged. "It is my place in the tribe."

"You're a scout?"

"I am the Watchman."

A beam of sunlight climbed over the trees to shine on Jimelis' deeply tanned face. Blue-eyes.

Ice blue. Nordic blue.

How could a Dyak from the depths of Borneo have those incredible eyes?

"Who are you?" the English words spilt out of Blair's mouth.

"I am Jimelis," he replied in Javanese. With that he turned and loped into the jungle. Blair watched as the branches closed behind Jimelis, sweeping away the evidence of his existence.

"Who the hell is he?" Blair asked the empty clearing.

By late afternoon the proud father was granted permission by the healer to take his son to the Shaman for a blessing. The boy felt sturdy, substantial in his arms.

Before the boy had been born and Budi had looked upon his face, he had been ready to beg the gods to let the child die so that his beloved Wiwik would live. He was glad he didn't have to pray for such a thing today. He loved his young wife with all his heart but his small, perfect son held his soul.

He had believed his chance for love and a family had long passed him by. The responsibility of the tribe had fallen to him when he had not been much older than Wiwik. Twice he had married. Twice he had buried a fruitless wife. His entire reason for being had been to serve his tribe.

Then he had found Jimelis.

How a white man, sunburned, starved and out of his mind, had managed to float up the river to him without being devoured by crocodiles, killed by wild animals or captured by other Dyak, had been nothing short of a miracle.

Budi had been the youngest son of the old Shaman and his cousin, Sugeng, was the present Shaman. It had taken Budi and Sugeng less than a day to realize that this outsider was a Watchman sent to them by the gods.

Over the course of a growing season, Budi had been able to teach Jimelis not only how to maintain some control over his senses but to speak their language and live within the customs of the Dyak.
Jimelis had given him a purpose other then the well being of the people; he had given him friendship.

Not that Budi had been without friends before but since adulthood he was looked at as a chieftain before a man. Jimelis was without impression when Budi found him: no language, no people, not even a past. He knew only his name--Jimelis. The stranger was quick of mind and the two became close.

It was Jimelis who had noticed Wiwik's interest. Without the Watchman's encouragement, Budi would never have attempted to win a third wife, especially one as young and lovely as Wiwik.

Now, because of Jimelis, he not only had his mate but he had his son.

Budi was grateful to the healer but now that the danger had passed for his son, he wondered if he'd made a mistake in letting the man stay with the tribe. What if he reminded Jimelis of the past? It was obvious they were of the same people. Would Jimelis see that? Would the Watchman want to return to wherever it was he'd come from?

The tribe could survive the loss of their Watchman. Sugeng was already training a boy, Kawi, who had shown promise of the gift. No partner had been found for the boy yet.

According to the teachings of Dyak, each Watchman had a true partner, a personal Shaman who enabled the Watchman to extend his power without fear of insanity.

Budi understood he was not Jimelis' true partner. Jimelis had some control over his gift but Sugeng had said more than once that the man's powers were far stronger than he was able to use safely.

"The Watchman protects the tribe," Sugeng had told them, "and the Watchman's Shaman protects the Watchman." They had searched the Dyak for a partner or a mate for Jimelis without success.

Perhaps Jimelis' Shaman could only be found among his own people.

Budi had hoped his friend would find a wife within the tribe. There were many women who would have gladly mated with Jimelis but he had shown no interest. There was restlessness in the big man that the Chief imagined a wife and children would take away. Maybe not.

Holding his son close, Budi ducked his head to enter Sugeng's shelter. The Shaman and the Watchman were the only members of the tribe who lived outside the longhouse.

Soft moaning filled the small room. The boy, Kawi, lay on a pallet, arms folded over his head, rocking gently.

"Whisper," Sugeng warned Budi.

"Is he ill?" Budi asked.

"Since he woke up this morning his vision and hearing have been out of his control."

Budi remembered how greatly Jimelis had suffered with his senses in the beginning. "Poor boy."

"I've done all I can do for him. I hope it will pass soon." Sugeng reached for the baby. "Let me see this son of yours."

Budi placed the sleepy baby in his cousin's arms. The jostling startled the child and he began to cry. Budi cringed knowing the noise would only add to Kawi's agony.

To Budi's surprise, Kawi climbed off the pallet and staggered toward them, his dark eyes clear and
free of pain. Sugeng stood still as Kawi gently stroked the soft flesh of the infant's cheek.

"My pain is gone," Kawi said with wonder in his voice. "I heard the child and the pain went away."

Sugeng smiled. "You have given the tribe more than a new son, Budi. You have given the Watchman his Shaman."

Blair had been hopeful the first two nights. Now, as dawn approached, he had his doubts. The baby was fine, Wiwik was still touch and go. A cousin of Budi's had taken on the responsibility of wet nurse and the child was thriving. She was keeping the baby with the rest of her children as Wiwik was in no shape to take care of the child's most basic needs.

Budi was in and out of the sick room. His fear for his wife's life was palpable. It had stunned Blair when he'd realized that the old chief actually loved his wife. Blair had thought at first it was an arranged marriage between an elderly man and a young girl. Discovering it was a true love match was still hard for him to believe. Maybe April was right about that whole irresistible thing.

He'd not seen Jimelis since the morning at the clearing but he felt as though the other man was nearby. And when Blair had slept he dreamed more than once of Nordic blue eyes in a strong, handsome face.

It had just been too long since he'd had sex, he rationalized. Way too long since he'd had a lover with a body like that, if ever. Now was not the time to start thinking about doing the natives. That was a big no-no, passed stupid, not allowed. Damned tempting.

Sighing, he hung another bag of IV fluids. April was curled up on her sleeping bag, snoring softly. He knew she was beat. With a little pressure and a lot of fast talking, he had persuaded Budi to have the children in the longhouse immunized. Of course, Budi was so enthralled with the baby, Blair was pretty sure he could ask for almost anything.

He and April had switched off between caring for Wiwik and running a little impromptu clinic. Along with inoculations, they'd cleaned a few wounds, treated some infected insect bites and examined pregnant women.

The overall health of the tribe was remarkably good. Budi told Blair not only was Sugeng a strong Shaman but that Jimelis had insisted on the tribe following rules about drinking water and hand washing. Again he wondered who this blue-eyed Dyak was. Nothing about Jimelis fit. Blair had tried to discreetly question Budi and various tribe members about the Watchman but he discovered nothing new.

"Jimelis is the Watchman," they'd said, as though that should explain it all.

Blair vaguely recalled a lecture Eli had given years ago about Watchmen, or Sentinels, in some tribes. There was a theory that primitives selected someone with the genetic advantage of heightened senses to protect and provide for the tribe. Could Jimelis actually be one?

Blair admitted to himself that although the puzzle of the man intrigued him, the great body and domineering presence was an attraction, too. A big attraction.

God, get your brain out of your pants, Sandburg, and concentrate on the medical problems happening here.

Wiwik wasn't responding to treatment as well as he'd hoped. She would need someone with her at least another week. He was supposed to meet his ride back to civilization on Wednesday. Despite the
Dyak's hospitality, he had no intention of leaving April here by herself. Not only was this way more than she'd signed on for but he worried about Chaz being in charge of the clinic. The guy was a terrific nurse but his command of the language left much to be desired.

There didn't seem to be a reasonable solution. Well, maybe not reasonable but there was a solution. He could stay.

Planes left out of Borneo every day. He could catch a flight when Wiwik was stronger. If he didn't arrive in Cascade in time for the next cocktail party there was at least one person who would willingly take his place on the circuit for a few weeks. Yeah, it might not be as thrilling for the folks as meeting the wild jungle doctor, but they'd still open their checkbooks.

He could stay.

Not forever, of course, but long enough to make sure Wiwik was out of danger. Maybe long enough to talk the chief of the second longhouse into letting him immunize the children there. Maybe talk to a few of the midwives about different birthing techniques or even speak to the Shaman on the natural jungle remedies being used.

He could stay long enough to see Jimelis again.

April sat up, rubbing her eyes. "What time is it?"

"Around six. You can sleep a little longer if you want," Blair offered.

"No, I'm up." April stood and stretched. "How's she doing?"

"Not great. She started spiking temps again around two this morning."

"What do you think, Blair?"

"What do you think, April?" he tested her.

"I think she needs another round of IV antibiotics. The clinic would be the best place for her but the trip would be hard."

"I agree."

"So?" April asked.

"So, I think someone has to stay here with her."

"I'll do it, " April said immediately.

"No, I need you to go back to the settlement. I'm going to talk to Budi in a few minutes about arranging it."

"But, Blair," she protested.

"Listen," he interrupted, "you need to go help Chaz. Just let Eli know that I'm not sure how soon I'll be back."

"Blair," she started.

He could see the woman digging in her heels so he tried another tact. "April, did you know I was
studying to be an anthropologist before I switched to medicine?"

April shrugged. "Sure. Everybody knows that."

Blair pushed down the grain of irritation wedged in his throat. Yeah, the PR machine at Rainier, starring Cassie Welles, had managed to parade out every bit of his personal life possible in the name of publicity.

That red-haired bitch, Cassie, was yet another poor choice in lovers he had made. When the foundation first started out, she'd offered the services of her upstart public relations firm. She'd worked for next to nothing, insisting to Blair that she wanted to help, that she loved him and the publicity she received for Pennies would open the door for other high-paying clients.

He still had trouble believing he'd ever been so naive. Cassie had appeared so incredibly sincere not only about the charity but about her feelings for him. Catching her in their bed with one of her high-paying clients had opened his eyes about the depths of her love for him.

Unfortunately, she had already convinced him that letting the public know more about him could only help financially.

She'd been right, of course. She might be a two-timing ball-busting whore but she was a hell of a PR agent. Maybe the two went hand-in-hand. He wasn't sure anymore.

She was the one who planned lecture tours to follow every clinic opening. Each arena he spoke at was packed with good, civilized people who adored being both fascinated and appalled by what he had discovered in his travels. Newsletters went out to contributors and classrooms providing updates on established clinics and outlined future projects. Cassie had dragged him along the Oprah/Leno/Letterman circuit more than once. Yeah, she was great at her job and because of that, he would be forced to deal with the lying bitch on a professional level for far longer than he wanted to.

He'd been, in his opinion, pretty reasonable until Cassie began to spice up the stories, leaking out details of his private life: poor little bastard child of a hippie girl, lonely scholar left without a family. Fuck, it was only his threat of legal action that kept her from making his bisexuality front-page news.

It amazed him that not only had he once loved her, but he'd mourned the end of their relationship. Now, she was just one more reason to stay in Borneo.

"Yeah, April, I guess it's no secret I changed to medicine after my Mom passed away." He lifted his hands in supplication. "I want to have this time with the Dyak."

April nodded sympathetically. "Sure, Blair."

"Why don't you get cleaned up and get something to eat? When you get back, I'll talk to Budi."

Yeah, he could stay.

Jimelis blended into the darkening forest, watching, listening, waiting.

The woman had returned to her settlement four days ago. According to Budi, Wiwik grew stronger every day.

He knew the healer's time among them grew short. He'd avoided Blair since their first meeting.

Oh, he'd seen Blair. He'd spent hours watching the gentle way the healer had worked with the
children and the sick. He had listened as Blair respectfully questioned Sugeng about Shamanic remedies. He'd observed the tribe coming to accept the healer's presence among them. Many men, women and children managed to spend a few hours each day around Blair.

He longed to be one of them.

Jimelis had not taken a woman since he'd become Watchman. Many beautiful women had offered themselves to him but he'd had no desire to touch their soft, lush bodies in that way.

But Blair, the desire for Blair kept him from resting, from thinking. He understood it was taboo for one man to take another but he knew it was done. Little happened in the village he was not aware of.

Men did have sex with other men but they were discreet, the tribe kept their secret and the relationship was not blessed by the Shaman.

Would Blair find this desire, this attraction unnatural?

Jimelis thought perhaps Blair would welcome it.

He had seen Blair's brilliant blue-eyes scan the edges of the village and farmland. Jimelis thrilled to it. He knew Blair was hoping to spot him. He had felt the heat between them the first morning. He had preened under Blair's obvious admiration of his body.

Perhaps Blair felt the same strong pull between them.

Perhaps he could find the courage inside himself to go to the young healer and discover the truth.

He would be alone again when the man returned to his own people, but wasn't he plagued by loneliness already? He could always visit the settlement if Blair wanted him to. It was merely a few hours journey.

As sharp as his senses were with the healer in the longhouse and him at the perimeters, how intense might they be if Blair was standing beside him? If Blair was touching him? Kissing him? Inside him?

A distant memory rushed to crowd into his brain. Jimelis and another man, writhing together on a soft pallet covered with smooth, fragrant linens the color of midnight.

A moan of remembered pleasure escaped his throat just before the thought scattered like ashes.

He could have something like that with Blair. He was sure of it.

He was leading a hunting party out at dawn. That gave him tonight to seek out the healer.

The turn around in the young mother was just this side of miraculous. Blair was allowing the women of her family to tend to her and the baby. The wet nurse was staying in the room. He'd switched Wiwik to oral antibiotics and if he left instructions with the Shaman he could probably leave tomorrow.

No, he needed to leave tomorrow. He had a thousand obligations waiting to be fulfilled and he was a man of his word. He would leave tomorrow.

"Blair?" Wiwik's mother beckoned him from the doorway. When he was beside her she whispered, "Jimelis would like to speak to you."

"Really?" Blair was pretty sure every drop of blood anywhere near his brain just migrated to his
"He is at his shelter."

"Oh." He was also pretty sure she was waiting for him to say or do something a little more intelligent. "Good, uh, good." She continued to wait. Pull it together, Sandburg. "Um, Wiwik shouldn't need anything else tonight. Maybe you can get her to eat or drink a little more. I'll be back in the morning unless you need me."

She nodded.

Blair had been sleeping in one of the empty sections near the back of the longhouse for the past two nights. He stopped there to wash up, gather his backpack and a flashlight.

Jimelis wanted to talk to him. It was very possible that's all the older man wanted to do was talk. He hoped not.

One way or another, he knew he had to leave tomorrow.

Jimelis paced within his small shelter. He'd bathed earlier and gone to the longhouse with the intention of inviting Blair here to eat with him.

In the end, his nerve deserted him. He had turned to leave when he had spotted Wiwik's mother. Before he could change his mind, he'd asked the old woman to have Blair come to him.

He'd tried to make it appear as though it was tribal business but the knowing smirk on her face assured him she was not fooled. Not that it mattered, he told himself. She couldn't be sure of anything. He couldn't be sure of anything; not that Blair would understand or want him, not even that Blair would come to him.

He listened as someone walked along the farming fields out the village, coming toward his shelter. It could be anyone in the tribe seeking him, he reminded himself. But the anticipation that tingled along his spine told him it could be only one person.

Blair appeared in the doorway. Sweet-smelling and beautiful with a shy grin.

He would go slow. The last thing he wanted to do was frighten Blair away. He had food, drink and a small fire waiting in the shelter. If nothing else, they could spend the evening talking.

He would go slow because there were things that needed to be said, needed to be done.

He felt the spark between them, even as they stood apart. It was no fluke, that aching desire he thought he sensed running through them that first morning. He could smell Blair's musky arousal.

With a groan he opened his arms.

Backpack slung over his shoulder, flashlight beam bouncing in front of him, Blair picked his way along the small, cleared fields of the Dyaks' communal farm. Every family helped with the crops of yams, rice and sugarcane. The jungle supplemented the Dyak diet with meat and fruit.

The Watchman's shelter lay just beyond the farmland.

Blair was light-headed, nearly giddy as he hurried down the path. He hadn't experienced this kind of anticipation, this tingle, since he was a grateful sixteen-year-old college freshman sliding into a
generous coed.

This wasn't a sure thing, he reminded himself. Budi and Jimelis were close friends. The only motivation the Watchman might have for wanting to see him was to express his thanks for saving the chieftain's wife and child. Or maybe Jimelis knew that Wiwik was almost well and was going to tell him it was time to go back.

The thought made him stumble. Fuck, he knew it was time to go back.

He just wanted this...this, whatever this was. A chance to talk to the man. Maybe find out why a blue-eyed Dyak lived here or if Jimelis really was a Sentinel. Maybe find out why he himself was so goddamned fascinated with the man. Maybe find out if he tasted as good as he smelled.

He stood in front of the shelter trying to calm down. Okay, Sandburg, be cool. Share a moment out of time with this man, then tomorrow go back to your real life.

He clicked off the flashlight and stepped in.

It was nearly dark in the room. A banked fire, a pallet, and not much else was visible to him. He opened his mouth to call out a greeting when he recognized the form in the faint light. It wasn't bright enough to see those blue eyes he'd spent so much time pondering, but the bare-chested silhouette was most definitely Jimelis.

In silence they faced each other. Blair could scarcely breathe for the pressure in his chest, the bubbling excitement threatening to choke him.

He remained motionless, afraid a sudden movement would spook Jimelis. Hell, would spook him, if he were being honest.

Then Jimelis opened his arms.

Blair knew he was lost. He moved into the embrace and lifted his face.

Jimelis could scarcely believe this was happening.

One look at the young healer and his good intentions vanished. He opened his arms. He wasn't sure how Blair would interpret the gesture, he wasn't even sure he knew what he meant by it.

Ah, then that sun-scented body was pressing against him. That lovely, masculine face was tilted to him. That full mouth parted for him. He needn't have worried. Blair knew what he wanted, understood what they both needed.

He covered Blair's lips with his own. The taste was new yet familiar; sugary and sharp.

Toothpaste.

The foreign word burst to the surface of his consciousness. Blair tasted like toothpaste. A flash of an image came to him: he stood in front of his reflection, white linen draped around him, his mouth filled with toothpaste.

The underlying flavor of Blair rubbed against his lips and the memory whirled away like leaves in the wind.

Blair's warm hands pressed against Jimelis' chest, effectively breaking the kiss.
Had he been wrong about what the younger man had wanted? "Blair?"

Blair shook his head as if to clear it. "Wait," he said. Jimelis tightly closed his eyes. He drew in a slow breath, attempting to cool the fire in his gut. He had moved too fast and now the healer would run.

A thump and the slide of fabric caused him to open his eyes. Blair's backpack and shirt lay in a heap on the ground. Blair smiled up at him and pressed against him once more. "Better," he proclaimed.

Jimelis grunted his agreement as he settled his mouth over Blair's again. Blair immediately worked his tongue past Jimelis' lips to probe his mouth.

Jimelis was bombarded by sensation: the crisp hair of Blair's torso gently abrading his own smooth chest and belly, Blair's cloth covered erection grinding against his thigh, the warm trail of Blair's fingers skimming the exposed flesh at the small of his back. For a brief second he stiffened in Blair's arms, fearing it was too much and he would slip into a small time of insanity.

"Jimelis?" Blair whispered and his fears disappeared. Blair knew what to do. He would let Blair lead.

Blair slipped his slightly callused fingertips just below the knot that held the fabric at Jimelis' hips secure and pulled. Without relinquishing the hold he had on the healer's hair, Jimelis kicked the pooled fabric away. The night air was cool against his hardened shaft and he rocked it into Blair's firm abdomen.

"God, let's lay down," Blair gasped.

"Not yet," he answered.

Reluctantly releasing the curls threaded around his hands, Jimelis sank to his knees before Blair. He dragged his hands down Blair's body, scoring his nails over Blair's nipples, across his abdomen, to the top of his garment. He hesitated, studying the silver closure on it.

Zipper.

The word came unbidden. It was a zipper. With sure hands, Jimelis worked it open, wondering for a moment how he knew how. The scent of Blair's heat filled his head and the knowledge was forgotten.

"Oh man, oh man, oh man," Blair chanted above him as Jimelis slipped the clothing down and Blair stepped out of it. He buried his face in Blair's groin, inhaling deeply. He felt the stinging bite of Blair's fingers digging into his shoulders for support.

Blair was here and if the moans he were emitting were any indication, Jimelis was pleasing him very much. He nearly shouted aloud with joy.

He moved his head slowly from side to side letting the varied textures of the wiry curls, the sticky-slick precome and the hot, firm erection run over his face again and again.

"God, Jimelis, God," Blair pleaded.

Not yet, he thought, as he brought his face lower to nuzzle the heavy, full sacks beneath Blair's penis. He opened his mouth and carefully drew one in, laving it tenderly before turning his attention to its mate.
Blair's voice trembled. "So good, man. So fucking good."

Silently, he agreed. He pulled back and began to nibble at the base of Blair's cock, working his way to the tip with tiny nips followed by wet licking. When he at last reached the head, glistening moisture had gathered there and Jimelis suckled at it while firmly pumping the shaft. It tasted incredible: salty, fertile and alive.

Blair bucked his hips and Jimelis moved his hands around to grasp the other man's thighs and hold him still. Blair mumbled "Sorry," and Jimelis had pity on him. He sucked the hard cock deeply into his mouth.

This, too, somehow he remembered. Relaxing as much as he could, he bobbed up his head up and down caressing Blair's cock with his throat while swiping his tongue over the sensitive glans under the head.

Oh yeah, suck me harder, Jimmy. You suck me so damned good. Yeah, just like that. For an instant he thought it was Blair then he realized it was a voice from his past that crooned to him.

"Perfect," Blair said. "So fucking perfect."

Jimelis knew Blair was close. Another trick from his past surfaced. He released Blair's cock from his mouth and squeezed tightly at the base. When Blair spilled his seed, Jimelis wanted it to be within him.

Blair shuddered as his orgasm, so close to erupting, was effectively suppressed.

He reached his hand out to Jimelis. "Come on." Jimelis took it, stood and followed him to the pallet. Jimelis sat at the edge of the bedding as though waiting for Blair's instruction. The sight of the Watchman, so big, so powerful, so ready to comply with his desires, was a little intimidating.

"Um, wait a second," Blair said, scrambling for his backpack. "Oh, lay down, okay?" he called over his shoulder. In the semi-dark of the shelter he searched through the pack by touch. "Found it." He hurried back to Jimelis.

The other man was on his belly, arms folded under his head, strong, lean legs spread in invitation.

Blair swallowed hard. Shit, this was way more than he had hoped for.

He lowered himself on the pallet and kissed the side of Jimelis' face. Jimelis tipped his head and met Blair's lips. "Blair," he whispered, "you will take me?"

Blair ran his hand over the silky expanse of the larger man's back. The muscles were bunched, tense. "We don't have to do this," he offered, although he sincerely hoped they would.

"I want to," Jimelis assured him.

"Well, if you're sure," he said as he moved between Jimelis' thighs.

"I am sure."

Blair leaned forward and began to lick at the nape of Jimelis' neck. He'd had sex with countless men over the years but never before had it seemed so important. He would remember this forever; he needed Jimelis to remember this forever, too.

The hot body under him began to squirm, trying to move closer. He stretched out over him, his chest
against Jimelis' back, his hard cock against Jimelis' ass. Then Jimelis pushed up to increase the friction between them.

Jesus, he wanted to shoot right then. Yeah, Sandburg, really impress him with a little premature ejaculation.

He bit his lip, attempting to distract his hard-on from the taunt skin under it, and moved slowly down Jimelis, leaving a pathway of moist kisses on the man's shoulders and spine.

"Blair," Jimelis breathed.

He reached over for the Surgi-lube he'd taken from his backpack. Kneeling up, he squeezed the contents of the silver package over the fingers of his right hand. Take it slow, Sandburg, he reminded himself, as he used two fingers to rub tiny circles at the tight entrance into Jimelis. A moment later Jimelis raised up on his elbows and pushed back demandingly.

Hmmm. Okay, maybe taking it too slow.

He eased into Jimelis, loving the contrast of the tight ring around his fingers and the smooth channel beyond. Jimelis moaned his name and Blair was struck by the total rightness and complete wrongness of their lovemaking.

He wanted this connection desperately but not like this. Their first time together shouldn't be with Jimelis face-down and turned away. It was too anonymous. It smacked of the nameless, faceless fucks he'd picked up over the years to sate his sexual hunger. This was more than that. He couldn't explain but he understood this was more.

He gently withdrew his fingers.

Jimelis froze. "Blair? What's wrong?"

Jimelis felt a rush of air across his back as Blair sighed then began to speak. "Nothing is wrong, really...just, would you turn over?"

"Turn over?" he repeated stupidly.

"Yeah, it's just that I," Blair paused, obviously embarrassed. "I just want to be able to see your face when we, when I'm inside you."

He hadn't imagined he could get any more aroused but Blair's words, hesitant and with the ring of truth in them, had him ready to burst. He shifted to his back, splaying his legs, letting Blair crouch easily between them.

Blair kissed Jimelis' chest, then rocked back, settling his weight on his heels. Jimelis bent his knees upward in invitation. The healer smiled softly and positioned himself at Jimelis' opening.

He winced slightly as the head of Blair's cock pressed carefully into him.

"Is this all right?" Blair asked, concern coloring his tone. "Am I hurting you?"

Jimelis was burning, stretching but the last thing he wanted was for Blair to stop. "No, you're not hurting me," he lied.

Blair advanced again, the strain of holding back showing on his face. In that moment, with Blair's bright blue-eyes searching his own with worry, his body remembered. He relaxed, unclenching his
small, internal muscles. He wrapped his legs around Blair's waist and pulled so that, in one stroke, Blair was completely seated within him.

"Oh, my God," Blair hissed when his pelvis was flush against Jimelis. "You are fucking amazing." Blair leaned down and licked his lips.

He wanted to tell Blair how perfect this was, how surprising it was to have found this at last but Blair tilted Jimelis' hips higher off the pallet and he lost the ability to speak.

At first, Blair's movements were excruciatingly slow and tentative. When he growled his approval, Blair slid his arms under Jimelis, helping to support him, to let the thrusts increase in speed and force. The burning and stretching gave way to heat and wholeness, to fiery ecstasy.

He'd been right. With Blair buried inside him, holding him, tethering him, he could let the power of his senses take flight.

He could smell not only their sexual arousal mixed with the musk of Blair's skin, but also the overturned soil of the fields, the foliage that filled the jungle, the fast moving water of the river, the freshness of the far-away mountain tops.

He could hear not only the pounding of Blair's heart, but also the sizzling of meat in the settlement cooking fires, the laughing conversations in the longhouse, the breeze skittering along the tree branches.

He knew he could safely let his senses go even further. He was sure he could have listened to the wind that blew between the stars if he tried but he reined his senses in.

There would be other times, other chances to let his senses soar; for now, he wanted to soar with Blair.


Blair couldn't believe he'd lasted this long.

The array of tactile stimulants should have easily pushed him over the edge by now. Jimelis' salty, warm flesh was shining with perspiration in the faint light. The hot hole surrounding his cock was an impossible combination of snug and pliant. Jimelis erection bobbed between their bellies searching for friction. It should have been way too much but, Jesus, he wanted this to last.

Blair repositioned Jimelis' legs from around his waist to hook over his shoulders. He pumped his hips forward so that Jimelis' ass and lower back were completely in the air.

"Yes, yes, yes," Jimelis moaned in time to Blair's quickened, soul-deep thrusts.

"So fucking good," Blair managed as he moved his right hand to encircle his lover's rigid penis. "Nothing ever felt this fucking good." He lubricated Jimelis' cock with the fluid it was copiously leaking and began to rhythmically fist it. Jimelis came almost immediately, his orgasm spattering Blair's chest and neck, his body clenching even tighter around Blair's cock.

That was too much. With a roar Blair erupted, pouring his seed into Jimelis' clinging body.

They remained locked together, still for several moments, their harsh pants echoing in the primitive shelter. The spell was broken when Blair's now semi-erect cock slipped from Jimelis. Blair gently lowered the other man's hips and legs down to the pallet.

Jimelis reached for Blair and they settled into each other, sated and comfortable.
There were so many things Blair wanted to talk with Jimelis about but the steady beat of the
Watchman's heart lulled him to sleep.

Tomorrow, he thought. They would talk tomorrow.

His dreams that night were troubling.

Twice he'd awakened short of breath, heart pounding, the remembered taste of brine at the back of
his throat.

Twice Blair had reached out to soothe him, patting him and saying "Go back to sleep. I'm here.
Everything is all right."

It was true. With Blair wrapped around him, everything was all right.

The third time he awoke it was near dawn and slivers of the dream remained. He was falling from
the sky then swimming and swimming while the air around him was full of smoke and screaming
and fear and helplessness.

He pulled Blair closer and the dream faded.

He finally understood. He kissed Blair's ear and whispered into it, "My Shaman." Without disturbing
the sleeping man, he slipped from the pallet and made ready to lead the hunters.

He dressed quickly, his mind on his lover a few feet away. Blair was his Shaman. He was Blair's
Watchman. They belonged to one another. Jimelis didn't want to leave Blair's side, he never wanted
to be apart from him but he had to head the hunting party. It was his duty. If Blair returned to the
settlement at the river's mouth, Jimelis would follow him later. Blair would know this because now
that they had found each other, they were one.

Jimelis gathered his darts and arrows. He would take the hunters far today and provide well for the
tribe. After this they would have to depend on their own skills and that of the boy Watchman, Kawi.
He was grateful to Budi and these people, they had been good to him but they would understand.
The Dyak knew a Watchman should be with his Shaman.

His heart light, Jimelis stood by the pallet and watched Blair slumber. This would be his forever. The
younger man's exhaustion was clear. Too many nights at Wiwik's side, too many days tending to the
tribe. He would let his Shaman sleep.

He bent down and tenderly kissed the beautiful, sleep-slack mouth.

Quietly, hope soaring in him, Jimelis left his shelter.

"Would you like another drink, sir?"

Why the fuck not? "Yes, please. Bourbon and Coke." Blair rarely got drunk on a plane. Hell, he
rarely drank alcohol at all but it was, after all, a special occasion. How often did a man come face-to-
face with his irresistible someone only to discover the attraction was one-sided?

The flight attendant, cute and way too perky for his state of mind, set the cocktail on Blair's laptop
tray. "I don't mean to be forward but aren't you the Pennies for the Jungle doctor?"

He dredged up a smile for her. "Yeah, I'm Blair Sandburg."
"I'm Missy," she said. "I was sure it was you. My niece is a second grader and I went with her to one of your presentations in Seattle last spring. Your work is just fascinating."

Blair gulped his drink. The sweet burn was comforting. "Thanks."

"Well, if you want anything else, let me know." Blair nodded absently at her. Six months ago, hell, two weeks ago, he would have jumped on what Missy was not-so-subtly offering. Right now, though, his heart was a little too sore for it.

He tilted his chair back and looked out the window. It was dark now. Good. That meant he couldn't gauge where they were or how far he was from Jimelis.

"Missy?" he said as the brunette walked by again. "Could I have another, please?" She looked as though she might refuse him. Airline regulations were pretty strict these days about letting passengers get shit-faced but Blair flashed her a wide-eyed, little boy grin. "Last one, I swear. It's been a long couple of months."

"Oh, did you open another clinic?"

"Yes, in Borneo. Clinic number five. I'm celebrating and then I'm going to sleep. Promise."

Missy clucked her tongue sympathetically and hurried to fetch his drink.

After he finished the bourbon and coke, he tried to sleep but each time he closed his eyes the last week replayed in his head.

It was time to admit that when it came to love, he was a fucking fool. Cassie Welles should have cured him of any romantic notions but no, he'd fallen for a man he hardly knew and had barely seen.

He pressed his lips together tight to keep a groan from escaping as he recalled how unbelievably hot Jimelis' mouth had felt on his skin, how delicious it had been to pump into the other man's hard, muscular body. His heart dropped into his stomach as he recalled how safe, how tethered he'd been as they rested in each other's arms.

He was such a jerk. He'd actually managed to delude himself there was something more than blood-pounding, breath-stealing, toe-curling fucking going on between them. He'd convinced himself they had an amazing connection, that they were destined to be together. He was too jaded to be blinded by the forever-after bullshit that April had spouted, but he'd been taken in all the same.

Even when he'd awakened alone in Jimelis' shelter he'd believed everything was fine. Jimelis was the tribal Watchman, he was bound to have obligations other than making love all day.

Budi had told him that Jimelis and the hunters were out in the jungle and they normally returned within a day. So, he had spent the next day and night on an emotional high waiting for his lover to return. He'd worked happily giving last minute instructions to the midwives and examining some of the children from the second longhouse.

When night fell the second day, Blair realized Jimelis was waiting for him to leave before the hunters returned to the village.

After extracting a promise from Sugeng and Budi that Dyaks of their longhouse would use the clinic if necessary, Blair had them take him back to the base camp.

Blair had stalled for a few more days at the clinic, hoping against hope Jimelis would come to him there. When he realized how stupid it was to wait for someone who would never come, Blair had Eli
arrange a ride to the airport.

Blair wanted to ask Missy for another drink but he didn't. He turned to look out into the darkness again. What had he been thinking anyway? That Jimelis would fall head-over-heels in love with him? And if he had, then what? Pluck a primitive Dyak out of the jungle and plunge him into the twenty-first century so that Blair wouldn't be alone any more?

With the Dyak, Jimelis had a position of honor, a role that was essential in the tribal hierarchy. What had he expected Jimelis to be in Cascade? His trophy? His fuck toy? Or had he imagined that he would turn his back on everything and stay in the jungle with Jimelis? Jesus, he was so unrealistic sometimes. The whole thing was impossible from the beginning. Jimelis realized and accepted it. Why couldn't he? Why did it have to hurt so fucking bad?

He wondered, as he drifted off into a drunken sleep, why, when he thought of their night together, did he remember their conversations being in English?

This hunt was taking far too long.

What would have taken him a single morning was now stretching into a second day. Letting the boy Watchman, Kawi, lead the party was difficult but important. His youth notwithstanding, the tribe would soon depend on Kawi's powers and skill for game and protection.

As the boy made yet another false start, Jimelis reined in his impatience. He stood silently as Kawi stilled and scented the air in a second attempt. The boy's senses were good but he allowed his childish enthusiasm to cause him to act without caution, to move too fast. He'd alerted more animals than the men had brought down.

It was a matter of wisdom and maturity, Sugeng had told Jimelis before. Jimelis wondered if the tribe would tire of fish and fruit before the boy learned to temper his senses and enthusiasm.

Kawi turned to the men and smiled. He nodded toward the east began and began to quickly and quietly stalk the game. Jimelis stayed behind giving the boy his chance to lead the men and gain confidence. Each Watchman duty Kawi took and mastered, moved Jimelis closer to freedom, closer to being with Blair.

The scent of the hunt wasn't right, Jimelis realized. Blood, fresh and coppery and most certainly human, began to drift on the air.

He ran into the underbrush where Kawi and the other had disappeared from sight.

Deciding he must have completely fucked up his Karma during his last lifetime, Blair exited his plane in Cascade. His head was pounding with a wicked hangover and his tongue was coated with sleep and stale bourbon. And there waiting just outside the gate, in all her shark-like glory, was Cassie Welles.

The redhead smiled brightly and hurried over to him. Before he could stop her, she threw her arms around him and kissed his face. "Blair, honey, it's so good to see you."

The blinding flash alerted him to the press just beyond Cassie. "Smile, Sandburg," she hissed in his ear.

"Why?" he whispered back. "I am totally not happy to see you." He pulled away from Cassie and turned to smile at the reporters. Cassie threaded her hands around Blair's left arm and hung on tightly.
Wondering what her game was, Blair gave a short interview. Yes, the fifth clinic was up and running. Yes, he'd be touring soon and would release all the details then. He'd like to thank everyone for their continued support of Pennies for the Jungle. Gosh, he'd love to talk longer but he was exhausted after a long flight.

Charmed by him as always, the reporter let him pass.

Blair was silent until he'd picked up his luggage and settled into Cassie's BMW. Raining and gray, Cascade was the same as when he'd left it months ago.

As she smoothly pulled into mid-afternoon traffic, Blair twisted in the passenger's seat to confront her.

"Okay, what was that all about?"

"What was what all about?"

"The hug and kiss, you meeting me at the airport, the camera crew laying in wait."

"I can see four and a half months in the jungle hasn't improved your temperament at all, Blair."

"Cassie, don't fucking push me," he warned.

"Oh, for heaven's sake. You stay out in Borneo longer than you were supposed to and missed two important fundraisers. I knew the handsome doctor fresh from the wilderness would gain some forgiveness and support, alright?" She glanced at him. "Honestly, Blair, you're a celebrity. Would it have killed you to clean up a little before you landed?" She wrinkled her nose. "You smell like a whiskey factory. I hope no one from the TV station got a whiff of you."

"Bourbon actually and if you hadn't staged the impromptu interview whether or not I drink on the plane wouldn't be an issue for public scrutiny."

"I reiterate, you're a celebrity, Blair. You always have to be aware of what you do and how it might appear to the public."

"No, Cassie, I'm a doctor. That's the only important thing to me." He realized he was near shouting and lowered his voice. "All this celebrity crap was your concoction, not mine."

"You were happy enough for my help in the beginning, weren't you? Don't be angry now because I did my job well and you've gotten the face recognition you needed."

"You just don't get it, do you? Man, I never wanted that. I wanted to build clinics in remote areas. I wanted health care available for primitive tribes, not to be some well known personality for you to trot out at every damn dog-and-pony show you can scrape together."

"My making you a household name was a stroke of genius, Blair, and I won't let you down play it. It's what pays for those clinics you care so much about and don't you ever forget it."

"Like you'd ever let me." He sighed. "Funny how you managed to build yourself quite a lucrative career using my name and face."

As if realizing arguing wasn't working, Cassie shrugged her thin shoulders. "Look, Blair, I know you're tired. I guess I shouldn't have set that mini press conference up without telling you. It wasn't very considerate of me. I wasn't thinking about how you might be feeling. It just seemed to be such a great photo-op for the foundation."
Blair snorted, not taken in by her feigned sincerity. "Amazingly enough, it appeared to be a great photo-op for Welles' Imaging, too. Don't try to bullshit me, Cassie. You haven't been the one to pick me up at the airport for years. Let's keep it that way, okay?"

Cassie pulled in front of Blair's building. "Oh, Blair," she said sarcastically, "I must really have hurt you back then for you to be so bitter. You've got to let it go and get over me."

Blair gave an ugly laugh. "Better get over yourself, Cassie. Whatever it was I felt for you is in the past and that's where it stays. I'm just wondering if you and your business needed to be on the news tonight more than Pennies for the Jungle did."

"What are you saying?" she asked.

"Never mind." He put his hand on the door handle then turned back to her. "I realize we have to work together. Your firm does great work so I'm stuck and so are you. I can live with that. I've forgiven us for things we did to each other before but I'll never forget. You were a liar and cheater and a manipulator and I was ignorant and naive. The difference now? I've changed, you haven't."

"Real nice sentiment, Blair."

"Maybe not but it's the truth. When I see you I remember I can't trust you. Let's not pretend we're friends, Cassie."

Cassie rolled her eyes. "Fine." She watched as he climbed out of the car. "You know," she said through the open window, "someone who makes as much money as you do should live somewhere other than Prospect. This is such a run-down dump of a neighborhood."

Blair pulled his suitcase from the trunk then leaned into her window. "I love it here but, yeah, it is a little on the seamy-side. Maybe you better leave before it gets dark." Bitch, he added under his breath as he walked into the stairwell. He allowed himself a small smile of satisfaction as he heard her car squeal away. How could he have ever thought that he was in love with that woman?

"The spirits wait for him," Sugeng declared. "Listen to his words. He is speaking the language of his gods."

Budi wiped the tears from his eyes. His friend was thrashing in agony.

"His death is not without purpose, Budi," Sugeng offered by way of comfort. "He saved the life of Kawi and four other men. Even to the end he fulfilled his duty as Watchman."

Budi turned away, unable to bear the other man's suffering as he rushed towards eternity. When the hunters had brought him back, Budi had been horrified by the deep gashes along Jimelis' back and legs.

Kawi, kneeling by Jimelis' pallet praying, was inconsolable. The boy had misread the scent and signs of the game and stumbled over a Malay bear. The wound on the boy's leg was healing well. The wounds Jimelis received were now putrid and oozing. The Shaman's shelter held the unmistakable stench of pain and death.

Sugeng had done all he could, the tribe had prayed and fasted and still, it was not enough. Late last night Jimelis had finally awoken from his stupor but he'd become delirious, calling out in gibberish. Sugeng insisted it was spirit talk. Budi believed Jimelis was speaking the language of his past, calling out for help that would never come.
"Send for me when the time is close," Budi said from the doorway. "I do not want him to die without me at his side."

Budi leaned on the outside wall of the shelter. Night was rapidly approaching. He knew Jimelis would not live to see another dawn.

He could not find the strength to push away from the shelter and go home. Home, where his happiness waited. It was unjust how he now had everything he'd ever wanted, and his friend who was responsible for so much of that happiness was dying. It seemed cowardly to not at least wait there, listening as Jimelis cried out in his twisted tongue to his gods. Budi owed the man at least that much.

Then Jimelis began to repeat one word over and over.

Not just a word, Budi realized, but a name. A name he knew also. Blair. The healer's name was Blair.

He was a fool, a blind fool. He had been so set in the old ways he had not even considered the possibility of using the new ways.

It would take far too long to fetch the healer to Jimelis. He would have to send Jimelis to the healer. If they hurried, a flat boat could get Jimelis to Blair before it was too late.

Blair flipped the switch nearest the door, flooding the loft with light. The loft had been home since he was eighteen and had used Naomi's small life insurance policy as a down payment. It was a wide open room downstairs containing a kitchen, an eating area and a living room. There was a small room equipped as an office under the steps and a bathroom he'd spent an obscene amount of money remodeling a couple of years back.

Windows and glass doors lined the side of the loft leading to a long balcony that had an excellent view of the bay. The room was decorated in a comfortable, discreetly expensive style with artifacts from the various expeditions he'd gone on. Upstairs was a huge bedroom with a king-sized bed.

Dropping his luggage at the foot of the stairs, Blair glanced at the flashing light on the answering machine. Fifty-three calls. Maybe tomorrow he'd feel more like sorting through them. He checked to make sure the ringer was turned off. He definitely didn't want to talk to anyone which was, he decided, rather perverse of him since he was so fucking lonely.

Stripping off his rumpled jeans and shirt and dumped them on the floor next to the luggage, he went into the bathroom, took a quick shower and brushed the tasted of rancid liquor out of his mouth. He wrapped up in the blue flannel robe hanging on the back of the bathroom door and hurried into the living room to start a fire.

The pouring rain had turned to a drizzle but he knew the sun would never break through the heavy overcast.

His stomach growled. He knew the neighbor who'd aired out his apartment would have put a few groceries in his refrigerator as well, but he usually celebrated his first night home with a pizza from Papa Leoni's. There weren't many things he missed while in the jungle but Papa Leoni's deep dish was one.

Still, it seemed wrong to celebrate anything when his heart was freshly stomped on. He made two grilled cheese sandwiches which he ate while watching a Gilligan's Island rerun.
Full and exhausted, he laid down on the sofa and covered up with the Navajo blanket he kept folded at the foot of it. He fell asleep almost immediately.

In his dream he was a voyeur, hovering just above Jimelis’ pallet. He watched himself make love with the other man. The part of him that observed the lovers was oddly detached from the scene in front of him.

The part of him that was holding Jimelis was joyful, fulfilled. He looked on as the bigger man wrapped himself around the sleeping Blair’s body. Jimelis leaned over and whispered into Blair’s ear, "My Shaman."

Blair sat bolt upright on the sofa.

Jesus. He’d had a few dreams about Jimelis and sex over the last week but nothing so real, nothing so upsetting.

My Shaman. Where had that come from and what was it supposed to mean?

The sound of his own voice coming from the television drew Blair’s attention. Apparently his airport interview had made the 11 o’clock news.

Cassie was right. He had looked like shit. She, on the other hand, had been dressed to the nines. He hadn’t realized at the time how possessive she’d looked, leaning against him with her hands wrapped around his left arm. The sight was disturbing. They looked not like business associates but like lovers.

He wondered again what she really wanted. Cassie always had an ulterior motive. She couldn’t seem to help it, it was just the way she was wired.

Using the remote, he turned off the TV and settled back down on the sofa. He was damned tired but he wasn’t up to facing that big, empty bed.

The street lights softly illuminated the loft. Blair turned on his side to watch the now heavy rain pelt the glass doors.

It was stupid to lay here practically mooning over someone a couple of thousand miles away who lived in a culture a couple of thousand years apart from his own. He knew that, but he wasn’t ready to let it go.

No matter how juvenile, no matter that a primitive jungle dweller was more pragmatic than he, Blair just couldn’t let it go. He couldn’t help but think that there could have been more, that the night they’d been together could have been the beginning for them.

And anyway, with the nugget of hurt lodged in his heart right now, at least he felt something.

"April, wake up. I need your help. It's an emergency."

April sat up on her cot struggling to be alert. It was Chaz’s night to sleep in the clinic and be their version of the on-call nurse, so she’d stayed up late reading and writing letters.

"Chaz, what the heck is it?"

The man looked absolutely frantic. "Two Dyak warriors brought a wounded man in. They're asking for Blair. The guy is in bad shape but they won't let me touch him. I can't get them to understand that
Blair isn't here anymore."

"Okay, let me get dressed." She slipped on shorts and tucked her nightgown into it. She quickly pulled on boots, grabbed her flashlight and led the way back to the clinic.

She immediately recognized the two men as the warriors who had taken her and Blair to their village two weeks ago. Sagging between them was her patient. She could already smell the infection in him.

The younger warrior sighed with relief when he saw her. "April."

"Yes, hello." She indicated the examine table, "Put him up here."

They gently lifted him up. "Place him on his left side." She turned to Chaz and instructed in English, "Start an IV of 1/2 normal saline wide open and get a couple of irrigation kits."

"Budi wants Blair to care for him. I tried to tell this one," the older warrior said, pointing to Chaz, "but he did not understand."

"Blair is gone," April said as she took vital signs. The man was burning up.

"Gone? Where has he gone?" the younger asked.

"Back to the place we come from," she said absently. This man was critical. "What happened to him?" she asked moving to irrigate the festering flesh on the patient's back and legs.

"Jimelis was attacked by a bear while he was trying to save a hunting party."

"Where are the others then?"

"They are unhurt."

"Thank goodness for that at least. How long ago was the attack?"

"Four days, almost five."

"You were right to bring him here," April told the two warriors. "We have a lot of work to do. You are both welcome to wait in the longhouse." She addressed Chaz, "Point them in the right direction and get back here quick."

So, this was Jimelis. She hoped to God she could save him.

Back less than forty-eight hours and Cassie all ready had him dressed in a tux and pressing flesh at the Rotary Club’s Annual Ball.

Jesus, he hated these things. This pretentious, condescending jackass questioning him about the "pathetic squalor that the savages live in" was crawling on Blair's last shred of patience.

Sandburg, you're a total hypocrite.

Blair nodded, smiled and answered with as much sincerity as he could muster. Cassie had pointed out this particular horse's butt as a potentially huge donor.

"Play nice, Blair," she’d warned in that irritating schoolmarm tone she loved to use with him. "This guy could fund a clinic for a year with the change in his pocket."
Reminding himself it was for the greater good, he escorted the jerk's much younger wife out on the dance floor. At least the woman was a decent dancer and a pleasant conversationalist. Anyway, it was a four-minute respite from fundraising and Blair was grateful.

As the band was winding down, Blair danced her back to her husband and was immediately pulled back to the floor by Cassie.

"Why are we dancing?" he asked as he whirled her around. "We haven't danced together in years, Cassie, and I kind of wanted to keep it that way."

"I'm trying to keep us from losing William Muntzinger as a benefactor."

He gracefully swung her to the edge of the platform. "Lose him? I was so totally charming."

"His wife Kathy thought so, too."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"It means if you're hitting a man up for money you probably shouldn't be hitting on his wife."

Through tightly smiling lips Blair said, "You are way off base here, Cassie."

"Am I?"

"I have no interest in married women. You should know better than anyone that I have no use for cheaters."

"Ooo, arrow to the heart," she said with a nasty laugh. "Seriously, Blair, little Kathy was eyeing you like an éclair that she wanted to take a bite out of. I had to defuse the situation."

"By dancing with me? How does dancing with me defuse the situation?"

"Well," Cassie wouldn't meet his eyes. The music stopped and she attempted to step around him. He discreetly grabbed her hand and pulled her to him.

"What did you do, Cassie?"

"Can we take this somewhere else?"

"No. Tell me now."

She sighed and tilted her head to him. "I told him you and I are seeing each other."

He was angry but kept his voice low. "What the hell would you say that?"

"It's not a big deal, Blair." The band started again and she moved into his arms. He automatically began to dance. "I mean, I'm not seeing anyone. You're not seeing anyone. If it helps us snag a big donation from an old man who's trophy wife has a roving eye, what's the harm?"

"What's the harm?" He took a deep breath to center himself. "The harm is, I don't want anyone to think that we're dating. And it's a pretty big leap there, that because you're not with anyone, I'm not either."

She waltzed in silence.

"Okay, Cassie, what? I can tell you're dying to say something, so just say it."
She gave a dramatic sigh. "Well, are you?"

"Am I what, Cassie?" God, this woman was infuriating.

"Are you seeing someone, Blair? Honestly, you drive me nuts."

"If I'm involved with someone, it's hardly any business of yours."

"Hmmm," Cassie mused aloud, "you've been stuck out in Borneo for months so it has to be someone on the team." She screwed up her mouth as she thought for a moment. "I doubt it was one of the anthropology students. The woman, what's her name, April? She's too old for you. So, that leaves the other nurse. Charles Something." She shot him a hot glare. "Dating boys again, Blair?"

He shrugged. "I never stopped. This conversation is boring me to tears, Cassie."

"Fine. Just let me say one more thing then. It's not going to help the foundation if you'reouted."

"You are unbelievable, you know that, Cassie? Man, two years ago I threatened to sue you if you leaked out the details of my sex life. Now, you're telling me to stay in the closet."

"The cultural pendulum is swinging, Blair. Our backers are more conservative than they were in the beginning."

"Whatever." He led her off the dance floor. As a flurry of dancers passed on either side of them he whispered to her, "I'll sleep with whomever I wish. I'll be involved with whomever I wish. We work together and that's all, Cassie. I don't know what's gotten into you but I don't want your opinion or interference in my personal life. Got it?"

"Perfectly."

"Great. If you'll excuse me, I see some people I'd actually like to talk to." With that he joined a group from the University.

As he struggled to return smiles and handshakes with old acquaintances, he thought how much easier all this would be if Jimelis was waiting for him somewhere.

Cassie slammed her black clutch on the kitchen counter.

Damn it. Damn Blair Sandburg. Damn the whole night.

She knew better than to come on strong with him but she'd done it anyway. The two of them were like gasoline and a blowtorch. They always had been.

She kicked her pumps across the living room, smiling with satisfaction when one hit the far wall. She would have liked to hit Blair upside his arrogant head this evening.

She stood beneath the unforgiving florescent light over her bathroom mirror and began to remove her makeup. Smoothing lotion around her eyes, she noted how pronounced the fine lines were becoming. Maybe Botox would be in her life a little sooner than she'd originally anticipated.

When she'd planned her life way back in college, she thought she'd be married by now. If Blair wasn't such a judgmental prick she'd all ready be in an advantageous, socially mobile union.

Sure, Blair had had no real social standing when they first met. He was just some bastard kid with a medical degree and a dream, but she'd recognized the drive and the potential in him. She'd help
nurture that potential. She'd helped him make the charity viable.

He'd been crazy about her in those days. She should have pressed for marriage but she'd been cocky and stupid. She'd never imagined Blair would walk in to view her doing, well, extra curricular activities. She'd certain never dreamed he'd take it so hard.

Blair had been so free-spirited and open-minded back then. He'd admitted his bisexuality, for heaven's sake. But she'd learned the hard way there were a few things on which Blair was unwavering. Monogamy, fidelity and loyalty were all tied together for him.

She changed into her nightgown and scrutinized herself in the full-length mirror. Her body was excellent. Four days a week in the gym and a diet regiment straight from the depths of hell kept her belly flat and her breast and bottom high. Even so, she knew diet and exercise could do only so much against age and gravity.

After putting an outrageously expensive ointment that promised younger skin, she turned off the light and slipped into bed.

Years ago she'd tried to explain her indiscretion to Blair. She'd tried a hundred times but he wouldn't listen. Sex with other people didn't have to mean anything, it didn't have anything to do with the relationship she had with him. Besides, that particular fuck had been business, pure and simple. Little more than a handshake to seal-the-deal. For some reason that explanation had seemed to upset Blair even more.

She'd even begged for forgiveness but he'd been stubborn.

All he'd given her for her trouble had been the bum's rush out of his loft and out of his life. At the time it had been more inconvenient than painful.

She had really liked Blair. He was gorgeous and generous and funny and smart. Their sex life had been great and he'd been well on his way to bigger and better things. If she'd played her cards a bit smarter, he would have taken her with him.

Honestly, a few months ago none of this ancient history and morose reminiscing would have had the power to interrupt her sleep. She never believed a woman needed a man but right now she needed someone.

She desperately needed Blair's cooperation. Starting tomorrow she'd put away the hostility and try using the womanly wiles she knew she possessed.

He'd never know what hit him.

By the morning of the fifth day, April was sure Jimelis would live.

The wounds had been debrided and were pink with healthy tissue showing. He'd been unconscious most of the time but his fever was low-grade now, not raging. She was still running IV maintenance fluids along with the IV antibiotics.

The Dyak warriors had been sent back to their village three days ago with an invitation to return in a week to check on him. The anthropology students had enjoyed questioning the two, but the undertone of hostility between the local Dyak and the warriors was obvious even to April. She and Eli would have to talk with the longhouse chiefs again.

The chiefs had all agreed to a truce of sorts for other tribes seeking medical help but this had been the
first time members of an interior tribe had come and stayed in the settlement. Something would have to be worked out.

Jimelis moaned in pain as he shifted on the cot. After counting his respirations, April injected four milligrams of morphine sulphate into his IV port. After a few moments, he settled back into a peaceful sleep.

He was healing but it would be quite a while before he was up and able to care for himself. She soaked a wash cloth in warm water and wiped his face.

Something about him was so familiar. The first time she'd done neurological checks on him and flashed light into his eyes to observe his pupil's dilation, she'd been taken aback by his blue eyes.

She was certain she hadn't seen him in Budi's camp. She'd heard of him, naturally. During the days she'd worked along side the women of the tribe tending to Wiwik, they had gossiped about various members of their group. This man was very highly regarded among the Dyak.

April had heard Blair carefully probe the tribe about Jimelis. Looking at the man's body, magnificent even in dire illness, she could easily understand why Blair's curiosity had been piqued.

No, she was positive she had never seen him at the longhouse.

So then, where did she know him from?

For so long it was as if nothing existed but his pain.

How long it had been this way, he did not know. His entire body burned from within and his back and legs shrieked out at him in fiery agony.

Sometimes the fire turned cold and he shuddered from its ice. Even then his legs and back were lapped by flames.

Sometime he went to a dark place and hid for a little while but the pain would find him and slam his spirit back into his aching body.

Sometimes gentle hands soothed him. He could hear voices talking over and about him. Sometimes the words held perfect clarity for him. Other times he felt as though he should understand but the meaning was just beyond his reach.

Through the days and nights and time of his suffering, he waited. Patiently, he sorted through the voices and touches and smells searching for the one for whom he would always be waiting.

To his puzzlement, his Shaman never came.

He'd never been called back to one of the established clinics before.

In the past five years, nurses had been replaced and supplies sent without difficulty. Anthropology teams came and went. In one case, the country's entire political structure had pulled apart at the seams yet the clinic stood untouched.

He glanced through the computer file again. The clinic, deep in La Montana region of Peru, was the second one he'd opened and the smoothest set-up to date.

The original two nurses still manned the clinic. Linda and Courtney Yarbrough were a mother-
daughter team he'd selected out of hundreds of applications. The two had worked together in critical care for four years at Cascade General. The daughter, Courtney, had seven years previous experience in maternal nursing and her mother, Linda, had been a midwife. Nurses could be called to perform any number of medical procedures in the jungle but maternity and childcare were far and away the most frequently needed skills.

The Yarbroughs had been a good choice. Both had spoken Spanish fluently when Blair had hired them so they could communicate easily with Peruvian officials when needed. They'd picked up Chopec quickly. Languages were easy for Blair to learn but he realized how difficult it could be for some people. Communication was as essential as good nursing for any clinic's success. He remembered how Chaz had struggled with Javanese.

Having no desire to let his mind wander to Borneo and Jimelis, Blair turned his attention back to the computer monitor. According to Linda, the trouble had started six months ago when the old Shaman had died. The new Shaman, Incacha, refused to honor the agreement his father had made with Blair. The women were safe and untouched but Incacha had allowed them less and less access to the tribe until they were now no longer able to treat anyone of his village.

The Shaman wanted Blair to come back and renegotiate with him, face-to-face. Blair could understand from an anthropological point of view. The Chopec were a patriarchal society. Incacha would never discuss tribal business with women. As far as he would be concerned, they had no power; they received their authority and orders from Blair.

Perhaps there was an advantage to sending a male and female team to certain tribes. He filed away the idea for future consideration.

He sighed as he turned off the computer. The last thing he needed was the added pressure of running to Peru while he was busy fundraising as well as firming up plans for the next clinic.

Of course, he'd already hired a nursing team for the next project. They were at Rainier in intense language classes as well as cultural classes. Supplies had been ordered. The anthropology team wasn't really his concern but had already been selected.

Everything was chugging along just fine. Maybe a month in Peru was what he needed.

Between Cassie's increasingly bizarre behavior and the melancholy he couldn't seem to shake, Blair was suffocating. He caught a glimpse of his reflection in the balcony's glass doors. Hair pulled back and dressed in a tux, he didn't look like someone about to lose his mind.

Cassie was bending over backwards to cater to him. There were moments she was so like the girl he'd once been in love with, he almost forgot what a conniving bitch she could be. He'd yet to figure out what she wanted from him.

Four weeks had passed since he'd left Borneo. He'd never imagined his longing for Jimelis would actually grow stronger rather than fade away. He was beginning to think maybe he would never get over him.

The grown-up, mature Doctor Sandburg hoped Jimelis was well and happy. The hateful, childish Blair hoped the Watchman was miserable and regretted that he hadn't even bothered to say goodbye.

It didn't help that he'd had the weird "My Shaman" dream again last night. It always left him shaky and off kilter for a day or two.

After he'd had the dream the first time, he'd headed over to the university and checked out everything
he could get his hands on that had anything to do with Watchmen, Sentinels and Shamans. He swung between thinking there really was some deep, spiritual connection between Jimelis and him and thinking the whole thing was superstitious nonsense.

He had to keep reminding himself it really didn't matter one way or another. Whether it was a spiritual connection or nonsense was a moot point. They didn't fit into each other's lives.

Not to mention, Jimelis had obviously fucked him and forgotten him. Well, technically, gotten fucked and then forgotten him.

Blair checked the wall clock. 7:19. He and Cassie had a dinner engagement with the Muntzeingers and several other well-heeled philanthropists at eight.

He rubbed at his forehead. Cassie's Miss Sweetness-and-Light act was as irritating as her usual hostility. He'd stopped asking her what she really wanted a couple of weeks ago but he hadn't stopped thinking about it.

He left for Peru tomorrow afternoon. Cassie would either spring it on him tonight or she'd have to wait a month.

He doubted she'd wait.

Cassie put the finishing touches on her face. She'd made an effort to achieve the natural look that Blair had always been so fond of.

She threw down her eyebrow pencil in disgust. For heaven's sake, the last thing she wanted was to have to cater to another man. Wasn't that how she ended up in this mess in the first place?

When she'd come up with this scheme, she'd thought she would have a few months to win Blair over. Between him leaving for Peru tomorrow and the blue test-stick results she'd gotten six weeks ago, her time was up.

Damn it, she hated to go Blair. Unfortunately, of everyone she was acquainted with, only the wonderful, self-sacrificing jungle doctor had a big enough, unblemished enough reputation to pull her fat out of the fire.

After smoothing a creamy, coral color on her lips, she picked up her evening bag and left her townhouse.

Raining. Terrific. She opened her umbrella to protect her hair as she hurried to her car.

If nothing else she'd had a valuable lesson reinforced: never trust anyone, never love anyone. Hadn't her mother told her that a thousand times when she was a kid?

She would have to swallow what was left of her pride and talk to Blair tonight.

When he opened his eyes this time, his mind was clear. He hurt but it was bearable. He had been awake a few other times but the pain had stilled roared so loudly in his head he had not been able to speak. Besides, the light-haired healer spoke with so thick an accent, Jimelis wasn't sure they would be able to communicate.

The air carried the scent of fresh dew and early morning. Little light had filtered through the treetops but there was enough for him to see in the shelter.
On a pallet across the room another slept, huddled beneath linens.

Jimelis' heart beat faster. Who else but his Shaman would be here helping him, coaxing him back to health?

"Blair?" he croaked, his voice dull and low from lack of use and thirst. "Blair?" he tried again.

He desperately wanted to rise and go to his Shaman but he knew he was still too weak.

Closing his eyes, he remembered running into the clearing to see Kawi being attacked by a bear. Without thought, Jimelis had gotten between the boy and the animal, scooped Kawi up in his arms and attempted to flee to safety. The added burden of the boy's weight slowed Jimelis down and made him stumble. He'd wrapped his big body around the boy, taking the brunt of the bear's fury himself.

He had felt cheated in that moment. Despair had settled in him, not because he was going to die but because Blair would again be lost to him. He'd cried out in anguish.

Opening his eyes again, he watched the bundle across the room sleep and was filled with peace.

The hunters must have finished off the bear. He prayed Kawi and the others were safe.

He looked about the shelter. He had never been inside Blair's clinic but he knew that was where he had to be. Blair brought him here to be healed. It made sense. A Shaman would want his Watchman secure in his own medicine hut.

Jimelis wanted to call out to Blair again, to have his healer touch him and talk to him, but his body was exhausted. Blair was here, they were both safe. That was enough for now.

He closed his eyes and slept.

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The dinner party had been another tedious affair. Only with Herculean effort had Blair been able to smile and follow the conversation.

As much as he hated to admit it, even just to himself, Cassie had been right about Kathy Muntzinger. Not only had she been chasing him right under her husband's nose but she hadn't made the slightest attempt to be discreet. How the hell had he missed it at the Rotary Ball? Was he really that out of it? Was his head so full of Jimelis, so full of what he wanted and could never have again that he was completely oblivious to a beautiful woman hitting on him?

He'd been honest with Cassie, though, he had no use for cheaters. He'd been coolly polite to Kathy and immensely grateful to Cassie. She'd rescued him from several potentially embarrassing incidents with Kathy over the course of the evening.

Now, with the party over and holding the promise of nearly five hundred thousand dollars in pledges, he walked Cassie to her BMW.

"Blair," Cassie said as he opened her car door, "can you come over to my apartment tonight? I need to talk to you."

Ah, at last she was ready to spill the beans. Now that she was willing to let him in on her little secret mission, he was oddly reluctant to hear it. "I'm beat, Cassie, and I've got a long flight tomorrow."

"Please, Blair. It's important."

"Can't you just tell me here? I've got a ton of stuff to take care of before I leave."
"I," she hesitated, shaking her head. "It's personal. Please." She looked at him, her eyes bright with tears.

Jesus, he didn't want to do this. He knew she could cry on demand so her tears probably weren't even real but he couldn't help it. "Yeah, okay, I'll follow you over. I can't stay long, though."

"That's fine. Thanks, Blair."

April crawled out of the clinic cot, her bones aching with the early morning damp. The continuous humidity seemed to settle in the joints in her hands and feet. She knew from experience once she started moving and the heat of the day came in, she'd be pain free.

She glanced at her lone patient, still sleeping on the cot across the room. His infection, once life-threatening, was very much under control. The wounds were healing well. Over the course of three weeks he'd come back literally from the brink of death. She felt satisfaction well up inside her. This was what Blair had been talking about that afternoon in Phoenix. Without this clinic this man would be dead. She'd made a difference.

Chaz had been able to get him to eat now and again, but not much. She planned on getting enough in him by mouth in the next day or two to discontinue the IV fluids and medications. Jimelis still slept most of the time, but he'd turned the corner in the last twenty-four hours. Anymore days spent laying in bed could only hurt now, giving his muscles more opportunity to atrophy.

She went to take his vital signs before Chaz came in to take over the clinic. The other nurse would stay for an hour or so, giving her a chance to eat and freshen up.

"Jimelis?" she softly said as she touched his wrist. "Jimelis? Are you awake? I need to examine you."

His eyes snapped open. They were clear blue and alert. It was the first time she'd witnessed animation behind those eyes and she was struck again by the familiarity.

"Blair?" he asked.

"He's not here, Jimelis." She hadn't realized that he and Blair had even met. "I've been taking care of you."

He looked confused. "Where is Blair?" he demanded. "Isn't this his shelter?"

"Well, it's the clinic he set up, yes, but he's not here anymore."

"Where is he?"

"He's in Cascade." She realized that explanation would be of no use to this man and tried again. "He has gone home. He went to the place we come from."

"When will he be back?" He sounded panicked.

"Jimelis," she said gently, "he won't be back."

The devastated look on his face was heartbreaking. "He has gone?" Jimelis whispered. "He has gone and I am left behind?"

"Jimelis," she began, having no earthly idea how to comfort him, or why he even needed comforting, "I will take care of you until you are well enough to return to your tribe. Budi had you brought to the
clinic because you were so ill they were afraid you might die. Budi hoped our medicine would help you like it did Wiwik."

Jimelis gave a small nod, indicating his understanding.

"I am April," she said, hoping to ease some of the distress radiating from him. "April Dickerson."

"April Dickerson," he repeated dutifully.

It was the way he said her name. She knew then.

She looked passed the shaggy, crudely cut hair, passed the darkly tanned face and the wane of illness. At least six years had gone by since she'd seen him, maybe three years since she'd heard any talk about him, but it was definitely him. The same blue eyes, the same jaw line, the same voice.

She crouched next to his cot so they were eye-level before she spoke.

"Captain Ellison?"

Cassie shook the water droplets from her coat and umbrella before stepping into her townhouse. She took his coat and hung it with hers in the tiled foyer.

"Would you like some tea, Blair?" she called over her shoulder. He almost refused, wanting this over with quickly, but the evening chill swirled in behind them and changed his mind.

"Yeah, that would be great."

"It will just take a minute," Cassie said, disappearing into the kitchen. "Take a look around and get comfortable."

He wandered through the dining room and living room before sitting on the sofa. Her place was filled with tasteful, ultra chic furnishings. It was beautiful and sterile and nothing like what they'd shared for two years.

It was also nothing like where he wanted to be. Closing his eyes, he let himself slip from the cool, clean, sharply modern home to the hot, steamy, primitive richness of Borneo.

"Blair?" Cassie sat on the love seat across from him, putting the tea tray on the low table between them.

"Hmmm?"

"You looked like you were a million miles away," she said, handing him a cup.

"Actually only a few thousand."

"Pardon?"

"Nothing," he sipped his tea. "So, what did you need to talk to me about?"

She looked down at her lap for a long moment. When she lifted her eyes they were tear-filled.

Jesus, he wasn't going to be manipulated. He was willing to listen but he wasn't going to play games. "Can the tears, okay, Cassie? I'm here. I'm listening. You don't need the dramatics."
She sniffed and knuckled the tears away. "For heaven's sake, Blair, when did you get so hard?"

"I'm pretty sure it was several years ago when I saw the girl I wanted to marry in our bed with another man."

"I'm sorry." She almost shouted. "I have told you over and over that I screwed up and I'm sorry. What else can I do?"

Blair carefully placed his cup back on the table, reining in his temper. He knew he was being unnecessarily hostile. Was he even really angry with her anymore or had it just become a habit over time?

"There is nothing for you to do, Cassie. I was wrong to bring it up. Please, what did you want to talk to me about?"

She watched him warily then settled back in the love seat, pulling her feet underneath her. "Blair, I'm in trouble."

"What kind of trouble?"

"It feels like every kind of trouble." She rubbed her arms as if to ward off the cold. "I didn't want to drag you into this, I swear. Damn it, you were the last person I wanted to ask."

He laughed. "I'll bet." He picked up his tea and leaned against the arm of the sofa. "We haven't exactly been friends."

"No, we haven't." She gave him a small sigh. "I wish we could be friends again, Blair."

"I'm not sure I'm ready for that, Cassie, but I'm willing to call a truce. Tell me what's going on."

"I hardly know where to start," her voice was wobbly.

Blair looked, really looked, at her for the first time in years. She was tense and fragile, nothing like the woman he'd built up in his mind. Knowing what he knew now, would he really have wanted to marry her? Putting her infidelity aside for a moment and just comparing how he had felt about her after living with her for years against how he had felt about Jimelis after only a few hours, would he have really wanted to be her husband? If he'd been as deeply in love with her as he had once claimed to be, wouldn't he have listened to her? Wouldn't he have found a way to forgive her back then and work things out?

Was his fury born out of a broken heart or outraged pride? He didn't know. He did know, though, if Jimelis came to him, explanation notwithstanding, he would forgive everything, forget everything for another chance.

Maybe it was time for him to grow up when it came to her.

"Cassie," he said kindly, "just take a deep breath and start at the beginning."

"I always believed I was immune to romance," she finally said. "I never thought I would do any of the crazy things women in love do like being blind to a man's faults. I was wrong. I'm as big an idiot as the next girl."

She saw the disbelief on Blair's face. Not hard to understand, she decided, as she recalled telling Blair she loved him hours before she hopped into the sack with someone else. She watched as he bit
back a no doubt scathing retort and nodded for her to continue. Maybe he wasn't as big a prick as she remembered.

"I met a man at a Pennies fundraiser about five months ago. His dad is part of Cascade's movers-and-shakers. We've dealt with the father before, William Ellison? Do you remember him?"

Blair considered it for a minute. "Maybe. I don't know. You introduce me to dozens of people at every function. I've always been impressed with the way you can recall names and faces."

For heaven's sake, was that praise coming from Blair? "Thanks. It's all part of my job."

"So you met this guy?" he prompted.

"Yes. Stephen Ellison. He works for his father at Ellison Corporation. I've never been hit like that before, Blair. We were introduced and suddenly there was this, I don't know how to explain it. It was as if we'd known each other forever. It probably sounds ridiculous but there was this connection. It was like he was...he was..."

"He was your irresistible someone," Blair said softly.

She snapped her mouth shut. Damn it, what had she been thinking? She and Blair had lived together, she'd broke his heart and now she was describing her romantic tryst with another man to him? Yes, he had to be told about Stephen but maybe with a little more tact?

Blair seemed to sense her discomfort. "It's okay, Cassie. I didn't know there was such a thing as an irresistible someone until a month ago myself."

"Oh."

"Go ahead with your story."

"I guess irresistible is as good a term as I've heard." She stopped. Blair was different, not weaker exactly but most certainly less rigid. "It happened to you, too," she said. "You fell in love in Borneo."

"Maybe. Look, I really don't want to talk about me, okay?" He rubbed his hand over his face. "Go on."

Perhaps going to Blair was a bad idea but she was out of options. "Stephen and I started seeing each other. Looking back I should have figured out something wasn't quite right with us but I was so happy, I ignored all the signs."

"What kind of signs?"

"It was always just the two of us. We went to out-of-the-way places or met at my apartment. We never saw friends or went to any functions together. He said he was having problems with his father and didn't want me to get into the middle of his family mess."

"And you fell for it?"

"It sounds stupid, huh? You have no idea how charming an Ellison can be. I would have believed anything he told me."

"So, he's married?"

"Almost. His fiancé is the daughter of one of his father's business partners. I didn't get that little piece
of news until six weeks ago." She shrugged her shoulders. "I was a fool. Stephen and I spent so
much time talking I really thought I knew him, Blair. He was unhappy working for his dad. He has
an MBA and worked for the company on and off since he was a kid but his dad didn't trust him to
make any decisions. William kept a tight rein on him."

Cassie poured them each another cup of tea before she continued. "Stephen's older brother died
several years ago and Stephen could never measure up in the old man's eyes. He wanted to strike out
on his own. He had a great idea but no capital."

"How could he have no capital if he's an MBA and a rich kid?"

"William believes a man should earn his own way. The older brother left home after high school,
joined the army and put himself through college. William expected the same kind of thing from
Stephen. By the time Stephen graduated he was neck deep in student loans."

"So was I. So were you as I recall."

"Yes, I was, but Stephen was raised wealthy. He wasn't used to saving and budgeting." She laughed.
"Just listen to me. After all he'd done to me, I'm still making excuses for him."

"I understand."

"You really do, don't you?" She sat on the edge of her seat. "Who is it?" She discovered she actually
cared. Maybe misery really did love company.

"It doesn't matter. It was all one-sided." He glanced at his watch. "It's getting late."

She had enough problems of her own but couldn't resist offering him something. "Well, if it's any
consolation, that person missed out on a pretty terrific guy."

"Uh, thanks."

"I mean it." She found she did. "I know it's old news, but I am sorry, Blair."

"You've already said that, Cassie. It's not important anymore."

"It is to me." Something inside her shifted and changed as she watched him, so handsome and sad
against the pristine white of her sofa. "I did a huge disservice to both of us back then. I hurt myself, I
hurt you and I'm sorry."

Blair gave her a sweet smile, the kind she remembered him giving her all those years ago. Why
couldn't she have loved him the way she loved Stephen? Her life would have been so much easier.

"That's all over, Cassie. I promise." He leaned forward to rest his elbows on his knees. "Finish telling
me what happened with you and Stephen."

"Okay." She cleared her throat. She found it humiliating to reveal how much of a sucker she'd been.
"Stephen needed capital so I found it."

"What did you do, Cassie?"

"I mortgaged the townhouse and the business. Don't say it, Blair. I know. It was a crazy thing to do
but I had looked over his proposal and it was good. Really good. The project had a 120 day turn
around on the initial investment so I should have been able to make my note without any problem."

"But?"
"But a couple of weeks after I gave him the money, things between us cooled off. He was suddenly unavailable to see me or even take my phone calls. Then I read his engagement announcement to Carolyn Plummer on the society page. I had refused to admit I'd been taken for a ride till then."

"What about contracts? Can't you take him to court for the money?"

"I didn't make him sign a thing, Blair. I trusted him. I was in love with him."

"Cassie, I have some money put way but probably not enough to stem any kind of major cash flow problem."

"I don't need money. I've got a merger pending with Brackett and Associates."

"So what do you need from me?"

"Well, it turns out William has had a private detective following Stephen so naturally he found out about Stephen's little indiscretion with me. William paid me a visit just before you came back from Borneo and warned me to stay away from his precious son."

"You're joking."

"No. Apparently an Ellison is allowed to screw around with someone like me but he marries old money."

"Where is he from? Like the 1800's?"

"As archaic as it sounds, it's the way things are done. The Plummers and Ellisons are tight in business and Stephen's marriage to Carolyn seals the deal. I'm guessing the detective was the old man's way of insuring Stephen didn't mess up the engagement."

"Why come to you after you two had already broken up?"

"That's the part I can't figure out. Maybe he found out about the money and thought I might publicly embarrass the family. Who knows? Ellison does know I'm in a financial bind and am set to merge with Brackett. He threatened to ruin me, Blair."

"How?"

"He said he'll go to Brackett and tell him I'm a bad risk if I cause any trouble."

"Do you plan to cause any trouble?"

"No. Stephen has no money so what would I do? Blackmail his dad? Show up at the church and try to stop the wedding? No, I'm done with Stephen. I just can't seem to convince William of that. I don't want to have to start over again. Especially now."

"Why especially now?"

She hesitated, wondering if she should reveal everything. Well, in for a penny, in for a pound. "I'm pregnant, Blair."

It was astonishing, really, how something that would have destroyed him five years ago, that would have infuriated him a week ago, just exhausted and saddened him tonight.

Cassie looked so small, almost childlike, as she curled up on herself on the loveseat. The cocky
manipulative bitch who had broken his heart was nowhere in sight. In her place was someone who had been thoroughly beaten up by love.

He knew the feeling.

She waited quietly, probably trying to gauge his reaction. He found himself thinking of Naomi. She'd never been the business barracuda that Cassie was, yet at some point in their lives they'd ended up in the same place--pregnant and abandoned.

"What do you need me to do?"

Relief visibly flooded her.

"I want you to be my fiancé."

"Excuse me?"

"Let me explain, Blair. My deal with Brackett closes in 28 days then I'm free and clear. With you as my fiancé, Ellison will have no reason to think I'm still after Stephen. Otherwise, I think he'll crush me."

"Cassie, that sounds a little paranoid."

"You don't know how the Ellisons operate, Blair. They can be as deadly as they are charming."

"Okay, if you're right and you need some kind of protection from Ellison, why ask me? You've got to have plenty of other guys who'd jump at the chance to be with you."

"Yes, there are a few other men who would probably be willing to help me but none of them can. You're the great jungle doctor, Blair." She stood and paced the length of the living room. As he observed her he could now see the subtle changes of early pregnancy in her body. Her face was fuller, her belly softly rounded. "Your reputation will be my protection. Alone, I'm vulnerable. As the fiancé of Doctor Blair Sandburg, self-sacrificing saint, I'll be above reproach."

"Jesus Christ, Cassie, could you make me out to be any more pretentious?"

Her face reddened immediately. "Oh, Blair, I'm sorry. I didn't mean it to sound like that."

"Like I'm a sanctimonious bastard?"

"Of course not, but people do think you walk on water."

Blair ran his hand through his hair, dislodging the black cord holding it in a ponytail. "Seriously? That's what people think? That I'm some self-righteous prick?"

"No, Blair, no," she insisted but he noticed her face burned redder still. "People admire the way you've dedicated your life to helping others. You're respected. Honestly. Why do you think the charity has been such a huge success?"

"Because it's a great idea."

"Yes, well, it is a great idea but you're the one who sells it. Why do you think I've concentrated so much of the PR on you?"

"An hour ago I would have said it was to torture me." Did the public really see him as some Mother Teresa knock-off?
She grinned at him. "Really? An hour ago I would have found some enjoyment in how much you hate the media circuit but, no, that's not why. It's because people like you, Blair. You're good looking. You're smart. People listen to your spiel and they believe you. They believe in you."

"Oh."

"Ellison could bad mouth me to Brackett and everything'd fall apart. If I was your fiancé, though, and Ellison went to Brackett, he'd come off looking like a bully with a hidden agenda."

"Does Stephen know you're pregnant?"

"I didn't even know until six weeks ago. I'm been so busy trying to pull my professional life together. I overlooked all the changes going on in me. I tried to phone a few times after I found out, but he still won't take any of my calls." She sat on the edge of the loveseat. "Besides, what good would it do?"

"Don't you think the father has a right to know?" He thought of his own childhood and how Naomi had struggled to provide for them.

Cassie absently touched her belly. "Not always. He stole $70,000 from me, knocked me up and ran off to get engaged to another woman. Not exactly father of the year material."

"No."

"All I need is for you to let me use your name until the merger happens. I'll recoup most of my losses, the agency will be solvent and life will go on."

"What about the baby?"

"Blair, I'm perfectly capable of taking care of the baby myself."

"I never doubted you were, Cassie. I don't really want to be known as the guy who jilted his pregnant girlfriend either. It doesn't go well with my saintly image. Plus, anyone who can count will know I was in Borneo when you got pregnant."

"No one is going to count up the months, for heaven's sake. And I'll break up with you, okay? We can say whatever we want after the merger is complete. I'll say I was artificially inseminated or I'm a surrogate mother or it's an alien's baby. No one will know or care."

"I don't know, Cassie."

"Blair, I hate asking you. I hate putting this pressure on you but I really need you to help me. And you'll be in Peru for the duration of our engagement. By the time you get back from the Chopec, the deal with be done, I'll dump you and you'll be a couple of months short of heading for Indonesia."

"Jesus." He wondered how long it had taken Cassie to work up this little scheme. He realized her plan had been in motion from the minute she met him at the airport. "You're really something."

"If there was another way out, I would have taken it. Please, Blair. It's not like I'll be taking an ad out in the Cascade Times. I'll mention our engagement to select associates. I really need you to do this for me and my baby."

The woman always did know how to play that trump card. It wasn't as if it would do any harm to pretend for her. Still, it seemed totally wrong to pretend he was going to marry her while he was in love with someone else.
Someone else who would never know and wouldn't care if he did.

Cassie was worrying the rings on her perfectly manicured hands as she waited for his answer. Jesus, she must have been desperate and frightened to come to him.

"Okay, Cassie. I'll help you."

The woman, April, spoke to him most of the morning alternating between Javanese and her own language. She insisted not only had she known him before, but that they had been friends.

After a while he had turned his back to her and closed his eyes. Feigning sleep was childish but perhaps she would shut up and let him rest.

She didn't. Over and over she called him Captain Ellison and Jim. It couldn't be true. He would not allow it to be true.

He knew Blair was his Shaman but the younger man had chosen to leave him behind. If Blair, his true match, did not want him, then he had to return to the tribe. If what his mind had hidden from him was revealed everything would change. Where would his place be then?

So he ignored her as her voice droned on and on. He had eaten the food put in front of him earlier only because he needed to build his strength, but he had refused to answer her or even look up at her as she yammered on about "the old days." She could speak forever if she wanted to. He would not remember no matter what she said.

He heard the other healer, Chaz, come into the clinic.

"Is he sleeping, April?" Chaz asked.

"I think so. He still won't talk to me."

"Do you really think he's that Army captain?"

"I know he is."

"How the hell did he end up with the Dyak? Why didn't anyone look for him before?"

"I have no idea how he ended up with the Dyak. Darn lucky for him he did and was taken in by a generous tribe. That's probably the only reason he survived. As for the army looking for him, well, you might remember the story. It was in all the papers five years ago. Captain Ellison's team was unknowingly sent on a bogus mission to cover illegal drug running in the Philippines. By the time the chopper was reported down, the Army did a quick sweep of the ocean, found the burnt wreckage and assumed all the men had been killed."

"I do remember the story, April. Well, sort of. A general was court marshaled over the incident, right?"

"A colonel. Colonel Oliver. I knew him in Washington, too. I was shocked when it came out he'd been the head of a drug smuggling operation. When Ellison's chopper went down, Oliver tried to blame the Captain and his team for the drug running. He almost got away with it, but one of Oliver's men gave him up to the Army. He hadn't realized Oliver had planned to kill fellow soldiers as a cover up."

"I was taking a graduate level world studies class when all of this happened," Chaz said. "My
professor pointed out how the press had to do a ton of backpedaling. At first the headlines were
calling the soldiers on the mission traitors and a couple of weeks later they were hailing them as
fallen heroes. I just can't believe one of them is still alive."

"I can't tell you how glad I am he is."

"April," Chaz was whispering now but Jimelis had no trouble hearing every word, "do you think his
memory will return?"

"I hope so. If the amnesia is caused by actual physical trauma, then no, it will never return."

"But if the cause is psychological trauma, then yes?"

"Maybe. There is every possibility it is psychological trauma. He watched his helicopter go down,
probably saw some of the men under his command die tragically, and God only knows what he had
to do to survive until he was taken in by Budi's clan. I'd say he's had his share of psychological
trauma."

"Yeah. It's a miracle he did survive."

"I agree. I also think his survival points to his amnesia being a repression rather than brain damage. I
mean, since the accident, he's learned a new language and a whole new way of life. Other than the
clawing injuries, he's in excellent health."

"What are you going to do with him, April?"

"For starters, I plan to keep talking to him in English part of the time. I've already told Eli about him
and Eli said he'll send word to the authorities as soon as possible."

"So, he's got a few more days until the world knows he's still alive."

"Yes. The Army will want a piece of him before he actually goes home, I'm sure."

Jimelis lay still on the cot, listening to them talk. At first he was only able to understand a word here
and there from their conversation. Then the language, no, then English began to make sense.

With the return of his language came a wealth of memories. The fuselage bursting into flames despite
the rain and ocean. The odor of charred flesh as his men begged God to let them live. He had
thought he was meeting his death that day, failure and guilt in his heart. It was his command, his
mission and they were his men. His inadequacies had led to their demise.

His head and his heart were full and aching as bits of memories began to crash into him. Pieces of his
childhood and his service in the military joined his recollections of life with the Dyak.

The remembering flooded him with anxiety. God, what now? Did he pretend ignorance and return to
the Dyak? He had been happy there. Most people back in his old life assumed he was dead already.
Some, like his father, probably preferred it that way. After all, it was better to be the father of a dead
hero than of a rebellious ingrate.

He was strong enough to slip into the jungle undetected and return to the tribe. No Westerner would
ever find him unless he wanted to be found.

"When Captain Ellison first woke up, he asked for Blair," April told Chaz.

"I'd like to see Blair's face when he finds out exactly who it was he met out in a Dyak village."
"I'm sure he'll be shocked."

Blair, Jim thought. He had one reason to return to the states and his old life--Blair. Perhaps the young doctor had thought there was no possibility of a future for them. How could there have been? A primitive Dyak and an American physician were not an ideal couple but he and Blair were more than that. Their ties to each other might be ancient and mysterious but that didn't lessen the strength or importance of them. He and Blair were Watchman and Shaman. They belonged together and now there was a chance they could be.

Pushing himself up on his elbow, he turned to the woman.

"April," he said, interrupting her conversation with Chaz.

"Yes?" she replied in Javanese.

He cleared his throat and said in English, "I'm starting to remember."

He'd landed in Peru ten days ago and for ten days he'd been stalled, put off and generally pushed aside.

Incacha was nowhere to be found and Blair was getting pissed. It wasn't as though the Chopec village was Cascade, with numerous places to hide and yet, Incacha had managed to avoid Blair at every turn.

Through a messenger, the Shaman had granted permission for the clinic to reopen the day Blair arrived, so it wasn't as if he had nothing to do. Still, his time was rapidly running out and negotiations hadn't even started.

"He's a frustrating man," Linda observed as she and Blair talked before the campfire. It was Courtney's night to man the clinic, while he and Linda sat outside together, enjoying the cool of the early evening before the insects drove them into their respective tents.

"I assume we're talking about Incacha," Blair said.

"Yes, indeed. Incacha, the bane of my existence."

He chuckled. "He doesn't strike me as the cooperative type, that's for sure."

"Blair," Linda said seriously, "what if Incacha won't negotiate with you? Will we close the clinic?"

He stretched out on the ground, laying on his side with his head propped on his hand. "That's pretty much a worst case scenario. I don't see that happening. The Chopec have a very complex social structure. I think Incacha is merely cementing his position of power within the tribe and letting us know we're here only by his good graces."

"Are you saying this is all some power play?"

"It makes sense. This is a male dominated society surviving in a brutal environment. Only the strongest can seize control and keep it. Incacha has to have the respect of the chief and the tribe to function as Shaman. By his very job description, the Shaman is a healer. In a way, the clinic encroaches on his territory by giving medical care."

"So he might look at the clinic as something that undermines his authority?"

"Exactly. In the tribal hierarchy the Shaman's role is as important as the chief's. The tribe looks to the
chief for leadership and protection and to the Shaman for their teachings, their health and to be a sort of keeper for their traditions." He glanced at Linda. "Incacha must be looking for some kind of a balance between his function and that of the clinic."

"I guess that sounds reasonable, Blair, but why hasn't he sent for you?"

"That I totally don't get." He banked the fire. "I'm heading in. Good night, Linda."

"Night, Blair."

Although it was still early, he quickly readied himself for bed. Incacha's proclamation that the clinic could again treat the Indians in the region had opened a floodgate. There would be people waiting at the clinic before daybreak.

He couldn't get comfortable in his hammock. His body wanted to rest but his mind was racing.

Jesus, he hoped he'd done the right thing by agreeing to help Cassie out. She'd seemed sincere, but he'd been fooled before. Turning to lay on his back he wondered why he couldn't just let the past go. He'd changed a lot in the past five years. Why was it so hard to accept that she had too? He prayed the merger went through without a hitch. Even if Cassie turned out to be the same old bitch she used to be, she didn't deserve to be kicked in the teeth like that. No one did.

With his eyes closed and the sounds and smell of the jungle permeating the air, he could almost believe he was back in Borneo. That's it, he decided as his slid his hand into his boxers to touch his burgeoning erection, he was still in Borneo.

He is nude and waiting on Jimelis' sleeping pallet. He's been there a long time, hot and impatient and eager for his Dyak lover.

Blair cupped his scrotum, slowly squeezing, savoring the slightly burning sensation and his cock responded by becoming fully erect.

Borneo, okay. When he thinks he will go crazy, Jimelis finally returns. The smell of the hunt, earthy and rich, clings to him. He climbs on the pallet, grass and sweat and bits of the kill shining on his bare chest in the firelight. Their eyes meet and Jimelis pulls the light blanket off him, revealing naked flesh.

Blair released his testicles and began to steadily stroke the smooth column of his erection.

Right, Borneo. Jimelis lowers his sticky, hot body on top of Blair, and grinds his belly against the smaller man's hard-on. Jimelis kisses his lips once, twice before he slides his mouth to the juncture of Blair's neck and shoulder and bites. Hard.

Blair groaned and lifted his hips while he increased the speed and fiction of his masturbation.

Yeah, Borneo. Jimelis slips his belly, slick with sweat, over Blair's dripping cock. Over and over, faster and faster. Blair pants and pushes back against Jimelis, the pleasure of pressure on his penis mixes with the pain of Jimelis' teeth still buried in his shoulder and the sensations intensify one another. He murmurs, "Yes, Jimelis, yes," and splatters his seed between their heaving bodies.

Blair released his orgasm over his hand and abdomen with a harsh groan.

Jimelis lifts his head. He kisses Blair's ear and whispers, "My Shaman."

Blair sat up, gasping for breath. Jesus, even his jerk-off fantasies were tainted with the My Shaman
crap. He grabbed a towel off the stool next to his cot and cleaned himself up.

It still seemed pointless and hopeless, but maybe he'd find a way to end up in Borneo. He never thought he'd be back among the Chopec and yet here he was.

"Blair," Courtney called from just outside his tent.

"Yeah, Courtney. What's wrong?" he asked as he dressed.

"A messenger is at the clinic for you."

"Thanks, I'll be right there." He picked up his flashlight and backpack before heading out. A boy, perhaps twelve years old, stood beside the clinic.

"Incacha wants to speak to you," the boy said before Blair could even utter a greeting.

"Now?" he asked.

"Yes."

Blair stuck his head into the clinic. "Courtney? I'll be in the village if you need me."

"Not the village," the boy interrupted. "You are to follow me to the prayer hut."

"Uh, Courtney? I guess I'll be at the prayer hut, wherever that is. I have no idea when I'll be back."

"Okay, Blair," Courtney said. "Good luck."

"Thanks."

Almost an hour later, they reached the hut. Blair was totally disoriented. His sense of direction, never the best, had been thrown off further by the twists and turns the boy had led him through.

"Incacha is inside," the boy said before melting into the darkness.

He had to stoop over to enter the hut. Inside was an empty, open space. A smoky fire burned in a pit in the center of the room.

Incacha, stripped and with eyes closed, knelt near the fire.

As a sign of respect for the Shaman's position, Blair stood quietly, waiting to be acknowledged. He and Incacha had had very little interaction with each other the last time Blair was in Peru.

"Sit," Incacha said.

Blair dropped gracefully to the ground, pulling his legs underneath him to sit across from Incacha. They studied one another in silence. Incacha was probably around his own age and, like Blair, he carried the burden of tremendous responsibility. The smoke and heat stung Blair's lungs and eyes.

After several long minutes, Blair had to fight the urge to cough or clear his throat. Finally, Incacha spoke.

"You are here at last," the Shaman said.

"As soon as your messenger contacted me at the clinic I came."

"No," he said, shaking his head, "I meant you left your home and came back to the Chopec."
"Yes." Blair wondered if he was missing something in the nuance of the language. "Linda sent word you wanted to speak to me so I returned as quickly as possible."

Incacha looked puzzled. "The clinic is the first thing in your heart?"

Was something wrong in his translation? He'd worried his Chopec was rusty so he'd spoken Chopec exclusively the past two weeks. He wasn't having any difficulty with the literal words but felt he wasn't catching all the meaning.

"The clinic and the Chopec are very important to me," Blair said, carefully choosing his words.

"They are first in your heart?" Incacha pressed.

"Um, they are dear to me, but I think a man's god and the people in his life are first in his heart."

Incacha nodded, apparently satisfied with Blair's answer. The Shaman scattered a handful of dried herbs on the fire. This time Blair could not help himself. He coughed. Incacha smiled.

"I am Shaman of the Chopec now."

"I've heard. I offer my sorrow for the passing of your father; he was a great man and Shaman. You will do his memory honor as the new Shaman."

Incacha nodded then squinted through the smoke at Blair. "You say your people are among the first in your heart, yet you leave your women alone in the jungle. Here they are far from your home and are unprotected."

Blair sighed inwardly. It would be useless to try and explain the Yarbroughs were not his women or that women were considered equal and capable in his society. Incacha would have absolutely no point of reference for that particular discussion.

"My women," and wouldn't Linda love to hear him call them that, "feel they have a calling from our god to help heal, just as your gods call you to heal. They are not considered far from my people as they are obeying our god." He smiled as he played his ace. "And I didn't leave them unprotected. I left them in the care of the Shaman of the Chopec, your father."

Incacha laughed. "You have been well chosen, Blair."

"Chosen?"

Incacha threw more dried leaves on the fire. "Then you wish for your women and your clinic to remain with the Chopec?"

"I do. I would like the clinic to be allowed to remain for all time and for my people to serve your people."

"Ah."

"I may have to send other healers to take the women's place but anyone I bring would stay only with your approval."

"And under my protection?" Incacha asked slyly.

"I want that very much."

"Then they are welcome to stay in the valley."
"Thank you, Incacha."

Incacha nodded and closing his eyes, drew a deep breath. "Who is first in your heart?"

"I, uh."

"I had a vision before you returned to the jungle. You were chosen but turned away."

"Incacha, when was I chosen and turned away?"

"You were chosen as all were--before the beginning."

"Before the beginning?" Blair tried to remember all he could about Chopec folklore.

"Souls are tethered together before stars are born."

Blair had a weird chill in the pit of his stomach. "Souls are tethered together?"

"Yes."

"And I was chosen." Blair cleared the thick, perfumed smoked from his throat. "For what was I chosen, Incacha?"

"You truly do not know?" Incacha looked at him in disbelief. "Blair, do the people of your village not listen to the whispers of their hearts?"

"Well, uh, I'm not sure."

"Your calling is great, Blair. I have felt its pull and heard its call. You did not?"

Blair shook his head. "I don't think so. Can you tell me what you know?"

"There are many things a man must learn for himself. Pray with me, Blair. Meditate and listen for your calling."

Much later, naked and thirsty, Blair came out of his trance, stumbling out of the hut into the cool of the dawn. Following Incacha, he made his way to a nearby pond. There, the men washed the stench of burnt grass and sweat from their bodies. Blair coughed long and hard, clearing his lungs of hours of smoke inhalation.

He'd heard it though. Heard it clear as a bell. Incacha was right. His heart had been whispering and he hadn't listened.

A voice, newly familiar and precious, had called two words out to him again and again. My Shaman.

A week in DC being debriefed by military intelligence had left Jim Ellison shaken.

A few days after his memory had begun to return, a military escort had met him at the base camp and brought him stateside. A quick check-up at John Hopkins had cleared him medically and six days of intensive questioning at the Pentagon had cleared him professionally.

Things had sure changed in the course of seven days. His legs and back still ached if he stayed in the same position too long. He found himself thinking in Javanese sometimes and speaking English made him feel as if he were talking around a mouthful of marbles.
The chow was better though. He had to admit the food was delicious and a whole hell of a lot easier to come by. No stalking, killing, cleaning or cooking necessary. Order it up and out it came.

He stretched his long legs as far as he could within the confines of the plane's business-class seat. He'd worried he'd be afraid of flying after all that had happened, but it hadn't been a problem. Maybe a small craft over open water would have been too much but a big plane, well, no problems so far.

The clothes bothered him. Had clothing seemed so confining to him before Borneo? Probably not. After all, how often did a Westerner have an opportunity to wear nothing but a loincloth and woven sandals for years on end? He found he missed the hot sun and humid breeze on his bare limbs and torso.

Had there always been so many people? Washington, DC was packed full of people. Hell, everywhere he went from city streets to restaurants and stores to the place he was sitting right now was jammed with humans.

He'd possessed somewhat of a solitary nature since he was a child, but he'd never felt this claustrophobic. Of course, his Watchman abilities hadn't been uncovered when he'd lived in the states before, so he hadn't been assaulted by the smell, the sight, the noise, even the heat of so many other human bodies around him.

For now, his senses were turned down as much as he could manage. When he was reunited with his Shaman he would be free to open himself up more. Even carefully pulling in his senses, he saw, heard and smelled too much. Budi and Sugeng had taught him to filter and control but that had been in the jungle. Here, in this fast-paced version of civilization, the stimuli was multiplied a hundred-fold.

The flight attendant brought him another black coffee. He nodded his thanks and turned to look out the window. The debriefing had been a waste of time for the Army. He'd known nothing of Oliver's operations.

The pain of Oliver's betrayal and the subsequent loss of Jim's men was staggering. It may have happened over five years ago but to him it was new and the hurt was fresh. This was another thing his Shaman could help him deal with.

He was grateful Sam Hollis had stepped forward five years ago and exposed Oliver. Otherwise, he might be heading for a military prison rather than Cascade.

No, he'd been able give the Army very little. The story of his life with Dyak had been greatly edited. He had no intention of mentioning his power and function as a Watchman. If the military didn't believe him, he might be labeled insane and have to spend God knows how much time a military hospital. If they did believe him, he'd be tested endlessly and his life would never be his own again.

He'd resigned his commission and been cut a substantial severance check. He had enough money to take his time deciding what to do with his life now. Well, what he and Blair would do with their lives now.

His dad had been told he was alive. Stephen was overseas someplace on Ellison Corporation business. Jim had opted not to talk to William yet, but he'd left word that he'd see him in Cascade as soon as he could.

He squirmed in his seat a bit. If April hadn't explained Pennies for the Jungle to him and told him that both the foundation and Blair were based in Cascade, he knew his father and brother would have waited a damned long time before he managed to find his way to Washington State.
Blair. God, in a few more hours he'd see Blair again. April had given Jim Blair's home and office telephone numbers and he'd tried both in the last 48 hours. He'd only been able to reach voice mail. According to April and everything he'd been able to read about Blair and the foundation, his Shaman was a busy man.

He'd left no messages. What would he say? Hi, Blair? This is Jimelis but guess what? I'm not a Dyak anymore.

No, some things were better discussed face-to-face. Besides, he had no fear about his reception. Blair might already know. Jim's face and story had been all over the newspapers and television for the past three days. Blair was probably waiting for him to show up.

Jim had no concerns. They were Shaman and Watchman. Their link was undeniable and unbreakable and they both knew it.

Cassie fumbled through her purse searching for the keys to Blair's loft. Normally, a neighbor watered his plants and checked on his place when he was out of town but they'd decided it might look better, might seem more like they were a couple if Cassie took over the duties while Blair was in Peru.

Like she had the time or energy for this extra crap.

Everything was going well, she reminded herself. She'd heard nothing from either Ellison in weeks. Lee Brackett was thrilled with Welles' Images and anxiously awaited the closing of their deal.

She should feel wonderful or relieved or at least something good. Instead, she was crabby and tired and lonely. Her cigarette-slim pants and skirts weren't buttoning up anymore and just yesterday she'd burst into tears when Panera's had run out of the shortbread cookies she had been craving. Yes, pregnancy was a real joy.

Her mood swings were nightmares. She should have been expecting that. Dear old mom had been hell-on-wheels while pregnant with Cassie's numerous younger siblings. As a kid, Cassie had dodged plenty of shoes and dishes her mother had used as discipline missiles.

Would hurling her handbag down the hallway make her feel any better? Where the heck were those keys?

She shook the offending bag from side-to-side. The darn keys were jingling so they were in there some place. In a fit of frustration she upended her purse and let the contents tumble into a heap in front of the loft door.

There amidst Breath Savers, a hairbrush, a compact, a wallet, a half-dozen lipstick tubes, a notebook and a cell phone, winking up at her, were Blair's keys. Damn it. Now she had to get on the cold, wooden floor to put all that junk back in her purse. Damn it.

Kneeling down, she crammed everything but the keys back into her purse. Too tight pants, high heels and, thanks to the baby, a slightly off-center balance, prevented her from rising up gracefully. She leaned hard against the wall and attempted to push herself up. When she thought she would end up sprawled on the ground, a strong hand caught her gently under the elbow. It was just enough leverage to allow her to get her feet firmly planted under her.

Cassie turned her head and flashed a smile at her rescuer. "Thank you."

"You're welcome," he smiled back at her.
Her smile widened as she ran her eyes over him. He was big, good looking, maybe a little older than her usual type and, even though she was sure she hadn't met him before, somehow familiar.

He looked at the door she stood by. "Is there something I can help you with?" Cassie asked.

"I'm looking for Blair Sandburg," he said. "307 is his place, right?"

"Right, but Blair is out-of-town."

"Out-of-town?" The big man appeared to deflate before her eyes.

"He's in Peru."

"Is he opening a clinic?" the man asked her.

It wasn't a secret so she told him. "No, more like trouble shooting down there. It was sort of a spur of the moment thing." Cassie wondered if her new concern and compassion for others was related to the hormonal rushes of pregnancy. "He'll be back in a few weeks."

The man looked relieved. "Only a few weeks? Great."

"Is there something I can help you with in the meantime?" She extended her hand to him. "I'm Cassie Welles. Blair's fiancé."

Jim took the redhead's hand in his. It was white and soft. Women in the jungle didn't have the luxury of hands such as hers with smooth flesh and oval, painted nails.

She was Blair's fiancé. Pain and fury warred within him as he released her small hand. Were they among the Dyak, no woman would dare come between a Watchman and his Shaman. As she continued to smile at him, revealing perfect white teeth that no tribe woman could ever hope to possess, he was reminded he was no longer in the jungle.

"I didn't know Blair was engaged," he said stupidly.

"He proposed two weeks ago. Just before he left for Peru."

At least Blair hadn't already been promised to Cassie when they'd made love in Borneo. That was something, right? He wanted to vomit.

"Are you okay?" she asked, lightly touching the sleeve of his jacket.

No, I'm dying, he almost shouted. He'd traveled halfway around the world, given up a life he'd been well suited for and people who'd cared for him, all to be with Blair. Only now did he begin to understand how little their tie must have meant to Blair. Not even a month had passed and Blair had promised himself to another. How could he? Didn't he sense their connection, their unbreakable bond?

Blair must have felt it. It was inconceivable they would not be together. It was their destiny.

When Blair returned, Jim would see him. He would easily win his Shaman back from Cassie. She was far too pale and passionless for Blair. There was no way she could complete with him for Blair's affection when the doctor realized there was a way for them to be together.

His rival looked up at him, smile still fixed in place. He automatically returned her smile. God, this would be easy.
"I'm fine, thank you," he told her.

"Did you want to leave a message for Blair?"

"No, I'll see him when he gets back."

"Okay. Well, goodbye." She opened the door and stepped into the apartment.

In that moment, his life, his future, fell apart.

It was the smell of her. Under the expensive perfume and powder and cosmetics was a scent shared by many of the women of Budi's longhouse.

A child grew within her.

He would never make a Shaman choose between his Watchman and his child.

As he hurried from the building and ran through the drizzle to his rented car, the enormity of what he'd just learned hit him like a body blow. He struggled getting into the Taurus, his hands shaking with such force it took three tries to fit the key into the lock.

Once inside, he leaned his head against the steering wheel, gasping for breath. His heart pounded inside him as though he'd run a long way.

Blair belonged to someone else. Blair had chosen someone else. Blair had, in essence, cut the binding that tethered them to each other, leaving him alone and adrift.

When Jim was ten his mother had been killed in an automobile accident. That night he'd sat on the end of Stephen's bed, silently guarding his brother as the younger boy had sobbed himself to sleep. Their mother gone, their father cold and distant, Stephen'd been all Jim had in the world. As they grew older and grew apart, Jim had longed for that feeling of belonging. To some extent, he'd found it in the military and later with the Dyak, but he had never understood what it was to belong to someone until those few precious hours with Blair.

After dragging his arm over his face to dry it, Jim tilted back against the headrest. This was the Western world, the modern world and he had to remember that. Blair had never lived within the primitive world. The doctor may have worked among the tribes, served them, perhaps even studied them, but he'd never been one of them as Jim had.

Blair didn't understand how the hand-to-mouth existence, being both in harmony and competition with nature, stripped away all the bullshit and allowed a man to see clearly. So much of what modern man brushed off as folklore and myth was in reality, a truer vision of life.

Such as Watchman and Shaman. The Dyaks had taught him Watchman and Shaman were parts of a whole who would journey across great distances and time to be together. Jim knew the rightness of this teaching to the depths of his soul. Still, would he have known, would he have understood and accepted had he not spent the last five years with the Dyak? If the thin veneer of Western civilization had not been torn from him by amnesia, would he have been open to the concepts?

Perhaps not.

He rubbed his hand over his eyes. No, that wasn't true. He would have recognized Blair as his other half no matter where, no matter when, no matter how they met.

It was of no consequence now. Blair was not his and he would never be.
Jim started the car. He had decisions to make.

Why hadn't she cashed the check?

Stephen Ellison looked over the bank statement again. Cassie hadn't touched a dime. Why?

With a sinking feeling, he rifled through the stack of mail that had accumulated over the past few months. His secretary had dealt with anything that looked official, but personal mail had been sorted and left.

The nine letters he'd written to Cassie while he'd been in China were there. Return to sender and his office address were scrawled across the front of each.

Shit. The trip had been one of his father's spur-of-the-moment emergencies. Stephen had returned to the office from lunch one afternoon and his father had been waiting with an airline ticket and an agenda. Left with enough time to pack and drive to the airport before his plane departed, he'd tried to call her from the airport and the plane, but without success.

Phone service in the far-flung provinces of China was sketchy at best and he'd used his satellite time to keep in touch with the Cascade branch.

Maybe she'd been upset that he'd left without saying goodbye but he'd tried and anyway, it was business. Cassie understood that sometimes business came first. She had her own company to run.

But why had she sent all his letters back to his office? Even if she was pissed off at him, why would she endanger the future of Welles' Images by refusing the loan payback? It didn't make sense.

He started to reach for the phone then changed his mind. He missed her so damn much but two days of traveling had left him filthy and exhausted. This little side trip to the office before heading home had been necessity not choice. God forbid anyone return from a business trip and not report straight away. He needed a shower and a nap before he talked to anyone.

Whatever was wrong between he and Cassie could be righted. Whatever she needed him to say or do to fix things, he would.

He hadn't told her he loved her before. Maybe he hadn't even known himself, but a few days apart from her had cleared away any doubts.

He loved Cassie Welles. She'd know it, too, if she'd bothered to open even one of his damned letters.

This time around things would be different. No more hiding their relationship. No more secrets from his father. William didn't know it yet, but this was the last thing Stephen would do for him or the company. He was sitting on a tidy sum of money right now thanks to Cassie's faith and financial backing. He was going to be his own man from now on.

Cassie had seemed content with the way things had been but it wasn't enough for him anymore. She was everything he'd ever wanted in a woman and she deserved to be treated a whole hell of a lot better than he'd treated her in the past.

First thing tomorrow, flowers and ring in hand, he'd find her.

The forest was still, its darkness tinged blue.
He, in his wolf-form, was stalking the other. The hunt had been long and more than once he feared his prey had evaded him for good. Every now and then a branch would sway or leaves on the ground would rustle beneath the light tread of the other, and he would be reassured he was on the right path.

A growl, low and menacing, reached his ears. It had to be the other.

With his excitement came renewed energy and he increased his speed. Finally, he would catch up.

He froze in place, for just beyond him, at the edge of the clearing, the other stood, poised to flee. Moonlight shone on his black coat and yellow eyes.

A cat, the wolf-form realized. The other was a huge, powerful cat. When he would have stepped closer, the cat turned and bounded into the jungle. The chase was on.

With a harsh cough Blair snapped back from the vision. Incacha peered at him in the smoke-filled hut. "What did you see?"

"Myself as a wolf again."

Incacha nodded. "Your spirit-self. Your Shaman face."

"Yes." That particular part of this had been discussed to death. Each man had an animal spirit and Blair's apparently was a gray wolf. "It was a little different though. Before I was running as something chased me in the jungle. This time I was the pursuer. He was always just ahead of me."

"Did you see him?"

"Eventually. It was a black jungle cat. Jaguar, I think." Blair shifted from kneeling to sitting. He was still a little uncomfortable with all this mysticism. Sure, he'd studied plenty of folklore. His own mother had been a follower of metaphysics and Eastern religions. She'd raised him to be receptive to ideas far from the norm and he was for the most part. Still, to find himself not as an academic on the outside looking in but rather a participant smack in the middle was difficult to accept.

Hearing he was some kind of a Shaman in an ancient line of Shamans who served Watchmen, another ancient line, sounded, well, ridiculous.

Just the same, he hadn't left Incacha's side since the night the Chopec man had sent for him. They'd spent their time praying, fasting and meditating. Incacha had taught Blair what he could about taking care of a Watchman. Or, as the Chopec termed it, guiding a Sentinel.

It was all true, he knew in his heart, but his Western raised brain had a few problems with it. Like these visions he had while deep in a meditative trance. Or realizing his dreams of Jimelis whispering "My Shaman" to him were not fantasy but an affirmation of their bond.

Perversely, along with his doubts came a tremendous amount of relief and comfort. He wasn't losing his mind. He and Jimelis really were destined to be together. The heady experience of belonging he'd had with the Watchman was meant to be.

It wasn't some passing infatuation. According to the Chopec, it was a link forged before the Earth drank rain and before the edges of the Sky touched the mountains.

"Your Sentinel?" Incacha asked.

"The cat? Yes, I believe he is the cat." Blair wiped his smoke-stung eyes. "We recognized one
another but he turned away. Why would he turn away, Incacha? What does that mean?"

The Indian shrugged. "You left your Sentinel behind. Perhaps you will have to regain his trust."

"Maybe."

"Maybe?" Blair hadn't considered the possibility Jimelis might think he had deserted him. Hadn't Blair felt Jimelis had done the same?

"How many days until you return to your people?" Incacha asked as he stood and led the way out of the hut.

"Um, I leave the village in five days. It will take two days of travel to reach my home."

"And your Sentinel? When will you return for him?"

Blair sucked in a deep breath of fresh air. "As soon as I can arrange it. It won't be easy."

"No," Incacha agreed, "it will not be easy."

As Blair coughed and tried to regain his equilibrium, he reflected on the hurdles they would have to overcome. There were tremendous differences in their cultural backgrounds. Would he live with the Dyak or would Jimelis live with him? What of the foundation? The next expedition was set to take off shortly after he got back to Cascade. Cassie was sure to have a whirlwind of fundraising activities waiting for him.

When it came right down to it, all those hurdles were of no consequence. He and Jimelis would be together.

"You will do it, Blair? You will go after him?"

"I have to," he answered. "He is first in my heart."

Two days of fasting and meditation in his hotel room had brought Jim no closer to any decisions about his future. So, he'd shown up on his father's doorstep three days ago and was now living, at least temporarily, in the Ellison mansion.

William had had tears in his eyes when he had pulled Jim into his arms that first day. Jim couldn't remember the last time his father had hugged him and he knew he'd never seen the man cry. After the emotional upheaval of the last couple of weeks and the searing pain of losing Blair, his father's embrace was an anchor he'd never expected.

The transition from a Dyak back to an American was not easy. The world might not have changed much in five years but he had. His soul and his emotions were not buried as deeply as Western man's should be and he struggled to contain the wildness that lurked just below his surface.

Last night he'd awakened from a dream so vivid it took him several minutes to realize he was not sleeping in his shelter outside of Budi's longhouse. Sugeng had told him once his Watchman spirit was a great cat. In his dream he was a large, black cat. He ran through the jungle, evading an unknown predator. At the edge of a clearing he'd glimpsed his pursuer--a young gray wolf with Blair's blue eyes. The wolf wanted him desperately but he could not let himself be caught. Even in his dream he'd recalled Blair belonged to another. So, as the cat, he'd fled.

He wished he could speak to Sugeng. The old Shaman could help him uncover the meaning of his dream.
He closed the yearbook he'd been flipping through and returned it to the bookshelf. His bedroom was virtually unchanged from the day he'd graduated from high school and ran away. It was disconcerting to be in this room filled with his youthful mementos.

On the wall were ribbons, awards and trophies. His Boy Scout sash, covered with merit badges, was pinned in a case next to his Arrow of Light and Eagle Scout certificate. Model cars, Indian arrowheads and a few foreign coins in plastic sleeves were lined up carefully on his slightly scarred blue desk.

He knew all these things had belonged to the boy Jimmy Ellison, but there was no bridge to join the remembrances of that child to the man he was now. His memories were intact but he was unconnected to them. No matter how he tried to deny it, his time with the Dyak had changed him at the most basic level. Or perhaps it only opened him to what he was meant to be.

He perched on the edge of the single bed which was still covered with a racecar print spread. Dropping his head into his hands he allowed his grief to well-up.

Blair. God, this would have all been bearable with Blair at his side. This disjointed awareness, as if he were a half-step out of sync with the world surrounding him would have been vanquished if he could just hold Blair one more time.

Selfish, Ellison, so fucking selfish. Blair has a woman now and she carries his child. Stay away from him.

Raised voices from downstairs pulled him from his thoughts. He hurried from his room.

"What the hell did you do, Dad?" It had to be Stephen. He hadn't heard his brother's voice since they were kids but he knew it just the same.

"What are you talking about?" William asked. Jim stopped just outside the den door and listened.

"Don't fucking answer my question with a question."

"Language, Stephen."

"I'm not a kid you can push around anymore."

"I'm still your father and you'd best respect that."


"Whatever I did I'm sure I did for your own good." There was the William Ellison Jim remembered from childhood. "Now, what specifically are you talking about?"

"Let's start with Carolyn Plummer. My neighbor congratulated me on my engagement this morning. She'd clipped the announcement out of the Cascade Times for me since I was out of the country."

"Calm down, Stephen," William said.

"Calm down? You think I'm going to let you pick out my wife? Are you out of your mind?"

"You and Carolyn have been dating on and off for years. It is past time for you to get responsible and settle down."

"And you decided that? You think I'm what? Breeding stock? You picked the best heifer for the
"Ellison bull?"

"Don't be crude, Stephen."

"Damn it, Dad." Jim heard something crash on the floor. "I haven't dated Carolyn in a long time and it was never serious. I don't love her and I'm not marrying her."

"You'll do what has to be done."

"Wrong. Carolyn might be John Plummer's pawn but I'm not yours. You're not going to run my life. Not anymore."

"Stephen," William said in a let's-be-be-reasonable tone, "Carolyn is a lovely girl from a fine family."

"Oh, I get it now. Our marriage is part of some business deal, right? Well forget it. You marry her. I'm in love with someone else."

"That little tramp Welles?" William spat.

There was silence from the room for a moment then Jim heard the deadly cold in his brother's voice. "What do you know about Cassie?"

"I know you're trying to throw yourself away on some dirty, gold-digging slut."

"I'd kill any other man who said that about her, Dad, so you better watch your mouth."

Before the fight could escalate any further, Jim opened the door into the den. Stephen, his baby brother, was a grown man with hurt and fury etched in every line of his body. William stood across the room, self-righteous arrogance written on his face. Ah, this particular scene was one familiar to Jim. He and his father had played this game a thousand times.

His brother looked up and the anger fell away. "Jimmy?"

"Hey, Stevie."

Jimmy was alive.

A spear of joy pierced and deflated Stephen's fury. "Oh my God, Jimmy. You're alive." He threw his arms around his big brother and squeezed hard.

"Yeah, I am," Jim said on a laugh.

"How?" he asked, releasing Jim. "The Army told us you were killed in the Philippines."

Jim's face darkened with pain. "The men under my command did die. I was washed ashore somehow and have been living with the natives in Borneo."

"I can't believe it. Thank God." He hugged his brother again.

It had been almost twenty-three years since he'd seen Jim. William had ignored Jim's request for a small graduation celebration for a few of his classmates. Instead, in his typical style, their dad had turned Jim's personal triumphant into an opportunity to entertain business associates and clients.

He'd been thirteen that spring. Still a kid, but old enough to understand things were strained between his dad and his brother.
After the boys had been paraded by William's guests, they were shooed upstairs to amuse themselves. Their bedrooms had been side-by-side.

Stephen had shut himself in his room and laid on the bed to listen to the radio. He must have dozed off because the next thing he could remember was raised voices in Jimmy's room.

Jimmy's door opened and slammed shut. Afraid and fascinated, Stephen had peeked out of his room to see Jason Bailey, Jim's best friend, running down the hallway to the back steps. Jason had been bare-chested, his blue football jersey balled up in his hand.

"For Christ sake, Jimmy. Where's your head?" William had been angry but controlled. Even then Stephen had understood appearances were everything to his dad. The family might be in crisis but, by God, none of the downstairs guests would know.

His brother, tears wavering in his voice, answered. "I love him, Dad."

The sound of flesh slapping flesh echoed in Stephen's head.

"No son of mine is going to be a queer. I don't ever want you to see that faggot Bailey again. Do you hear me?"

"Yes, sir."

Stephen had quickly closed his door. After he'd heard William return to the party, he'd snuck into Jimmy's room. He'd been shocked to see his brother shoving clothes into his old Boy Scout duffle bag.

"You okay, Jimmy?"

"Yeah, I'm fine." His father's handprint, huge and red, marred his brother's cheek.

Panic had seized him. "Are you leaving, Jimmy?"

"I have to, Stevie." Jimmy had continued to pack. "He'll never change. He'll never accept me for what I am."

"Then take me with you." His big brother had been his hero, his confidant, his protector.

"Ah, Stevie," Jim had said, ruffling his hair. "I can't, Squirt. You're too young."

"I am not."

"Maybe you're not, but I'm too young to take care of both of us. I have to go. I'll come back."

"Promise?"

"I promise." Jimmy had hugged him tightly, picked up the bulging duffle bag and disappeared from his life.

He'd never heard from Jim again. Then five years ago he'd been told his brother and his chance for a reconciliation were gone forever.

Now his brother, alive and well, stood next to him. Stephen hadn't understood why Jim had left or why their father hadn't tried to find him back then. Over the years he'd put the pieces together. William Ellison would rather throw a child away then have a homosexual son.
He spun toward his father. "You knew I came back yesterday and you couldn't pick up the phone to tell me my brother was still alive?"

William shrugged. "Jim's been stateside for a couple of weeks. I didn't think to tell you."

"Too busy worrying how to fit us into your master plan?" The anger and hurt that had built up over the past thirty years spilt over. "It must have taken most of your waking hours figuring out the best way to marry off your straight, breeding stock son. And what the hell were you going to do with the gay one?"

"Steve," Jim interrupted.

"You know, Jim, you were right when you took off. He'll never accept us for what we are." He balled his shaking hands. "Cassie won't take my calls, Dad. What else did you do?"

William looked away, refusing to answer.

"Cassie won't talk to me, she returned all the letters I sent to her from China and she didn't cash the check I had couriered to her. Why would that be, Dad? Why would she refuse to accept a $70,000 check?"

"I wasn't going to let that little man-eater get her hands on Ellison money."

He shook his head in disbelief. "You intercepted the check. I can't fucking believe you. You intercepted the check."

"She's a money grubbing bitch and I'll be damned if she gets even one nickel of our cash."

He wanted to hit his dad. He wanted to knock him to the floor and beat the hell out of him. "You bastard. She lent me that money to underwrite a business deal. She mortgaged her business and home to back me. She had faith in me."

The consequences of William's deception threatened to crush him. "Do you have any idea what you've done, Dad? She put everything she's worked for on the line for me and you cut her off at the knees."

Jimmy gently squeezed his shoulder. "Stevie, can you pay her back now? Is it too late?"

"I don't know. It was a short turn around loan."

William cleared his throat. "I didn't realize the money was a loan repayment."

"You didn't bother to ask, of course," Stephen said.

William drew himself up. "If you'd come to me in the first place, this whole mess could have been avoided."

"Right, Dad. I'm not authorized to blow my nose at the office without supervision. Where did you think I got the money to give Cassie?"

His father said nothing.

"What did you think, Dad? That I stole it from the company?" When William remained silent, Stephen sighed. "You did, didn't you? Damn it, do you know me at all?"

"What was I supposed to think?"
"Why, that I was a thief, naturally. I took twenty dollars out of your wallet when I fourteen so once a thief, always a thief, right?"

"It wasn't like that, Stephen. I was looking out for you."

"By having a detective follow me?"

Jim jumped in. "Dad, you didn't. Please tell me you didn't pay someone to spy on Stevie."

William raised his chin. "I did what I thought was right. Granted, I might have misjudged the situation, but I did it with the best of intentions. I made a mistake with you, Jimmy. I didn't want to lose Stephen like I lost you. I had to protect him."

"Protect me from what?" Stephen asked. "Growing up? Getting out from under your thumb? Don't use what happened with Jim as a justification for all the bullshit you've pulled on me."

"Let's try to settle down and hash this out, Son."

"No. I'm too angry to settle down. I'm going to try and get Cassie to talk to me. Maybe it's not to late to save her business."

"She took care of it herself," William said.

"How, Dad?"

"She's merging with Lee Brackett."

"Because of me." He felt sick. "She had to give up control of her business because of me."

Jim, the hero of his childhood, squeezed his shoulder again. "You okay?"

"Not really. Listen, I've got to get out of here."

"There's one more thing you should know," William blurted.

"What?" he snapped.

"I heard from Brackett that Cassie is engaged."

Lightheaded, he paused to lean against the doorframe. "I don't believe you. You'd say anything to get me to fall in line."

Jim coughed. "It's true."

"How do you know?" Stephen demanded. "Who is she supposedly marrying?"

His big brother studied the carpet for a moment before he answered. "She's going to marry Blair Sandburg."

He watched as his brother turned the information over in his mind, looking for a way to deny it.

Finally, Stephen said. "That can't be true. She and Blair are just friends. Not really even friends. Her company does the PR for his charity."

Jim hated to make Stephen face up to this. Hell, he hated to face up to it. "I'm sorry, Stevie. She told me herself."
"How do you even know her?"

"I don't exactly. I met her outside of Sandburg's loft a few days ago. She introduced herself and said she was Blair's fiancé." Jim tried to keep his tone neutral, but the knowledge that his father's interference had effectively destroyed their happiness was devastating.

"She told you herself," Stephen repeated. He pushed up from the doorframe. "I've got to get out of here." He practically ran out of the house.

"I think I better go after him, Dad." He watched as William seemed to shrink before him.

"Maybe you'd better." William reached out to grab his arm. "Before you go, how did you end up at Sandburg's house?"

"I met him in Borneo. He came to the village I was living in to treat the chief's wife. When I was injured later, my tribe took me down river to the clinic he built. He'd already gone back to the States but the clinic saved my life."

"I see. So you two were friends?"

Heat filled his face. "Sort of."

"He doesn't know who you are then? He thinks you're some Indian?"

"A Dyak. Yeah, he thinks I'm a Dyak." Jim felt like a guilty kid. "I wanted to stop by and thank him."

"Oh." William pulled a notepad off the desktop and scribbled on it. "Here's Stephen's address and cell phone number."

"Thanks."

"Jimmy," William started.

"Yeah?"

"I really was trying to protect him."

Jim wanted to give the old man the benefit of the doubt. The past couple of days William had been genuinely attentive, but he couldn't forget his father's actions had cost him the future that should have been his.

"You might try to be a little less Machiavellian next time. Stephen is a grown man."

"I want him to be successful. I want him to be safe."

Jim threw up his hands in frustration. "Do you hear yourself? I want. I want. What about what Stephen wanted? He loves this woman and she must have loved him, too. Now, she thinks he's some kind of a monster and she's going to marry another man."

"Stephen will get over it."

"Why? Because you said so? Maybe he'll never get over it. Maybe he won't want to. Maybe she's the one special person in the world just for him."

"Romantic crap. I expect it from your brother but not from you."
"Why? Because I'm gay?"

"You're not gay." William said automatically.

"Yes, I am, Dad. You couldn't accept it twenty years ago and you won't accept it now. Your rejection drove me away and kept me away."

"But you did come home," William protested.

His control slipped. "I would never have come back to Cascade if Blair wasn't living here." He carefully folded the slip of paper with Stephen's information and put it in his wallet. "I'm going to pack up, Dad."

"Jimmy, you don't have to go."

"I think I do. I'll call and let you know where I end up." He was halfway up the staircase when his father's voice reached him.

"I didn't mean to hurt either one of you boys."

He stopped but didn't turn around. "No, you just wanted to be in control. You wanted us to follow your almighty will."

William stood at the foot of the stairs. He had to make Jim understand. "You boys were all I had left after your mom was killed. I had to protect you."

Jim turned and sat on a step. "Dad, you loved Mom very much, right?"

"Your mother," he swallowed hard. He never talked about Grace. Thirty years gone and the pain of her absence was fresh. "I loved her very much, yes."

"Why can't you see Stevie might feel the same about Cassie."

The grief on Jim's face wasn't all for his brother, William suspected. Jim got up and climbed the stairs.

Since he didn't think he could watch both of his sons walk out on him in one night, he retired to the den and shut the door. Ten minutes later he heard Jim leave.

For the millionth time he wished Grace was here. She understood relationships, he understood business. He'd given his boys all the material things he could. He didn't know how to give anything else.

As he poured a shot of whiskey, he realized if he didn't learn how to give he wouldn't have Jim or Stephen. God, how he'd regretted the way he'd dealt with Jim back then, but he'd had no idea how to make it right.

He paced the room, sipping at his drink. He wasn't the petty dictator his sons believed him to be although his actions said differently. Nor was he a homophobic elitist. No, he was a single father who'd tried to help and shelter his boys.

Perhaps he should have found a way to accept Jimmy was a homosexual. Gays were, on the surface at least, accepted today. Twenty years ago though, it would have ruined Jim's life so he'd tried to convince them both that Jim wasn't gay. He'd lost contact with his eldest for over half the boy's life.
Maybe he should have trusted Stephen's judgment. Had he really let a petty theft from two decades ago color his perspective of his youngest?

Both boys had excelled and survived despite him.

What in the world had he thought was so wrong with Cassie Welles anyway? True, she hadn't been born into their social strata but she'd worked hard and smart. She'd already accomplished more than Carolyn ever would. She'd trusted and loved his son enough to put everything she had at his disposal. What more could a man want from a future daughter-in-law?

And then there was Blair Sandburg. William wasn't blind. He'd seen Jimmy's face when he'd talked about Sandburg. His boy had tried to hide his emotions but they were obviously too big, too raw to keep secreted away.

Before he'd put Ellison funds into Pennies for the Jungle, he'd had the organization and Sandburg thoroughly investigated. Sandburg was just what he appeared to be, a caring and dedicated doctor. It might take some time to really accept it, but what more could a father want for his son?

There was no way to turn back time and undo what his meddling had done. He considered picking up the phone and straightening things out with Cassie but after their last encounter, he doubted she'd take his call. And rightly so.

No, a direct approach wouldn't work.

He dialed Lee Brackett's private number. He was sure Grace would approve.

He waited on Stephen's front porch swing for an hour and a half. Snuggling deep in his thick, down-filled jacket he was thankful there was no rain tonight.

The smell of liquor wafted to him as soon as Stephen climbed out of his car and into the driveway.

"Hey, big brother. What are you doing here?" he softly slurred.

"I wanted to talk to you. You know, make sure you got home okay."

Stephen unlocked the door with a flourish and motioned him in. "I've been driving myself home for years."

"I know." He followed his brother into the small house. "Nice place."

"It's a rental but I like it." Stephen crossed the living room into the kitchen. "Want something to drink?"

"Sure, whatever you're having." He sat on the sofa.

"Then beer it is," Stephen said. He handed Jim a bottle and plopped on the chair across from him. "That son-of-a-bitch really dicked me hard this time, Jimmy."

"I'm sorry about what happened."

"Well, don't worry about it." He finished his beer in two long swallows. "I'm going to get her back."

"Stephen, she's marrying someone else." It was so hard to say it again especially when he wanted nothing more than for Stephen to recapture Cassie's affections. If Cassie was with his brother, than Blair would be free. He couldn't let it happen. There was the baby to consider.
He'd learned many things living with the Dyak. One of the most important was the value of family. The Jim Ellison of five years ago would never have taken the time to talk with William tonight. He would have cut and run long before it got so emotional. He wasn't that man any longer. He had to put family first and although it wasn't something he would choose, Blair and Cassie and their baby were a family.

He couldn't let Stephen destroy it.

"No, she's going to marry me." Stephen insisted. With the exaggerated precision of the intoxicated, he reached into his pocket and pulled out several items. "See, first I'm going to give her these letters and make her read them. I'm going to hand her the money I owe her and explain why everything got so messed up. Then I'm going to give her this." Opening a small velvet box he had balanced on the palm of his hand, Stephen revealed a solitaire engagement ring. "She'll forgive me because she loves me."

"Stephen, she loves someone else. She promised herself to Blair Sandburg."

"No. Love like we have doesn't just fade away in a couple of months."

In his heart, Jim knew it was true, at least on Stephen's part. Their father was proof the Ellisons didn't fall in love often, but when they did, it was forever.

"It's too late, little brother," he said kindly. "You have to let it go."

"Why? Why shouldn't I fight for her? I love her."

"She and Blair are going to have a baby."

Later that night, Jim half carried his drunken brother to his bed room. He helped Stephen crawl between the sheets. Then, as he'd done when their mother died, Jim spent the night sitting on the edge of his baby brother's bed, guarding him as he sobbed himself to sleep.

Cassie waited at the airport gate for Blair.

The weather had been horrendous this evening with icy downpours and minor street flooding. She'd left her townhouse early but had still managed to miss Blair. No matter. She knew how he operated; he'd be back up at the gate before long.

Last week had been a nightmare for her. Stephen had called her home and office over and over. The temptation to pick up the telephone when she heard his voice had been close to unbearable.

Her office assistant had strict instructions to tell Stephen she was out and to refuse anything, including messages, from him. So far two bouquets and a certified letter had been sent back. She'd finally turned off the answering machine at home after he'd filled it twice with messages. Unable to stop herself, she'd listened to the recordings at least a hundred times before erasing them all.

"Cassie, it's Stephen. I've been trying to get a hold of you all day. Call me, Sweetheart."

"Cassie, I know you're not out of town. Your secretary says you're not accepting calls. The florist called to tell me your office refused my flowers. Honey, please talk to me. Tell me where and when and I'll be there. Okay?"

After a day and a half, he'd stopped trying to contact her.
It was just as well. She wouldn't be fooled again, damn it. Even if she was crazy enough to overlook the fact he'd lied, cheated and stolen from her. Only by the grace of God, and Blair's help, had the merger gone through without William Ellison's interference. She wasn't ruined and she wasn't about to endanger her baby's future by antagonizing William.

She was through being stupid.

It had been such a struggle to ignore him. She wanted to be free of him, didn't want to love him anymore. It was one of the few times in her life where the sheer power of her will wasn't enough. She'd finally erased the answering machine when she realized little sound bites weren't necessary to remind her of Stephen. She had his baby.

"Hey, Cassie." Blair tanned and smiling strode toward her. He slid into the black vinyl seat next to her. "How are you feeling?"

Warmed by the genuine concern in his voice, she smiled back. "Are you asking in a professional capacity, Doctor Sandburg?"

"Nope. Just as a friend."

"I'm doing okay."

He stood, extending his hand to her. She took it and let him help her up. "Good. I hope you didn't have to wait long for me. I guess we missed each other."

"I've only been here a couple of minutes." He led the way to the baggage claim. "I knew you'd head back to the gate after you got coffee."

"Not coffee," he said absently, searching the carousel as it slowly spun. "I bought a ticket."

She waited while he pulled his luggage out. "Ticket? For who?"

"Uh, well, for me." He shifted his bags and headed for the elevator bank.

"Ticket to where?"

"I was going to wait until later to tell you. I'm going back to Borneo."

"Borneo?" She leaned against the elevator wall as it began its descent.

"It's kind of a long story," he said, indicating the other passengers with a nod of his head. "Let's talk about it in the car."

"Sure."

When they were settled in her car, she pressed him. "Okay, spill."

Blair laughed. "Why yes, the trip was very successful, thanks for asking. And did the merger go through?"

"Blair," she chuckled. "Yes, the merger went without a hitch. I'm fine, the business is fine, the baby's fine. So, why are you going to Borneo?"

"Don't worry, I'll be back in plenty of time for the next expedition." She glanced at him. Not only was he evading her question, he was blushing.
"Gee, Blair," she teased, "this wouldn't have anything to do with the boyfriend you left behind would it?"

"He's not exactly my boyfriend but, yeah."

She couldn't help it. She laughed aloud. He was adorably embarrassed. "Good for you."

"That remains to be seen but, hey, I've got to give it a shot, right?"

"I hope it works out for you." She wanted to encourage him, but her own wariness about relationships surfaced. "Just be careful. I'd hate for you to end up being hurt more."

"Well, I could do without the extra pain," he answered. "I'm starving. Why don't you come up to the loft and I'll order Papa Leoni's pizza?"

She wasn't ready to leave the hopeful whirlwind surrounding Blair yet. "I'd really like that."

Blair's body had been literally humming for days.

Incacha had helped him to realize no matter what separated Watchman and Shaman or Sentinel and Guide, it was fated for them to be together. Yes, they could survive apart but, as Incacha had pointed out, life was fleeting and should be filled with as much joy as a man could find.

Jimelis was his joy.

Long before he'd set foot on the Washington bound plane, Blair had decided he wouldn't leave Cascade International Airport without a round-trip ticket to Borneo. He'd considered buying Jimelis' ticket to the States. Somehow that seemed presumptuous. He was sure the Dyak would want to be with him but the choice wasn't his.

He would do his damnedest to find Budi's village, convince Jimelis they belonged together and then they could plan from there. He wasn't sure what it would entail to get a passport and visa for his Watchman. While in the Lima airport, he'd sent emails to various government officials he'd befriended since Pennies had become recognized worldwide. Surely one of them would help him.

The fame and notoriety that came with being the Jungle Doctor had been a burden to him. Now, he was banking on that unwanted attention to bring Jimelis to him.

Cassie had only picked at her dinner while he had inhaled half a pizza. Amazing how hope for a happily-ever-after brought back his long absent appetite.

"Hey, Cassie? You want to talk about it?"

"About what?" she hedged.

"Well, if the merger is fine and the business is fine and you and the baby are fine, what isn't?" He cleared the remainder of their meal from the table and brought in a pot of herbal tea. "You can trust me, Cassie. I'll listen but I won't judge."

"Peru really worked for you, Blair."

"I did a bunch of meditating and fasting with the new Shaman there."

"Oh." She moved into the living area and lowered herself onto the sofa. "It's Stephen."
Blair sat in the rocking chair near her. "What did he do? Are you alright?"

"I'm fine, really. He called several times last Monday. It really upset me."

"What did he want?"

"To talk, I guess."

"About what?"

"I don't know. I let the machine pick up."

"Why?"

"Just because you're ready to give your boyfriend another chance doesn't mean I am. He lied to me and stole from me. My business is, for all intents, Lee Brackett's now. I can't just forget all that and give him another shot at me."

"But you want to?" Blair guessed.

"Oh, I want to alright." She gave a watery chuckle. "I'm tempted to throw caution to the wind and take him on any terms."

"You wouldn't."

"I won't but I'm tempted. If it wasn't for the baby, I'm not sure how much resolve I'd be able to scrape up."

"Cassie, you deserve more than leftovers."

"I know, I know but I miss him, Blair. He treated me like an afterthought and I can't stop thinking about him."

"Then you should call him."

"Are you crazy?"

He considered it briefly. Maybe he was. Two weeks of kneeling naked in a smoky hut, fasting and meditating, had definitely shifted his perspective. He was prepared to fly halfway across the earth on the off chance he might manage to find a tiny, remote village located in a hostile jungle so he could convince a primitive warrior to leave everything he knew behind and jump into the 21st century as his lover and companion.

Yeah, that could possibly be conceived of as crazy, but what the fuck? Without Jimelis he would have next to nothing. With Jimelis beside him, he would be fulfilling his destiny and striving toward joy.

There was more, of course. He would have love, a true sense of belonging, a tether to this world. Most importantly, he would have an opportunity to make Jimelis content. According to Incacha, without his true Shaman, a Watchman could never reach his full potential. The longing for the closing of the circle between Watchman and Shaman, the desire for unity for them, was even stronger, Incacha had said, for the Watchman.

If he were to say all this out loud to Cassie, she'd no doubt think he really was out of his mind. He knew the truth though. Two weeks with Incacha had helped scrape back some of the bullshit keeping his mind closed and his vision blurred.
"No, I'm not crazy," he told Cassie. "I can't guarantee everything will work out. I can't promise either one of us won't be hurt. I do know that I've been miserable without him. I can't pass up the chance to make things right. If he turns me away at least I'll know I went down swinging."

Cassie followed the pattern embroidered on her jacket with her thumb. "You think Stephen will have some reasonable explanation for the hell he put me through?"

"I don't know. Maybe not, but if I were you, I'd probably talk to him."

"Would you?"

"Yeah, and I think you want to talk to him, don't you?"

Without looking up she gave him a small nod.

"Then give yourself permission to hear him out. Make sure you have all the facts."

"I'm just not sure, Blair. Are you?"

"Hell no. I'm not sure about anything. He might tell you things you don't want to hear and cause you even more grief. On the other hand, he might tell you exactly what you need to hear."

"You know," she said with a tiny smile, "you got pretty smart in Peru."

"Not really. It's more like I did a little listening in Peru."

"I'm going to have to think about talking to Stephen." She stood up. "I've got to run."

Blair pulled her coat from the rack next to his front door and held it open for her. "I'll go with you when you talk to him, if you want," he offered.

"Thanks, but if I do talk to him, it will probably be on the phone. I'm not ready to do the face-to-face." She patted her abdomen. "I don't think he'll be able to tell I'm pregnant but I'm not taking any chances."

"Okay, but if you change your mind, let me know."

She buttoned her coat and started out the door. "Wait, I forgot to ask you, when do you leave for Borneo?"

"On Saturday. I needed a few days to check on the next expedition's progress."

"Good. I meant to tell you the Bracketts' are throwing a twenty-fifth wedding anniversary gala on Friday night. Lee plans to present the foundation with, in his words, 'a huge, huge donation in his wife's name.' He specifically asked you be there to accept it."

He saw the apprehension on her face. In the past he would have given her a ration of shit before begrudgingly agreeing to attend. Jesus, he'd been such a dick in his dealings with her.

"Great. We could use 'a huge, huge donation.'"

"Great. I mean, I realize it's just Lee's way of getting some publicity and making sure everyone knows his firm represents Pennies now, but it's to everyone's advantage."

"Yeah, a real win-win situation." He squeezed her hand. "Did you want me to pick you up?"
"How about I pick you up instead?"

"Okay. What time?"

"I'll be here at seven thirty. Wear your tux and be ready to give a quick thank-you speech."

"No lecture needed this time?" He smiled at her headshake. "Perfect. Then I'll see you Friday."

"Night, Blair."

"Night, Cassie."

He closed the door behind her. He could suffer through another boring charity ball and give another thank you speech. He could totally handle it, maybe even enjoy it because the whole time he'd know his ticket to Borneo was in his pocket.

"Hello?"

"Stephen?"

He'd know her voice anywhere. Why did she have to call now? His first day back in Cascade he'd almost gone stalker trying to get her to talk to him. It seemed like a century ago. Before he knew about Blair Sandburg, before he knew about their baby.

The night Jimmy had told him about Cassie's pregnancy, he and his brother had sat up till nearly dawn, drinking and talking. The Ellison boys had been raised in a broken home. He couldn't willfully, selfishly do that to Cassie's child.

"Stephen? This is Cassie."

She sounded as nervous as he felt. "Hello, Cassie. How are you?"

He kept his voice cold, emotionless.

"I'm good. I'd like to talk with you, Stephen."

He'd like that, too. He wanted to see her, touch her, be with her but he couldn't. He had to do what was right. "Why? What could we possibly have to say to each other?"

Her gasp was audible. There was silence for a moment. "I see. I'm sorry to have bothered you. Goodbye."

He held the dead receiver for a long time, savoring his final connection with the woman he would love for the rest of his life.

"Goodbye, Cassie."

Jim impressed himself with his retained ability to turn a length of silk into a bow tie.

It still choked though, even if it did look good. Between the tux and the glossy black wing-tips, he felt like he was covered in armor rather than Armani. Years of running around in a loincloth had definitely spoiled him.

"Jim," Stephen said, sticking his head around the bedroom door, "are you almost ready?"
"Almost." He ran his finger around the collar of his starched dress shirt. "Do we really have to go to this shindig?"

"I do. If I'm going to be out on my own, I've got to accept invitations like this one from Brackett."

He knew he sounded like a cranky toddler. "What's this thing for anyway?"

"It's the Bracketts' twenty-fifth wedding anniversary."

"And why were we invited?"

Stephen came up behind him and pulled on the back of Jim's collar. He didn't know what his brother had done, but suddenly the uncomfortable pressure around his neck eased.

"We weren't invited. I was. Stephen Ellison and guest. You, big brother, my guest, remember?"

"I remember you asking me to go with you. I don't recall agreeing to go."

"Yet you stood to be fitted for a tux," Stephen teased.

"More the fool I," Jim smiled. As much as he didn't want to attend this party, he needed to be there for his brother. Stephen had been pretty shaken-up since Cassie had called a couple of days ago. Plus, as long as he was concentrating on Stephen's broken heart, he could try to forget his own.

He was leaving in the morning. With no real plans or destination in mind, he'd invested half of his military severance pay in Stephen's new business. The rest of the money had gone into the bank with enough left over to buy an old Ford truck and some camping gear.

Stephen had tried to talk him into staying a while, perhaps helping him get the company up and running, but the risk of running into Blair was too great. He feared he would not be able to contain himself. For all the practical reasons he'd given Stephen for staying away from Cassie and Blair, for all the personal conviction and ingrained Dyak teachings that he should never come between a man and his wife, Jim wasn't really sure he wouldn't seek Blair out. How could he be? The pull, the draw, the longing to be with his Shaman had grown into a physical ache.

"Jim? You ready yet?"

"Sure am, Stevie." He reached for the truck keys on the kitchen counter.

"Uh, not to come off like a typical Ellison snob but let's take my car, okay? I don't really want the valet to have to park the truck."

Jim laughed and followed his brother outside. "Stephen, have you thought about what you're going to do if Dad is at Brackett's party?"

Stephen used the remote to click open the door locks and slid into the driver's seat before he answered. "I'll be civil."

"That's big of you," Jim said, snapping his seat belt closed.

"Not really. Just good business sense. Dad is a big fish all along the Pacific Rim. Not to mention, I've got enough Ellison in me that I don't want anyone outside the family to know there's bad blood between us."

"Very mature."
"Not to mention," Stephen said with a sigh, "I've already alienated one big fish, John Plummer."

"Carolyn didn't take ending the so-called engagement well?"

"She was fine with it. The old man was my problem."

"He'll get over it."

The clear night sky was a rarity for this time of year in Cascade.

It was, Blair thought, a perfect night for his last in the States. Tomorrow morning he would board a plane for Borneo. For the thousandth time he fingered the edge of his ticket. Soon, Jimelis, soon.

He walked around the car, opened Cassie's door and took her hand to help her out. "You look beautiful, Cassie."

"Not pregnant, right?" she asked as she straightened up.

He gave her the once over. "Nope." Cassie's gown was designed in such a way that it was gathered tight under her breasts then flowed outward. Even with his knowledge of her condition and his trained eye he couldn't detect her pregnancy. He offered his arm and she tucked her hands around it.

"You look beautiful, too, Blair," she said as she handed the valet her keys.

"What? Beautiful? Not handsome, not irresistible?"

She smiled at his mock glare. "Well, maybe irresistible."

"Then thanks." He turned serious. "You okay with this? Not too nervous?"

"I've got a few butterflies. There's every possibility I'll run into William and Stephen tonight. Even though the merger is a done deal and I know they can't do anything to me, I'm still not thrilled about seeing either one of them."

"I understand." He patted her cold hand. "Try not to worry too much. I'll be right there if you need me."

"Thanks, Blair. I appreciate you playing fiancé one last time."

"No problem, Cassie." He was having more than a few guilt pangs for encouraging her to call Stephen. The fucking asshole had totally blown her off and she'd been a mess.

He pulled her a bit closer as they enter the foyer of the Grand Hilton. Yeah, Lee Brackett could afford to give Pennies a huge, huge donation. Yeah, Lee Brackett could afford to give Pennies a huge, huge donation.

He hated these fucking things.

He should be home packing. Okay, not packing since he'd never really unpacked from Peru. So, he should be at home pacing, trying to burn up some of this incredible anticipation that had been building up inside him since his plane touched down in Cascade.

Now that his mind was made up, now that he knew he would search for Jimelis, the calling inside him was painfully strong. Every time he closed his eyes he swore he could feel the Dyak drums pounding in him, could smell the Borneo jungle, could hear Jimelis whisper his name. If Incacha hadn't warned him something like this could happen, he would have thought he was losing his mind.
Cassie led him through the throng of party-goers, introducing him and reacquainting him to a numbing number of them.

"Blair, it's so good to see you," a warm, moist whisper skirted across his ear.

"Kathy. How are you?"

She pushed her painted lips into an appealing pout. "I was angry with you last weekend."

"Really? Why?" Somehow Cassie had become separated from him. He caught a flash of her red hair moving through the crowd. Fuck. He needed her to save him from the young Mrs. Muntzinger again.

Kathy trailed her fingers down his sleeve.

"We had a party on Saturday and you didn't make it."

"Uh, sorry."

"Cassie told us you were in Peru on some humanitarian mission."

He took a half step back from her. "Right."

"If you dance with me, I'll forgive you."

Resigning himself to dancing with this woman one more time before Borneo, he led her out onto the dance floor. As they made the first turn, Blair felt a hot tingle run down his spine.

He wished he was on that plane this minute because he swore he could feel the drums and smell the jungle right now and his eyes were wide open.

Jim should have anticipated this.

Maybe he had but wouldn't admit it to himself. Maybe he'd wanted this. Of course he'd wanted this.

The moment he walked into the ballroom, despite the hundreds of other guests, he had smelled him. His senses, which he'd kept reined as tightly as possible, welled up and soared.

His Shaman was on the dance floor, gracefully moving with a dark-haired woman in his arms.

It took all his considerable will not to pull the couple apart and drag Blair away with him. This, he reminded himself sternly, was not the jungle. He was no longer Jimelis.

"I see someone I need to talk to," Stephen said, interrupting his observation of Blair.

"Go ahead," he urged, snagging a drink off the tray of a passing server. "I'll try to mingle."

Stephen nodded and melted into the crowd. Jim slipped to the back of the room, trying to be inconspicuous. Although weeks had passed since he'd returned from Borneo and the fervor concerning his story had died down, he was still wary of large groups of people.

Although he'd worried after his face had been splashed all over television and newspapers, a surprisingly few people had actually recognized him. Some had look at him and asked if they knew each other, but for the most part, his fame had been a seven-day wonder.

The music changed and Blair had hardly stepped off the dance floor when another woman claimed
him as her partner. Jim settled into a seat.

It was a pleasurable torture to watch Blair, his last indulgence in what might have been.

"Hello, Cassie."

Her stomach cramped and the shrimp puff she'd just eaten threatened to make a reappearance. Pasting on a party-smile she turned to greet William Ellison. "Mr. Ellison. How have you been?"

"Good, thank you. Better than good really. You've heard my eldest son is alive? He was found a few weeks ago."

"No, I hadn't heard. How wonderful for your family." She attempted to move around him. He reached out and gently cupped her elbow. Not wanting to make a scene, she allowed him to stroll her along the perimeter of the crowd.

"Yes," he said, "it was an honest-to-goodness miracle. He'd survived a helicopter crash and had lived among the natives for years. It was in the news."

"I'm afraid I've been a little single-minded trying to get my affairs in order for the Brackett merger." She tugged a bit, hoping he'd release her. He didn't. "I'm very glad for your family."

"That's gracious of you considering all I've done to you." He scanned the party for a moment. "I don't know quite how to say this to you. Getting Jim back made me take stock of everything in my life. I did you a grave injustice, Cassie, and I'm sorry. I hope you can forgive me someday."

She eyed him suspiciously. There was more to this than his threats against her. "I'm not sure I know what you mean."

"You will." With that he whirled her to the left. She stood face to face with Stephen. "Stephen, Cassie, I believe you two know one another." He left them.

"Hi, Cass."

She couldn't find her voice. Her tongue was glued to the roof of her mouth, He looked so good. She wanted to touch him, wanted to kiss him. Instead, she stood there silent and stupid as her eyes filled with tears.

This was impossible. He'd taken almost everything from her, she wasn't going to hand him her dignity, too.

She fled to the balcony.

"Why did you do that?" Stephen's furious voice reached William.

"I was trying to help, trying to make things right."

"By humiliating us?"

He was puzzled. "How did I humiliate you two? I was trying to get one stubborn Ellison to talk to the woman he's in love with. I drove the wedge between you kids and I wanted to help you get back together. I was wrong, son. While I didn't give Cassie all the details, I did apologize to her. I figured you'd fill in the blanks."
"For what? Don't you ever listen, Dad? She's going to marry somebody else."

"She'd engaged, not married. You still have time to win her back, son."

"No."

"No? Why?" he asked, exasperated with his youngest child. "It's a mistake for her to marry Sandburg when it's obvious she loves you."

"You can't possibly know how or what she feels." Stephen cleared his throat. "Anyway, it doesn't matter. She's pregnant."

"She told you that?"

"No, Jimmy did. The night you and I fought, Jim told me about the baby."

William did some quick calculations in his head. "Stephen, Sandburg had only been in town a couple of weeks before Jim met Cassie."

"So what?"

"He'd been in Borneo for months before that."

"I don't need his travel itinerary, Dad. Is there a point to this?"

Sometimes Ellisons could be so damn dense, he decided. "Stevie, my point is the boy has spent the better part of the last seven months thousands of miles away from her."

Stephen nodded.

"So what I'm asking you is, are you sure her baby is a Sandburg and not an Ellison?"

William watched as understanding, then hope, dawned on Stephen's face. "No, Dad, I'm not sure but I need to be."

"I saw her go out to the balcony."

Cassie had to get herself together, for heaven's sake.

It wouldn't be much longer before Lee Brackett presented a check for the foundation and the last thing she needed was to be a tear-stained mess in front of the majority of her clientele.

She dabbed at her eyes and drew in a weepy breath. She thought she'd braced herself, prepared herself for running into Stephen.

She was wrong.

"Cassie?"

She sniffed and looked up at Stephen. "Yes?" Her voice was a little weaker than she would have liked. She decided to blame it on her racing hormones.

"I think I've been an idiot, Cassie."

"Really?"
"Really." He placed his hands on her shoulders and pulled her closer to him.

"Why's that?"

"Cassie, I've got a lot of things to tell you and even more to explain to you but first, I want you to know that I'm in love with you." Keeping his left hand on her shoulder he slid his right to cover the firm swell of her abdomen.

"Cassie, is this baby mine?"

William was queasy.

It wasn't enough his meddling and scheming had alienated his sons from him, he'd nearly let a grandchild slip through his fingers. God, please let Stephen patch things up with Cassie.

He directed his attention to Blair Sandburg who was currently swinging a pretty blonde around the dance floor. He recognized her as the Plummers' middle daughter. What a mess he'd made of things. His thirty-five year friendship with John Plummer was yet another casualty of his meddling and scheming.

Scanning the ballroom he spotted Jimmy sitting alone on the fringe of the crowd. His boy, heart in his eyes, followed Sandburg's every move.

God, Grace, this was hard. For all that he could see the naked hunger on his boy's face, it was still so damn hard to be a party to this. He knew Stephen and Cassie would make a normal life for themselves. They would marry, raise children, and find their place in the community.

Helping Jim find his way back to Sandburg would be helping to open the door to misery. There would always be people who would judge and hate Jimmy merely because he was with another man. There would always be places and opportunities closed to him as a homosexual. Pain and suffering waited for his boy along this path.

He glimpsed the quiet desperation that hung like a mantel around Jimmy as he watched Sandburg.

Not only would Jim be committing himself to a man, but the doctor was a very high profile man. Maybe he better just leave things as they were.

A grandchild had almost been lost to him.

He looked at his son again. No, if he'd read the signs right, he was responsible for destroying something important to Jim. Hell, his son had been at Sandburg's apartment before he'd even stopped by the family home. He owed it to Jim to help set things straight.

Sandburg was leaving the dance floor, pretty blonde at his side. William flagged down a server.

"Yes, sir?"

"Could you please tell Doctor Sandburg that William Ellison needs to speak to him? Have him meet me in the foyer in say, ten minutes?" He slipped a folded twenty into the server's hand.

"Yes, sir."

With a glance toward the balcony, praying Stephen would be successful, William steeled himself for part two of his mission.
Resolving not to think too much about it, he made a beeline to Jim.

"Son," he said. Jim looked at him. William detected no anger in his boy, just sorrow. "Son," he started again, "I know I don't deserve it but I'd like to talk to you."

He worried for a moment that Jim would walk away. Instead he answered, "Sure, Dad," and followed him into the nearly deserted foyer.

"I'm not too good at this direct approach stuff, Jimmy. I seem to excel at, what did you call it, Machiavellian plots?"

Jim shoved his hands in his pants pockets and waited.

"Anyway," he continued, "I wanted to say I was wrong. Dead wrong. I should have found a way to accept you all those years ago. And I should have let Stephen make his own decisions."

"Yes, you should have."

"I don't expect you to understand or even forgive me. I just want you to consider me reformed."

"Just like that?" Jim asked with a half smile.

"I'm sure I'll make a few hundred blunders on the way to complete recovery, but I'm going to try to mend my ways." He lowered his voice. "Please, Jimmy, don't cut me out of your life again."

"I'm leaving Cascade tomorrow, Dad."

William was careful to school the shock from his features. "I see. If you don't mind me asking, where are you going?"

Jim sighed. "I'm not sure. I need time to sort through what's happened to me. I thought I was coming back to something but, well, I'm at a loss right now. I need to find my balance again."

William nodded. "Will you try to call home now and then to let me know how the search is going?"

"Of course I will, Dad. I don't want to lose touch again either."

"Thanks, Jim."

He watched over Jim's left shoulder as Sandburg approached. Although it rankled him to help hand his son over to another man, he put on his most harmless smile to greet Sandburg. He'd nearly given away his grandchild; his own judgment was not infallible.

"Mr. Ellison?" Sandburg said, hand extended.

William grabbed the offered hand. "Doctor Sandburg, good to see you again." Sandburg's grip was firm, the hand strong and callused. The doctor was good looking, almost too good looking, but there was a tough intelligence in his eyes. William knew he needed to put a lifetime of believing stereotypes behind him and accept this young man.

"I was told you wanted to talk to me?"

"I'm making a donation to your foundation tonight and I wanted to do it before Brackett steals my thunder."

"Ah. Thank you." William noted the precise politeness of Sandburg's tone. Cassie had no doubt
filled him in on all the sins the Ellisons had committed against her.

"I think you might know my son, James," he said, indicating the silent figure beside him.

"I don't believe we've met," Blair said, putting his hand out again as Jim turned to face him.

"You two met recently in Borneo."

Hands clasped, they stood stock still.

Jim's power swirled up from deep within him. Blair's hand and eyes, his very presence served to tether him tightly as his senses flooded up and rode out from him in rippling waves. He knew it would be the last time he would have the luxury to let his senses fly like this.

He flowed through the ballroom, hearing the tinkling of glass and laughter, catching whiffs of expensively perfumed flesh and expertly prepared food. He flowed further, moving into the night sky. The scent of winter air filled him, the strains of music and car horns reached him. He wished to soar higher still when Blair's voice reached him.

"Jimelis?" Blair said in Javanese. "How is it possible? Is it really you?"

Reluctantly, he snapped back. He had to put distance between himself and Blair before he forgot the reasons he couldn't be with this man. "Jimelis doesn't exist anymore," he answered harshly in English. "I'm Jim Ellison."

He pulled his hand free of Blair's and hurried out the front door.

Okay, what now? Stephen had driven. He didn't have the truck and he certainly wasn't going back inside.

Damn it.

Blair couldn't believe it.

Jimelis was William Ellison's son?

He watched as Jimelis walked away from him. Again.

"Aren't you going after him?" William asked.

He wasn't sure. For the brief moment his hand was in Jimelis', the drums had increased in tempo, the smell of the jungle had drenched him and Jimelis' voice, although his lips were not moving, had echoed "My Shaman" inside him. For that moment contentment, rich and sweet, had filled every fiber within him.

Yeah, Jim Ellison had a different surface look than Jimelis but he would have recognized him anywhere. The thin layer of civilization: expensive clothing, impeccable grooming, even accentless English, could never have shielded Jimelis' true nature from Blair.

"How is this possible?" Blair asked William.

"His army platoon went down in a helicopter crash five years ago. He washed up on shore in Borneo, alone and with no memory."
"And the Dyak took him in," he surmised.

"Yes," William said. "A nurse at your clinic, April something, recognized him from time they'd served together in the army."

"Jesus. What are the chances?" Incacha would have said it was merely Fate falling in step with Destiny.

"Aren't you going after him?" William asked again.

Doubt suddenly assailed him.

He'd been fooling himself. Jesus, what the fuck was he doing? He'd spent a small fortune on a ticket to Borneo for what? To chase after some one night stand? The same one night stand who had just totally given him the brush off?

All the things he'd built up in his mind, all the dreams about them belonging together seemed ridiculous now. If he hadn't spent two weeks in Peru listening to Chopec folklore, he would have been over his infatuation with Jimelis already. He'd wanted to find his irresistible someone and he'd woven Jimelis into his fantasy.

Stupid, stupid, stupid. Jim Ellison was obviously embarrassed to even speak to the man Jimelis had made love to. Okay, so he'd fucked up again. Mistaken sex for love. He'd get over it.

"Doctor Sandburg?" William Ellison was still next to him. "Blair?"

"I don't think he wants to talk to me, Mr. Ellison."

"I think you're wrong, son. Your apartment was his first stop in Cascade."

"Really?" He hated the sparkle of hope William's words brought to life. "Not to be rude, sir, but you must be mistaken. This isn't the first time he's walked away from me."

"He almost died it Borneo."

"What? How?" The idea Jimelis could have died and he would never have known sickened him.

"Some kind of a hunting accident. He was on the wrong side of a bear. His tribe brought him to your clinic and the medical team saved his life."

"Thank God." He was selfishly happy. If the only life the clinic ever saved was Jimelis' then it had all been worth it.

"Thank you, Blair. Your clinic, your vision, saved my boy's life." William lowered his voice. "I don't understand the lifestyle you and my son have chosen. I don't pretend to like it."

"So," he interrupted, "why push me to talk to him?"

"I want him to be happy," William said simply. "I'm going to tell you one more thing and then you'll have to decide what you want to do. Jim thinks you're going to marry Cassie Welles."

"I'm not," he answered immediately. "I never was."

"I didn't think so."

"If you'll excuse me, Mr. Ellison," Blair called over his shoulder as he ran out the front door.
In his vision, wolf and cat had recognized one another but the cat had run. Incacha had warned him the Sentinel might feel Blair had deserted him. Blair had been told he would have to regain the other's trust.

Damn it, he would.

At first glance he was alone in a blurry, dark parking lot. Jesus. Hooking his glasses on, he looked again. Still nothing.

He wasn't the fucking the Sentinel so it wasn't as if he could tune into Jimelis' breathing or heartbeat or the crunch of gravel underneath running feet. The temperature had dropped in the few hours since the party had started and the cold began to seep into his evening clothes. He was tempted to go back for his coat, but a niggling at the back of his brain cautioned him not to let Jimelis get too far away.

Okay, so the Shaman couldn't track the Watchman. He could still make use of the tie that bound them. Eyes closed, he took a cleansing breath. The drums, the jungle smell, Jimelis' voice all returned.

Slowly making a circle, eyes shut tight, he tried to determine the source of the calling. Fuck, it surrounded him so thoroughly, coming from within and without, it was impossible to decipher where...wait, there was a difference facing this direction.

It was as though he touched a live wire. A current, strong but not unpleasant, surged through him.

Breaking into a run he decided to take the advice he'd given to Cassie. Even if he couldn't win Jimelis back, he was going down swinging.

See, Jim taunted himself, Blair had let him go without so much as a word.

Entering a small park a few blocks from the hotel, he slowed to a walk and headed for a small bench under a lamppost. He dropped his head into his hands.

Apparently Fate or Destiny or whatever the hell one called it, wasn't as deeply woven into the fabric of the universe as the Dyak had led him to believe. Or maybe it only worked while living in the primitive world.

Rage burned inside him. How had he not realized how angry he had been with Blair all along?

Perhaps hurt and confusion had masked it before. There it was, shiny and hot, pure fury. His body felt tight and swollen with the effort to contain the boiling emotion.

He had allowed himself to be tricked by a pretty face.

"Jimelis." He was surprised to find Blair crouch in front of him, his beautiful mouth letting out white puffs of air.

"I told you," he answered in English, "I am Jim Ellison. Jimelis, gullible idiot that he was, doesn't exist any longer."

Blair refused to speak English. In Javanese he retorted, "I don't believe that. Jimelis and Jim Ellison are parts of the same man."

Two could play this game. He refused to speak Javanese. "You don't know either one of them."

"No," Blair agreed, "I don't know either one of them very well. Just as you don't know me. I'm
hoping we will change that." Kneeling on the ground before him, Blair placed his hands on the top of Jim's thighs. "Look at me, Jimelis." Jim did. "I do know the most important thing about both of us though."

He wanted to resist Blair. He couldn't. In Javanese he asked, "And what is that?"

"I know who we are to each other. You are my Watchman. I am your Shaman."

On his knees on the cold ground, streetlight gently illuminating his perfect face, his tux slightly askew from running, Blair made a powerfully appealing picture.

Then his memories and anger resurfaced. "If that is true, why did you leave me behind in the village?" He sprang from Blair and began to stalk away.

"God fucking damn it," Blair shouted in English then switched back to Javanese. "Who has been the one to leave?" Blair quickly caught up with him and kept pace as they went deeper into the park. "I waited for two days in Budi's village. You never came back. I was supposed to go home but I stayed at the clinic for another week hoping you would come to me. You never did."

Was it true? "I was injured in a hunt the morning after we were together."

"Your dad told just told me. I didn't know, Jimelis. I swear I didn't. I thought you were finished with me. Maybe ashamed of what we'd done."

He stopped. Gripping Blair's upper arms he spoke. "I was never ashamed. I planned to come to you. I didn't understand you were preparing to go. I thought there was time. I thought you felt the same connection I did."

"I did," Blair stepped closer. A scant few inches separated them. He could feel the heat rising off Blair's body. "I felt it. I didn't understand it. Once I came back to the States I started having dreams about us. You called me 'My Shaman.' I spent hours at the university researching Watchmen and Shamans."

Jim smiled. Blair was liberally sprinkling in English words when he could not find a Javanese equivalent. "And what did you discover?"

"I discovered Watchmen and Shamans or Sentinels and Guides, have existed for generations in numerous cultures. I learned a Watchman needs a Shaman and I began to suspect I might be your Shaman." Blair pushed up to kiss Jim. Jim pulled away.

"Knowing all this," he spat bitterly, "you still chose to impregnate a woman and promise yourself to her."

"No, you're wrong," Blair said, sprinting after him when he began to run. "Fuck! Will you listen to me?"

He stopped and spun around. "Fine. Talk."

"Cassie is pregnant, yes, but not by me."

"Who is the father then?" he asked, disbelieving.

"It's not my story to tell, Jimelis, but I promise you the baby is not mine."

There was no taint of lie in Blair's sweet voice.
"Why were you going to marry her then?"

"We were never going to get married, Jimelis." Blair looked at the ground for a second. "I don't want to come off like I'm trashing your family, but Cassie has had quite a few problems with your dad and your brother. She asked me to pretend to be her fiancé until everything settled down."

The sincerity in Blair's eyes shone back at him. Still, the edge of anger taunted him. "My father hurt her. My brother had nothing to do with it."

"That's for the three of them to work out. I wasn't going to marry her. I was only helping a friend."

Suspicion struck him. "She is only a friend to you."

"Yeah. Until recently we weren't even really friends."

"Why?"

Blair tucked his hands into the pockets of his tux jacket. "Okay, she and I were involved years ago. It ended kind of badly. It's ancient history."

"I believe you." He did but his animosity toward Blair was growing and he started down the path again.

"Where are you going?" Blair didn't bother to hide his exasperation. "Jesus, will you keep walking away from me until I give up? Well, I'm not giving up, Jimelis. I want to be with you."

"Do you? Why?" His anger turned to ice as he suddenly found the reason for it.

Blair was just like his father. An eighteen-year-old queer wasn't good enough to be William Ellison's son, but a decorated military hero had been welcomed into the fold with open arms.

A primitive savage had been good enough for Blair to fuck, but not to love. Now that Jimelis was Jim Ellison, a Westerner from a well-to-do family, he was worthy in Blair's eyes.

Leaning against a lamppost, he looked into Blair's expressive face.

"Why?" Blair asked. "Fate? Destiny? Kismet? I don't know. We belong together."

"Watchman and Shaman, right?" he said sarcastically.

"One reason, yeah, but not only because of what we are. We belong together because of who we are."

"And who are we?" he sneered. "You keep calling me by my tribal name. I'm not Jimelis. Hell, that was some amnesic mumbling I gave Budi after he fished me out of the river."

"To me, part of you will always be Jimelis. I apologize if I've offended you."

Jim switched to English. "I'm not some primitive man running half-naked in the jungle now. I'm an educated, civilized man from a wealthy family."

Blair nodded and replied in English. "I know. You're all those things and a lot more. I want us to have time to explore all the aspects of each other."

"You had no idea who I was?"
"No, none. I was curious about your blue eyes, naturally, but I didn't know you were an American. When you came back to the States I was in Peru so, yeah, I was clueless."

"But it certainly worked out well for you, didn't it?"

Blair appeared confused. "I don't understand what you're getting at."

"I mean, it will be much easier for us to be together since I am an educated, civilized man from a wealthy family rather than some half-wild native."

"Uh, I guess," Blair said slowly.

"You couldn't very well drag a savage around with you, right? Jimelis had never even flicked a light switch, how would you have escorted him to a fancy affair like the Bracketts' anniversary? But Jim Ellison, well, he might not be the world's most sophisticated guy, but his family has some terrific connections. Hell, you've probably got a big, fat check from my old man in your pocket right now."

He witnessed the moment Blair's struggle for understanding turned to anger and he almost smiled. Good. They would have it out, then he could walk away for real. He'd leave this man and this dream behind him and never look back.

"Before I fucking lose it, let me get this straight," Blair said, his hands now moving in a rapid staccato. "You think I'm here with you because your family is rich? Do I have that right?"

"Maybe."

"You do realize I'm a doctor and I make a pretty comfortable living?"

"I did a little checking on you when I came back," he began.

"Oh?" Blair cut in. "Did you use the same detective your dad used to spy on Stephen?"

Jim ignored the outburst and continued. "You came from nothing. I don't think you'd be opposed to a little easy money. Who would be?"

"You fucking asshole. I don't consider myself from nothing. I might not have a pedigree your social set finds worthy, but since I'm not a show dog, tracing my family line back to the Mayflower isn't a big issue for me. My mom was a fine woman who loved me. As for your money, Jesus, I don't need it."

"Maybe not personally. Still I bet it takes plenty of cash to run your foundation, doesn't it?"

"Yes, it does but don't worry, Jim," Blair made his name sound ugly, "Pennies flourished for years before you came along and it will be fine after you're gone."

Blair was going to leave him. He could see it in the other man's stance, in the hard blue eyes that had, just moments ago, been filled with tenderness.

Good, let him go. Make him go.

"It makes you feel important," he said.

"What makes me feel important?" Blair sounded more weary than angry now.

"Being the Pennies for the Jungle Doctor. Having the world hail you as a great visionary and humanitarian. So much better than the rest of us. You've given up the comforts of living in America
"to wallow in the mud with the savages. You get to be superior to modern man and superior to the backwoods natives all in one swoop."

"Jesus," Blair let out a gurgle of air that could have been a laugh. "Is that what you think? Being the jungle doctor makes me feel superior to the rest of the world? Man, it totally humbles me. I see my contemporaries giving of themselves to help take care of people they'll never see who live in cultures they'll never begin to understand. I'm honored primitive tribes are trusting enough to let us help them and teach them and learn from them."

"I, er." He didn't know what to say.

Blair gave him a sorrowful smile. "I'm sorry I bothered you, Jim. I'm glad you're okay and that you found your way back home. Good luck to you."

Panic, bitter and thick, warred with the anger in him as Blair moved further and further from him.

Just let him go.

He said to Blair's retreating figure, "Why did you leave me behind in Borneo?"

Jim Ellison was a total dick.

Blair quickly retraced his steps along the footpath. Why hadn't he listened to himself to start with? What did William know about the two of them anyway? Or Incacha with his mystical load of bullshit?

He was done, done, done with this crap.

"Why did you leave me behind in Borneo?" Jim's question reached him on the night air and went straight to his heart. How could a warrior sound so much like a lost child?

Hadn't Incacha predicted he might have to win his Sentinel's trust? Is this how he did it? By shouting and hurting and running away?

Steeling himself for round three, he jogged back to Jim who was standing where he'd left him.

"What did you say?" Blair asked. There was no room for error, he realized. This was his chance to get it right.

"I asked why you left me in Borneo."

"I didn't want to. I told you I waited longer than I really should have. There were obligations for the foundation I was committed to. I couldn't stay in Borneo indefinitely."

"So all your talk about Watchmen and Sentinels and belonging together was just a line."

Blair glimpsed it in Jim's eyes then. Hope. Jim wanted Blair to prove him wrong.

Win his trust, Sandburg. He'd spent most of his life spewing out convincing fast talk. He could do it in numerous languages. Even Incacha had been impressed with his gift of gab. Now, when it mattered the most, he was at a loss.

He placed his left hand on the bare flash at the side of Jim's neck. It was wonderfully warm and smooth.
He could do this.

"Help me here, Jim. You think I deserted you and forgot about you."

"Yes."

"I waited. You believe me, right?"

"I believe you waited a few days, yes."

"Okay. I thought you blew me off in Borneo and you though I blew you off in Borneo. Can we call that a draw?"

"That would be fair, I guess." He flashed Blair a small, sad smile. "I still believed in our bond. You're the reason I came to Cascade."

"And when you tried to find me, I was with the Chopec and you met my supposed fiancé."

"Your pregnant, supposed fiancé."

"I'm sorry that happened, Jim. I would never hurt you." He pulled Jim forward and kissed him briefly.

Jim took a step back, breaking the physical contact. "You did hurt me, though."

"How?" Finally, he thought, we're getting to the bottom of this.

"I wasn't good enough for you before. The tie between us wasn't enough until you saw me like this."

"Like how?"

"An American."

"Jim, you think our bond, my being your Shaman, wasn't enough for me? I couldn't love you while you were, what, some kind of a Tarzan figure?"

"Sort of. Yes. I had no doubts about us, Blair. I came for you knowing you would greet me with open arms and I was wrong. How can I believe when you only want me now that I'm convenient?"

Being raised in the Ellison household had taken a tremendous toll on this amazing man, Blair realized. William had a lot to answer for. It might take a lifetime to convince Jim how very worthy he was of being loved. That was fine. He was up to the task.

"I'm beginning to think love is never convenient, Jim."

"Probably not."

Blair reached into his pants pocket, pulled out an envelope and handed it to Jim.

"What's this?"

"My plane ticket. I have a flight out at 7:15 tomorrow morning."

"Where are you going?"

"Nowhere now. Look at it, Jim."
He fairly danced in place as Jim slowly torn the end of the envelope off and removed the ticket.

"Borneo? You were going to Borneo? Why?"

"To find my Watchman, Jimelis. To beg him to give us another chance. To see if there was any way he would be willing to let me into his life. Or if he would be willing to try to fit into mine. I was going to tell him it didn't matter how we worked it out, only that we did work it out."

"Oh, God, Blair."

He wrapped his arms around Jim and kissed him.

"I'm asking you to believe in me, Jimelis," he whispered in Javanese. "Trust me. Believe in us. We're in this together from now on."

Jimelis buried his head in the crook of Blair's neck before he answered in Javanese.

"I do believe, from now on."

Epilogue

Blair watched as his lover, tanned body nearly naked, jackknifed into the pool. When Jim broke the water's surface he swam to the side of the pool where Blair was stretched out on a towel.

"Are you about ready to head back to the hotel room, Blair?"

"Had enough sun?" Blair asked from behind his sunglasses. He knew exactly what Jim wanted. They’d spent the better part of the last three days having sweaty, nasty sex and Jim was ready for another round.

"Never enough sun but," Jim faked a yawn, "I thought we could probably use a little nap."

Laughing, Blair closed the notebook he’d been making last minute calculations in and picked up his towel. "Let's go nap then. The anthropology team flies in tonight and that will pretty much be the end of our naps for a while."

Jim helped gather the rest of their pool gear and the two walked to their suite. "You know, Blair, if you weren't so loud in the sack, we could nap more often in the base camps."

Blair swatted Jim's ass with his notebook as they entered the suite. "I'm the loud one?"

Jim only laughed and pushed Blair down on the bed.

Two years had passed since that night in the park when they'd almost missed their chance. Some days, like today, it seemed impossible there could have been a future with them apart. But it had almost happened, Blair reflected as Jim slept in his arms. Love was not only not convenient, it wasn't to be taken for granted.

Cassie and Stephen were happily married. Their daughter Angelica Grace was the undisputed ruler of the Ellison clan. William admonished her Uncle Jim and Uncle Blair for spoiling the girl but he was every bit as guilty. Cassie and Stephen's new baby would be born before Jim and Blair returned from this expedition.

William slipped up occasionally but was, for the most part, supportive of his sons. He'd come a long
way in his acceptance of Blair's role in Jim's life.

Pennies flourished. Jim had been on the payroll as a scout and medic since the night in the park. Blair had wanted Jim's official title to be Sandburg's Personal Fuck Toy but they'd compromised on Scout.

With Jim's help, Blair had been able to venture much further from the base camps then before. They'd ferreted out some incredibly small, remote tribes. Jim loved his work.

Even the lecture tours and fundraisers were more enjoyable and profitable with Jim at his side. For all his proclamations of being the strong, silent type, Jim had proven to be a wonderfully amusing speaker. Diplomats and school children warmed up to him as they had to Blair.

And while they didn't exactly hide their relationship, they didn't broadcast it either. People became used to the sight of the Jungle Doctor and Jungle Scout living in each other's pocket.

Blair watched Jim sleep a few more minutes. God, he loved this man. "Hey, Jim? Are you awake?"

"Hmmm...why?"

"Because I love you and I'm ready for another nap," Blair whispered playfully.

"Love you, too, and I guess I'm up for another nap."

The joy of their laughter filled the room.

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