Guide Placement

by Jael Lyn

Summary

In the future, a disenfranchised guide and a new sentinel are thrust together.

Notes

This story was previously posted on LiveJournal in 2012, but has been revised with additional story lines. It is continued in the second story, Guide Seeking, which was written for the 2012 Moonridge Auctions.

As part of the revision, several readers pointed out - correctly & kindly, I might add - that the loose system of honorifics I was using in the story did not follow the correct form. I agonized over trying to bring it into line, and just couldn't do it. Mea culpa.

To use an example, if an address was formal or official, it would be Lord Ellison, particularly if the individual was being directly addressed. Between colleagues, familiars, friends and family, Lord William would be acceptable if permission was granted. The greater the difference in status, the more necessary to use the family surname.

Imperfect, but lets assume that after multiple centuries, all things would evolve.
This is not your Cascade.

Government and society have collapsed and reformed, only to collapse and reform again. Nations have splintered. Torn by plague, environmental catastrophe, war and food shortages, value structures have dissolved, to be replaced by an evolved morality, a complicated synthesis of old and new. During periods of chaos, new coalitions of power surge forward, restoring forms of order both more and less than their predecessors.

Technology has moved forward, humankind has adapted. Governments run by an elite have risen, yet the concept of a citizen with rights has survived.

Life, finds a way, and a story begins.

The door opened with a soft, agonizing groan, throwing a dim glow across the Guide Placement Center. The light outlined the stooped shoulders of the on-call supervisor, an unpleasant, bitter castoff of a man who was more than willing to sow his own discontent in the fields of others. "Thompkins," he rasped, managing to blend disgust with profound impatience. "Derek Thompkins? You have an interested party. Get moving. You're not the only available."

So much for stark reality, unkindly delivered.

From one of the far carrels Blair Sandburg could sense frantic movement. The eyes of other Placement Center occupants followed poor Derek's headlong rush to reach the door before it closed, barring the way to whatever slim hopes might lie beyond. The hapless Derek nearly bowed toward the on-call supervisor, and the hulking shape allowed him to pass. Not that Blair could blame him. When you were hungry and desperate and a little debasement might swing work your way, well, that always put a different focus on things.

The heavy door closed. God, how Blair hated that door. Hated this place, with its windowless gray walls. Hated the boredom, the false expectations, the despair. The crowded space returned to its normal hushed murmur, bathed in shadow. Muted conversations among guides waiting for placement never varied much. Whispered encouragement mixed with jealous resentment. They'll call you next time. Why him, and not me? Why - not ever me?

With a sigh, Blair returned to his work. At least he had work. It was important to remember that. Most night applicants came to this forsaken place with nothing in hand save the standard introductory vid and qualifications checklist, desperation eating at their guts and their fading hopes. It was one thing to be placed as a guide right out of your certification program, quite another to be cast adrift later. Almost any circumstance could be spun to place the blame at the feet of the guide, and what reputable sentinel would select a partner under a cloud? Sentinels had their pick. Woe to the guide with modest skills or a checkered past. If that was your lot, without a permanent placement the safety net for working guides was precariously thin.

He focused on a much-practiced private mantra. Blair Sandburg had reason to be grateful. Yes. Remember that. His circumstances were near luxury compared to majority of guides without a permanent pairing. He could afford to pay for private lodging, vegetables from the Third Tier Citizen's Market, an occasional pair of shoes or a coat. He wasn't starving or sleeping in a guide shelter. He wasn't shiny new, but he had skills and regular employment. The Standards Commission had ruled in his favor; it truly wasn't his fault. He had options. He didn't have to stoop to any assignment under any circumstances.

Keep telling yourself that, Sandburg. Say it in the vain hope it might actually be true.
Well, it was at least partially true. Despite the fact that his credentials were currently marked "UNATTACHED" in virulent red letters, he rarely came here. His own dilapidated quarters boasted one window-filled corner which sent glorious light and warmth streaming over the kitchen and sitting room. A scavenged armchair sat in the middle of this sunny area, a haven where he could relax and concentrate on work at hand. It was easier to ignore his precarious life prospects in the relative safety and solitude of a room that was his alone.

Unfortunately, once dusk fell, the temperature dropped to shivery levels. His credit accounts weren't flush enough to cover paying for additional heat at the moment, or acquire temperature conservation shutters. On this occasion, he'd traded the intimacy of his own place for simple warmth. It was possible, though difficult, to ignore the despair that nearly vibrated through the Placement Center. He wasn't compelled to accept any assignment that wandered through the door. If a plum placement happened along, that would be well and good, but not essential.

He forced himself back to editing, the real motivation for sitting in this melancholic room at night. Nighttime editing generated income, real money that sustained his cash flow. He loathed the ultimate recipient of this particular work, but he'd made his bargain with the devil long ago. His skills were for hire, but work for this client came only with a painfully high fee, even for an individual with substantial resources. This one job would cover two month's rent, enough of a reason to work through the night. With that thought he refocused on his work, blocking out his companions and the surroundings. He'd developed a rhythm for these things. His writing and research skills could still produce a revenue stream unimaginable for most guides.

Not every student enrolled at Rainier Provincial University was a motivated scholar. Occasionally, they were barely literate. Often, profoundly lazy. From need sprang opportunity, particularly if you were working under the scanners and the other trappings of the official economy. From this badly lit, stuffy cubicle he could massage thirty pages of poorly written drivel into a essay worthy of high marks. If you were willing to pay the archive and computer fees, Blair Sandburg could complete background research in virtually any field, delivered on-time with all the appropriate citations. Under his skilled hand a disastrous final guide project could sail through the accreditation committee. Anonymously. Quickly. And, of course, for a fee. Sometimes a very substantial fee. He tended to be generous with students who made earnest efforts but simply lacked the ability, occasionally throwing in a bit of tutoring in the bargain. Blair didn't deny that, even if those occasions were counted in his favor, his activities were morally ambiguous at best. Hunger and the need to keep a roof over his head balanced those scales.

In moments of brutal, self-mutilating clarity, he acknowledged the irony. His clients were scholastic incompetents, and he exploited their crises and shortcomings for profit. The Guide Placement Center, with its creaking doors, dim lights and crushing bureaucracy, did no less - and no worse.

After Derek's brief interlude, the night stretched on unbroken by a visit from the supervisor. Unusually quiet, even for night placement. Blair dropped into another world divorced from his fellow guides and their collective misery. He had work to do.

One hundred and thirty pages of writing and editing later, he stretched, rolling his head back to relieve the ache in his neck. Carefully he saved the edited version on the data pod of his client, a thoroughly dislikable young man with an apparently limitless reservoir of malicious intent to complement his credit accounts. Blair dreaded the encounter required to obtain his fee. He always insisted the transfer take place with transparency, and in a public place. Precautions were more necessary than ever. Soon his client would no longer need academic assistance, and might be tempted to refuse payment - or worse.

Down the length of the row, heads were down, sleeping away the wee hours of the night as the
chances of being summoned faded away. Several of the carrels were empty, indicating the previous occupants had given up and gone to wherever and whatever they called home. Times were bad, but only the truly desperate made themselves available at this hour of the night. Blair felt sorry for them, conscious that his own circumstances weren't quite so dire. After all, he was here for the central heat, not a placement.

Under normal conditions, he was a "day guide", fortunate and skilled enough to place on a fairly regular schedule. Professional and flexible, he could fill-in for a sick or injured guide, a vacation, or fill a short term contract. His last placement had been two weeks covering for a guide hospitalized for a restorative surgery and subsequent recovery. Work was reasonably steady, although some declared him "too good" for a short term temp. Blair had long since learned to ignore such statements as false hopes. No sentinel who took a really thorough, cautious look would - no. No need to dwell on what couldn't be changed.

Feeling totally alone in the semi-darkness, Blair forced his concentration toward more optimistic thoughts. After all, he'd chosen to be here tonight out of convenience and comfort. He wouldn't go hungry tomorrow like some of these poor souls. Didn't he have another week doing data retrieval in the campus central archive during exams - a regular, non-guide job? And didn't said job briefly spare him from a daily routine of scraping up employment? The archive was a comfortable, safe environment, and gave him convenient proximity. Several more academic clients might need last-minute help with exams or final papers. He was practically basking in excess.

He rolled the data pod between his fingers. His primary goals were accomplished. Although technically frowned upon, perhaps he could afford to leave early. Others obviously had done so. He really didn't have to hang around just to catch a couple hours of work. Thanks to the archive job and his now completed editing, he had a little monetary cushion. He savored that delicious thought. He could scurry home, burrow into a mound of blankets and grab a few hours sleep. In the morning, maybe heat up some soup, toast a slice of that French bread the bakery had given him from the discard bin …

The door opened, creaking loudly. Rather than calling out a name, the supervisor stepped in, casting a handheld search beam across the carrels, apparently looking for someone in particular. Odd, to say the least. Night placements were generally haphazard mix-and-match. No one here would be special enough to warrant a specific placement. Blair returned to tidying up his materials, dreaming of toasted bread and blankets, when he realized the narrow stream of light now resided on his hands. He looked up in surprise. Not an accident? The supervisor motioned him forward. He rose, quickly stuffing his key pad and view screen into his battered back-carrier.

Shit, what did I do this time? Violate some obscenely obscure regulation? Did some bored bureaucratic power figure out Blair Sandburg was double dipping and decide to reestablish correct order?

He traile the supervisor through the door and down a hallway into the "Employees Only" area, vainly attempting to ignore a wave of rising dread. By the time he reached the supervisor's office, he was nearly in a panic, frantically composing defenses and explanations for imagined accusations. He strained for composure, for the detached calm that was considered ideal guide behavior. Whatever this was, there was no sense in making things worse by appearing guilty.

Before he could open his mouth, the supervisor gestured for silence. "Listen up. We have a situation, an emergency." Blair nodded, slightly dumfounded. He'd never seen a placement supervisor so agitated. Apparently Blair Sandburg wasn't the one in trouble, a realization that somehow wasn't entirely comforting. The supervisor stammered, fussing with his com screen. "You're the only one here who's even remotely qualified to cover. We're sending you out. Your transport will be here
"Okay," Blair said slowly. This might be good, but he didn't want to sacrifice the archive job for a few hours work that he didn't absolutely need. "What's the placement? I'd like to review the contract before I decide."

The supervisor snorted. "Decide? You're not deciding anything. It's official, classified, and you're going. No details, no contract, no debate. Like I said, transport's en route." He looked away, absorbed in his work station, acting as though this was too trivial for discussion.

All Blair's alarm bells went off. No way was he getting bullied into something this crazy. For a guide of his status, a signed contract might be a slim reed, but it was the only thing standing between him and total exploitation. He crossed his arms, trying for an air of professional confidence. "I don't go anywhere without a contract. Absolutely not. What are you trying to pull? This is a official G.P. Center, not some black market street swap."

Beads of sweat popped out along the supervisor's brow. "It's no scam, just an emergency. If you have any sense, you'll quit posturing and do what you're told. Remember who you are, Sandburg."

Blair's calm retreated, the void filled with anger, or more accurately, panic. "What? You think this is conscription from the last century? I have a choice. You can't just demand I serve a sentinel, any sentinel, under any circumstances."

The supervisor raised a hand, ready to launch into another lecture or threat. Blair waved him off, gesturing toward the guides' area. "Get the contract or drag someone else out of there."

The supervisor slammed an open hand on his desk. "I said move it." He swallowed hard. "If you aren't in that transport within thirty seconds of arrival, you'll be on the censure list. You'll never work again - not legitimately. I guarantee it. Don't think I can't do it."

"What the hell? Censure? On what charge? You can't -" Blair froze in mid-rant. The man's hand, no, his whole body was trembling. Supervisory personnel in Guide Placement wielded real power over the lives of their charges, yet this man was terrified. What combination of circumstances in the middle of the night could frighten a G.P. official to the point he was willing to violate the most basic of statutes?

The door to the office flew open. Blair jumped back. Already suspicious and on edge, he thrust the battered back-carrier between himself and the invading force. A pitiful barrier, but all he had. He got a fleeting impression of height, bulk and dark clothing. "Is this him?" demanded a new voice.

The supervisor backed off three steps, pressing himself against the wall. "This is the candidate. He says he won't go. It's not my fault!"

Blair braced himself as a powerful hand closed on his arm above the elbow, expecting to be forcibly dragged out against his will. Despite the pressure on his arm, the larger man only squared him around so they were facing. "We don't have time. Please. He's a good man." Blair found himself focused on the dark eyes, the tone of voice, all the subtle cues a guide had at his disposal. No matter what catastrophes he'd weathered, these instincts were his touchstone, the one element of his life worthy of trust.

Sincerity, tinged with worry. Maybe panic, although his demeanor said this wasn't an individual given to panic. Urgency, but not deception. Whatever this was, it wasn't malicious.

Two slow heartbeats, and Blair gave a slow, single nod.
Normally, there was a ritual to these things. A brief interview to exchange credentials, contracts reviewed and accepted, the placement registered, payment details arranged - all essentials conducted in the public areas of the G.P. Center. Formality. Certainty, not necessarily in favor of the Guide, but at least everyone understood the expectations. Sometimes the sessions were even closed with a hand clasp, an additional courtesy not required, but appreciated.

Not on this night. In a netherworld of confusion and apprehension, Blair found himself hustled through security doors and restricted passages, emerging into a what must be the secured area of the transport garage. Despite the walls bordering the space, wind whipped through Blair's hair, which had come loose from its restraining clasp. Rain spit from a moonless, starless sky overhead. The vehicle bore the emblems of Cascade Provincial Security.

Never!

He'd promised himself, no matter what, he wouldn't place himself in the clutches of the security services again. In all the time since - before - he'd deliberately pieced together a life below official scrutiny, partly by necessity, but mostly by choice. The alternatives, the risks, were too horrifying to contemplate. In desperation he braced his arms against the cold metal of the transport. His escort was a much bigger man, but he managed to stall their forward progress just short of the doorway.

"Stop right here. I'm not registered for security work. I can't…"

It was a shockingly short protest. Without a word, his looming escort lifted him bodily off his feet and continued forward. Blair's fingers scrabbled for a hold on the smooth metal of the transport to no avail. In an impressive display of strength, the man propelled him the length of the transport, and dumped in a forward seat. The transport's doors slid shut with an ominous hiss.

"I'm Captain Taggart." He reached across Blair's torso, easily pinning him against the curves of the seat. Blair flailed against the pressure, certain that the cold arm and ankle restraints were imminent. Instead, he felt the normal seat restraint webbing pulled across his chest. "Sorry about that. I'll supply my credentials cypher if you want to file kidnapping charges, but for now, you're coming."

The voice was firm, but tinged with regret. The interior lights of the transport flared. Blair stilled, weighing panic against curiosity.

You're a Guide. Use your skills. You observe and analyze. You aren't helpless.

Obeying his internal voice, Blair studied Taggart as he programmed the location coordinates with quick, accurate strokes. Blair, highly skilled at data entry, recognized a kindred soul, although this imposing man didn't have the bearing of any archive or data specialist he'd ever seen. Dark skin, dark eyes. Strong capable hands that seemed oddly suited to delicate work performed quickly. For all his physical presence, Taggart didn't have the harshness Blair associated with security service officers. Shoulder flashes in yellow and red, representing a unit of service which Blair didn't recognize.

The transport streaked away with the customary jerk. Blair clutched the edge of the seat pod, keenly aware that his recent transportation choices were limited to walking and, when he chose to splurge, crowded public tram. The near-silent flight, rushing above building level, brought to mind journeys he'd prefer not to dwell upon. His panic returned, and he warred against it. He took a deep breath. Time to start behaving like the professional he was. Calm Controlled.

"Captain, you need to give me some information. I can't function without -"
Taggart abruptly waved him off. He keyed the com console and rattled off a series of coded numbers and words, apparently his identification. Blair couldn't interpret quickly enough, but he caught the designation of "Major Incident". Blair couldn't stifle his gasp. Major Incident handled the worst of the worst, from murder up to and including armed insurrection. If jumping from the flyer had been an option, he would have gladly risked the fall.

Taggart ended the com burst. Their altitude and speed increased. "We've got some travel time, but we're coming in hot, so arrival may be a little exciting. You have any trouble with rough air, son?"

"Uh, I might," Blair mumbled. The gentle nature of the man's voice took him aback and was oddly comforting. Definitely not typical for Internal Security. He paused, and added, "Exactly how rough is rough?"

"Right. Well, I'll try to keep it sane." Blair caught the gleam from white, even teeth. "Flight acrobatics aren't my personal choice for an adrenalin rush. When we come in, just grab your knees and hold on. You'll be fine."

"How reassuring," Blair grumbled. "So what is your choice for excitement?"

Another grin. "The short version? I defuse the bombs. It's very relaxing when you finish."

Blair really didn't want to think about that too hard. He decided it wouldn't be prudent to prod for more information en route. Below him, the lights of the city blurred into bright streaks, and he quickly lost track of time. Gradually, blotches of unlighted ground gaped like a missing tooth in a glowing grin.

Navigational skills weren't his strong point, but even Blair grasped they were heading out of the city. But this direction? North of the city, paralleling the bay? Only the landed gentry, vast country estates, the playgrounds of the very wealthy or very connected would be in their path.

Curiosity won out, and eventually, he couldn't stop himself. He tore his eyes off the ground below and stared at Taggart. "Where the hell are we going? Or is this some security operation that never happened?"

"You deserve to know more than I can probably tell you." Taggart paused, as if he were considering his options. "Ever hear of the Patriot Brigade?"

"Other than the fact that they're violent, irrational bigots?"

Taggart actually snickered. "Fairly accurate summation, considering you're an ordinary citizen. You got the high points." After a pause, he continued. "Unfortunately, their elitism appeals to the vanities of some of our aristocracy."

Blair tried to weigh what was being said against what was being implied. "Unbridled violent ambition mixed with power, unlimited funds and entitlement. I'm assuming not good."

"You're an astute man. Sadly, those who play with fire risk getting burned. In this case, violent ambition, as you put it, has made a snack out of entitlement and wealth."

"Which family? Or is that need to know?"

The flyer dipped. "You might recognize it as we come in. The Plummer clan, as in our former Provincial minister, Connal Plummer. Apparently, he was a little bored and resentful after being forced from office. Made some very dangerous new friends and invited them home."
Blair startled as the flare of an explosion filled the horizon. A few moments later, a concussion wave caused the transport to shake and roll in an alarming aerial dance.

"Charming. About that landing…"

Their approach could only be categorized as 'indescribably awful'.

Despite Taggart's advice to lower his head, Blair couldn't bring himself to look away. Early dawn silhouetted the massive estate and grounds. What must have been a formal park and gardens were marred with torn earth, fire, and hulking vehicles bristling with men and arms. Their transport wove through obstacles, dropping hundreds of feet as if the very air had been sucked away, then making a steep climb just as quickly. Taggart muttered something about "evasive action", but to Blair it was just another way to send his stomach on an out-of-body adventure. And people did this willingly?

In the middle of a ninety degree turn that sent the transport into a double roll, Blair heard himself shouting, "I thought you didn't like acrobatics!"

"Old dog, new tricks," Taggart shouted back, rolling the transport back the opposite direction. "Where's your sense of adventure?"

Before Blair could form another protest, their transport shrieked past an immense tree, shattered with a huge vertical split and blazing orange and red. Blair gave up and folded into a protective tuck.

Fully prepared to meet his own demise in a final crash, Blair was shocked when they bumped and slid to a safe landing. He tumbled out of the transport behind Taggart, reeling with nausea and grateful to feel solid ground under his feet.

Average citizens in Cascade didn't carry weapons. Blair knew a few, those who danced along the edge of the law, who carried the occasional blade or stun cartridge. Discharge weapons were the exclusive province of the military and the security forces. On his knees next to Taggart's solid bulk, Blair realized with horror that the air around him was fairly singing with projectile fire. When Taggart lurched away, Blair froze, staring into an indecipherable halo of live fire, unable to follow.

"Come on!"

Blair snapped to attention as Taggart grabbed him by the collar, and dragged him toward cover behind a wall. Stumbling, he managed to get his balance and follow his protector's dive into what looked like a hole.

What have I gotten into?

It was some sort of shelter, a circular wall with a curving bench. The wall was covered with a complicated mosaic, composed of tiles and sparkling crystals, no doubt worth more than all the credits Blair had ever earned. Maybe it had been a contemplation garden, traditionally filled with exotic and rare plants, with an emphasis on the fragrant and the colorful. If that had been the case, the place was now a forlorn wreck. Blair had an impression of wet, slimy mud beneath him where the ground had been torn open by booted feet and equipment. He scrambled to hands and knees in a crush of arms, legs and large bodies.

"Showing off, Joel? Nice landing."

The man attached to the sarcasm was actually larger than Taggart. Blair rocked back on his heels. Of the men surrounding him, he was the only one without some kind of uniform. Obviously, he hadn't
dressed for the party. It was too dim in the filtered light to see their uniform flashings and decipher their affiliations, but they had to be more security personnel. Everyone was talking at once without providing any coherent explanation. The conversation was conducted over Blair's head, as if he were not a full participant. Actually, that was just fine. Maybe he wasn't really present, and this was all a giant mistake, just a nightmare that he'd wake from at any moment.

When someone started to strap a concussion helmet on his head, Blair finally came out of his shocked silence and rebelled.

"Enough already!" he snarled, pushing hands and bodies away to clear a little breathing room. He stood, promptly lost his footing, and going down in an inglorious heap. He struggled out of his crouch again with a string of profanities. "You damn near kidnap me. No contract," he groused, peeling glops of mud off his hands and flinging it to the ground in disgust. "A briefing would be nice. An introduction would be nice. Who's in charge of this - chaos?" By the time he finished he was shouting, glaring at the surrounding faces.

Great. Smart move, Blair. These guys can arrest you.

Mouthing off like that to security officers was probably enough to get him tossed into a detention facility for what remained of his natural life, but at this point, who cared? How could things get worse?

"That would be me." Of course, it would be Mr. Sarcasm, the guy who'd been razzing Taggart about his landing technique. To make things even more special, the man pulled himself to full height, actually topping Taggart by a couple of inches. Blair had a ridiculous impression of being a shrub amongst tall trees.

"Captain Simon Banks, Major Incident Unit." His voice and presence carried an air of unchallenged authority. A crump of incoming ordinance shook the wall of their shelter, and the entire group ducked, Blair reacting with the group. Blair realized Banks had sheltered him with his body.

Interesting. Maybe he wasn't here as cannon fodder.

Banks nodded briskly. "Fair enough." He picked up the discarded concussion helmet and went back to securing it on Blair's head. "Talk later, protection first. You need this."

Blair held his tongue while the equipment was adjusted by more experienced hands, and accepted a sort of overgarment that slipped over the head and fastened at the sides and waist. Body armor? That implied exposure to weapons fire and a host of other body-maiming activities.

Okay. I take it back. This is worse.

Banks pulled the last buckle tight. "Okay, Guide - uh ."

"Sandburg. Blair Sandburg." He glanced quickly at Taggart, who gave an encouraging nod. The man continued to defy Blair's general opinion of security officers. For whatever reason, he trusted the guy. Blair took a deep breath, and gave his undivided attention to Banks.

Despite the Captain's air of confidence and authority, he shifted from one foot to the other, the poster child for uncertainty. "Well, we're kind of new at this. What exactly do you need to know?"

Blair gaped. This guy couldn't be serious. "Let's start with the obvious. You were pretty desperate for a Guide, so where's the Sentinel? Male or female? What's the nature of the emergency, and where's the usual guide? What created the need for temporary assistance?"
There was an awkward silence. All eyes in the anxious circle of men settled on Captain Banks. He shrugged and gave a weary sigh. "The short version? We were working units into forward position for a dawn assault. It's more complicated than that, but those details don't really concern you. My officer has been in an observation post for days, monitoring activity. He knew the terrain and was working far forward, directing the other personnel in close."

Blair frowned. Something in this story was missing or garbled. "Okay, so he's male. Was his guide there?" Another awkward silence followed. If anything, the whole group seemed embarrassed, which made no sense. "He was working without his guide? For that length of time? Whose bright idea was that?"

Banks looked chagrined, and ignored the question. "Anyway, the situation escalated too fast. The advance was detected and all hell broke lose. The assault team engaged and eventually pulled back, but Ellison - he didn't make it out. We think we have his location pinned down." He motioned to a younger man, who promptly started working on a holographic terrain projection. Banks ran his hands over the shadowy image, matching gestures to explanation. "We're pretty sure he took shelter in an abandoned water system he was using earlier to get around the estate. Basically, we need you to go in and get him, before we make another move on the main compound."

Every one of Blair's earlier misgivings boiled up. "I already asked you once. Where's his guide?" he asked in a terse, angry voice.

"Well, you see - the thing is -". Banks' voice trailed off. He looked at Taggart and gestured helplessly.

Blair lost any semblance of restraint. "Quit jerking me around. What did you do? Get the guide killed?"

Banks stared down at the churned mud beneath their feet. Blair found himself again locked in by the expressive brown eyes of Taggart. "We're not trying to play you, Guide Sandburg," he said gently. "What Captain Banks is trying to explain it that there was no guide. We didn't know Ellison was a sentinel."

Blair started to lose any semblance of composure. "You can't be serious."

Taggart answered with a rueful shrug. Banks and the others just looked helpless.

"Are you guys crazy? You get bored spying on innocent citizens and start hallucinating for entertainment?" Blair cried, horrified with the scenario these large, competent, authoritative men were presenting. "You didn't know he was a sentinel? Come on. You have to know! A person is either a sentinel or they're not. It's pretty obvious."

"We can't explain it," Banks said, making the statement in a flat voice that brooked no contradiction.

Blair shook his head. "Okay. I'll play. Why do you think your officer is a sentinel? Did you take a vote or something?"

Taggart had gripped him by the elbow and gave him a firm shake, demanding his attention. "He went down under an OAV grenade. You know what those are, don't you? They teach you about that kind of thing, don't they?"

Holy Shit.

Blair could almost feel the blood drain from his face, as if all the oxygen in the world had suddenly been replaced. Olfactory -Auditory-Visual weapons - OAV for short - were exclusively designed to
disable or kill sentinels. Normals didn't react to them at all. They also weren't available in non-
military settings. An insane situation, but the logic made sense, in a bizarre, improbable way. "You're
absolutely sure?"

Taggart nodded. "Those bastards with Lord Plummer were paranoid enough to prepare in advance
for hostile action. When they detected our movement, they set off the OAV's in a protective
perimeter. Blanket coverage. We couldn't even count how many. The sentinels assigned to the
assault teams went nuts."

"And your officer?" Blair asked.

"One second we're getting normal communication with Ellison over the cypher link. Those cursed
OAV's go off, and he's screaming over the com at the exact same time, about his ears and his skin
and the smell." Taggart's face twisted in distress. "It was awful. Even over the link, we could tell he
was in agony. We weren't close; we couldn't help him."

"No, you couldn't," Blair said softly. "No. Even highly experienced Guide-Sentinel pairings can't
manage an OAV when separated." He struggled to gather his thoughts. Where to start? "So you
really had no inkling he was a sentinel?"

Banks answered emphatically. "I know Jim Ellison's personnel file backwards and forwards,
including his medical history. Sentinels are so valuable the security forces routinely test for latents.
We had no clue. Besides, Jim was in the military for ten years, a serving covert officer. The military
apparently didn't know, and they don't miss anything. There's absolutely no reference to testing,
training or detection of heightened ability."

Blair nodded, still trying to take it all in. As unlikely as it seemed, an OAV reaction was definitive.
There was no other possible conclusion.

Another wave of heavy fire sent the small knot of men huddling against the inner curve of the wall.
Blair found himself crushed between Taggart on one side and Banks on the other. They really did
seem rather protective.

As they cautiously pulled themselves out of the muck, Blair waved toward the continuing sounds of
weapons fire. "Who are these guys that they'd have -"

"Something so illegal it's banned by international treaty?" Taggart interrupted. "You don't want to
know, and it's beside the point. But it's one hundred percent confirmed the barrage was OAV. Every
unit had to pull their sentinels out of the field." He paused. "We may have had some deaths."

Blair felt sick. Sentinels died from adverse reactions. That was a sad reality. But to die under an
OAV assault was unspeakable. For a sentinel, there was no worse way to die.

Banks took up the narrative. "We can't get Ellison out of there unless he's conscious and responsive.
We've tried everything we can think of and no one can get a flicker out of him." Something in the
Captain's posture implied that he'd made one of those unsuccessful attempts.

"You realize he could be dead," Blair said, hating to have to say the words.

"No. I don't accept that," Banks said adamantly. "Until I have a confirmed kill, he's a member of my
command, and we don't leave our own. Surely you can understand that, Guide Sandburg."

Blair did understand it. Agreed with it, admired it.

Banks took his silence as assent and continued. "If we leave him there and the next assault goes
forward - Like I said, he's a good man. Too good to lose. We don't have a lot of time, and we want him back."

Blair's legs just wouldn't hold him up any longer. He sank down, perching on a jumble of equipment, the racket of weapons fire still resonating around them. "You want me to go in and revive a guy, an injured sentinel, who doesn't know he's a sentinel and has never worked with a guide? That's the plan?"

The group nodded in unison. Blair stared off into the sky, still-lightening despite the rain. Fine drops swirled in sheets, driven by a harsh wind. It was impossible. It was crazy. A guide could never establish enough rapport under these circumstances, let alone some temp dragged in on the spur of the moment with a sentinel who didn't know who he was.

It couldn't be done. They were asking him to risk his life, and probably lose it. Blair mentally raced through the alternatives. He could decline. They couldn't really force him to do this. They could threaten to incarcerate him, but they probably wouldn't.

If he was gutsy enough, he could refuse and just walk away. It might take him awhile, but he could get back into the city on his own two feet. In fact, his editing client was counting on having his project tomorrow - actually, today. Brad Ventriss' level of slothful entitlement and desperation was equal to his affluence. He'd probably spring for the funds to get his source back into the city to deliver the goods on time. The archive would be upset about him being late for work, but certainly he could talk his way back into his two-week stint of employment. He was a far better archive retrieval tech than anyone they had on staff.

He could hoard his reserves, stay out of the Placement Center for a while. It would all blow over.

Blair opened his mouth, but the refusal didn't cross his lips. He felt a slow, uncoiling within his soul, a part of his being locked away and long denied. For the first time in years since - since before - he allowed himself to remember. He should stop himself. Frantically, he called upon the years of personal discipline, discipline which had kept these wrenching feelings at bay. He wasn't that kind of a guide anymore. He wasn't that person anymore.

Blair lowered his head, eyes shut, the heels of his hands squeezing against his temples. In a rush, the memory became physical: the passion, the completion of pairing, the twining of guide to sentinel in common purpose. Doing something that really mattered. Really being alive rather than a shadow. Accomplishing something more fulfilling and vital than cobbling together an existence on the underside of society.

He rode the whirlwind of emotion. With a physical ache that made him shudder, he allowed the protective shell of Blair Sandburg to flow away. Once unleashed, this was his own Pandora's Box. He would be open. He would serve, according to ancient dictates over which he chose to have no control.

With practiced skill, he relaxed, and bled his bodily tension out and away. He was a guide, and always would be. Only one choice was really possible. Not trusting his own control, he didn't stand, but managed to uncoil his hands, resting them on his knees.

"I'm going to need some things before we try this."

&&&&

"I'd feel better if you actually understood this, Sandburg."
Banks glared at him over the holographic terrain projection they were reviewing. For a high-ranking security officer, he was amazingly hands-on, down to personally serving as his instructor in the nuances Security Procedures 101. Or at least that's what Banks and Taggart facetiously called it. As far as Blair could determine, it could be summarized as, "Don't go here or someone will drop live ammo on your head. And don't go there either."

"Yeah, that would probably be good." Blair stepped up on the curving bench and took another peek in the general direction of the manor house, trying to match the holo to reality. Well, in a general sort of way, he could pick some things out. Well, yes, that was the house. That was… He sighed in frustration. Could he make sense in the press of an emergency? Not so much. The mind played tricks on you. Banks' voice kept fading out, only to be replaced by a crazed vision of his mother's reaction to his current situation. Naomi had a vivid control of the language when outraged, and could certainly turn a phrase.

Actually, that prospect frightened him more than live ammunition.

Back to the lesson. Communication codes. Personal locator. Mission timer. He'd refused to carry a weapon, even a defensive pulse emitter or stun pod, and after a short but fierce exchange of words, Banks had relented. And seriously, if they gave him one more acronym to remember, he'd need to pack in a dictionary along with everything else.

The "everything else" was actually quite impressive. The small group of men he'd met, loosely referred to as "Major Incident", had done their best to procure the sentinel supplies he'd requested. For a group that didn't know a damn thing about sentinels, they were certainly willing. Their performance was also in complete opposition to Blair's previous unhappy experiences with security personnel. The two youngest members, Brown and Rafe, had attacked the eclectic list with the childlike verve of a scavenger hunt. They'd even tapped the gear of the sentinels who'd sustained injury, a particularly sensitive undertaking. The resulting collection had been transferred to Blair's backcarrier along with the security bits and bobs, stuffing every pocket and fold to the maximum.

Which presented another problem. He was loath to trust his academic tools - the key pad, view screen, data pods - or his personal documents and civilian-permitted communication device to anyone. If they were lost or damaged, his fragile hold on a manageable life would be gone. However, as the backcarrier filled, it was increasingly obvious that something had to go.

He'd taken a moment to speak with Taggart while Banks dealt with other duties. With surprising kindness, the officer had accepted Blair's identity and accreditation cyphers. He carefully secured the keypad, view screen and data pods for safekeeping. True to his calling as a security officer, he'd probed the nature of the data pods. He accepted Blair's explanations, and their less than stellar implications, with nothing more than a raised eyebrow. A basically kind man, Blair decided, despite his life calling.

After a moment's hesitation, Blair even chose to hand over his tiny, outdated com access, an action that was oddly painful. Silly. Truthfully, why did he need it? In his younger days, staying in contact with Naomi could have been a full-time job. He'd given up long ago, realizing that Naomi simply couldn't relate to her son's life choices. And now? Access to his mother was under the control of others, and he scrupulously avoided dwelling on that painful reality. His once extensive circle of friends and colleagues had collapsed under the weight of scandal and private disaster. If Blair Sandburg ceased to exist, nary a ripple would extend to the broader world.

And then it was time. "You understand the route in and the covering fire?" Blair nodded, snapping back to reality. "Test the com link," Banks ordered brusquely.

Blair tapped the band on his wrist and got the expected pulse in his earpiece. "It's good."
"Keep the chatter to a minimum, but tell us what we need to know. Remember, that abandoned water system has odd twists and turns. It's wide in places and narrow in others. Some of it may have collapsed under the heavy weapons fire. We don't want to lose you underground. Keep a mental reference of where you are." Blair once again tried to visualize the hologram, both above and below ground.

"The mission timer will sound when you have two minutes left." Banks paused, swallowing hard. "This is dangerous as hell, but not a suicide mission. When that timer goes, leave, even if you haven't brought Ellison around." He shook his finger in emphasis. "Are we clear on that?"

Blair nodded. Banks tapped the mission timer and retreated a step. Taggart quietly spoke into his own com link, calling in what was referred to as 'covering barrage', which sounded ominous at best. Blair took two deep breaths and darted around the sheltering wall, running hard.

He felt more than saw the crackle above his head. He did a dive for the first intermediate cover position, making a neat forward roll into the relative safety of a burned-out rover. Two loud crumps sounded over his head. So much for diversion. Whatever this whole thing was about, the opposition apparently meant business.

Blair crawled to the far side of the ruined rover and cautiously took a look. The view before him vaguely matched the holograms. Was that shattered building the stable or - whatever. How did security personnel ever figure this stuff out? He could see the next cover area and his ultimate destination. Surprisingly, the area was still lush with vegetation. He'd be scrambling under briars and bushes to reach the concealed entrance to a narrow culvert and the abandoned water system.

Banks had promised diversions to clear the way for his last dash forward. Blair was shaking by the time weapons fire erupted from a security position behind and to the west. He took off again, and the ground seemed to dance wildly as he ran. What were those, anyway? God, were they going to blow the whole area to smithereens? People did this for a living?

Gooey mud pulled at his feet. Each step seemed slow, too slow.

Another explosion slammed him forward and down. Clawing on all fours, he didn't stop at the "safe zone" Banks and Taggart had selected for him, "safe" obviously being a euphemism for "stop here and we think they won't blow you up". The air, the ground, was shuddering around him. Was this really how a diversion worked? A shattering explosion tossed him flat again, clearly exposed to anyone who bothered to look. He scrabbled forward like a scuttling bug, frantic in his haste, plowing past obstacles. With a final lunge he rolled into the culvert.

Gasping for air, he checked for damage. His hands were bleeding, scraped raw. He picked at a wicked looking shard of metal, trying to pull it out of the heel of his hand. He grimaced at the blood that spurted out as it pulled free. His hip and one side were on fire where he'd been slammed down by an especially close explosion. Still, he could move, he could function. Wincing from the pain in his hands, he tugged the loaded backcarrier straps away from his shoulders and plopped it under his chin. The familiar object felt oddly reassuring. He tapped the com link. "I'm in."

A voice, which Blair recognized as Taggart's, crackled back in response. "Acknowledged. Watch your time. Good luck, son."

Outside the culvert, the rain and battle action had turned every surface into slimy muck. Here things seemed oddly dry. He'd been told that at one time the water system had been tiled, but sections had been damaged. Blair hated to think about what might be in the powdery grit. What an awful environment for a sentinel. Blair felt for the spot on the inner surface of the helmet he was wearing, triggering a tunnel of light. It darted haphazardly wherever he looked. The effect made his stomach
Just nerves. Calm down. Think about what you need to do in the time you have.

He crawled forward, trying to move without throwing the light into wild, distracting swings. He moved through sections that were chest-high, still tiled and perfectly rectangular. Other sections were clearly damaged, some with ragged openings to the gray sky above. Ellison must have used these peepholes to monitor comings and goings at the estate.

The culvert narrowed, and joined with another, which veered off toward the east. Or maybe north? Or both? Okay, so topography was definitely not his strong suit. Trusting to what he thought he understood, he followed a new passage. Ellison must have gotten farther up the passage than Banks expected. Besides, it was impossible to judge distance. All he could do was track with the blinking light of the mission timer.

In the gloom ahead of him he could see a lump. Ellison?

The culvert was tight and seemed to press in overhead, apparently a section which had caved in and refilled over time. He crawled into the space, using his forearms to spare his hands, pushing the backcarrier ahead of him. Each explosion aboveground shook down a fine curtain of dust, glinting as it filtered through his helmet spot. The surface conditions had changed as well. Instead of tile, some kind of dank slime was already soaking through his clothes, as if they hadn't been wet and gooey before. What a horrible spot under any conditions. And Ellison had been down here most of the last week or longer?

Finally, he groped close enough to make sense of the shadows. Ellison's arms were curled tightly around his ears, hands knotted at the back of his neck, knees pulled into the fetal position - the classic posture of a sentinel in massive sensory overload. According to the published literature, experienced sentinels described OAV hits as a shearing of reality, an avalanche of input impossible to characterize or process, and excruciating. Retreat was the only defense. Ellison couldn't possibly have any frame of reference for what had happened to him.

Okay, Blair. He's a baby, a frightened kitten. Make it safe.

Blair fumbled for the emergency equipment he'd dragged along in the backcarrier. Banks and the others had gaped at his list, but lying here in this dark, stinking coffin of a culvert - well, no request was adequate to this. Where to start? Smell. His trembling fingers set the mister, designed to cleanse a small area, at the same time adding trace scents calming to almost all sentinels - vanilla and citrus primarily. The little device whirred obediently. Within a minute the air in a ten-meter radius should be acceptable.

Blair used the time to organize the rest of his equipment. A pulse light, switched to solid blue, replaced the helmet spot. He waited for his eyes to adjust. Low yellow was the prescribed color, the optimal compromise between normals and sentinels, with subtle variations in intensity to minimize zoning. But under these circumstances, with an untrained sentinel? No. His gut said low intensity, unvarying blue. Blue was universally low impact on sentinels. He'd sacrifice his own vision to give Ellison every possible opportunity to reclaim awareness.

Carefully he cleaned his filthy hands with treated wipes, ignoring the sting from the gash on his hand. In his meager moments of preparation, he'd decided that besides minimizing the ravages of the OAV, touch was really the only viable option for retrieval. Ellison, uninitiated and untrained, wouldn't respond to any of the standard triggers. Scent stimulus capsules, an auditory stimulator, all the usual sentinel-friendly tricks would just constitute one more overwhelming terror.
He activated one of three freeze rods he was carrying. Protocol recommended gentle warming through a variety of methods, but the mission timer on his wrist was a relentless master. He just didn’t have the time. Freeze touch was relatively simple input, fast, easy to process, and not painful if done correctly. He reached around the huddled figure and drew the rod across the back of Ellison's hand, as delicate as a breath.

Ellison responded immediately with an unearthly howl. He flung himself back and lashed out with a powerful kick, which connected square on Blair’s hip. Blair cried out in his own pain. Both men recoiled, nursing a private agony.

Well, not an auspicious start. On a positive note, at least Ellison wasn’t catatonic. He’d reacted, immediately and with purpose. Blair rubbed at the bruise fast rising on his hip. Maybe the odd mix of withdrawal and directed response was a byproduct of spending a lifetime compensating for sentinel senses that, for some reason, didn’t reach full expression. Definitely a puzzle. Keenly aware of time slipping away, Blair considered his next approach, hopefully without sacrificing his own body to more abuse. Since Ellison had some level of awareness, he could work with that.

He crawled around Ellison to approach opposite those long, powerful legs and heavy boots. This time, he arranged the back-carrier as a buffer between his body and Ellison’s. His thigh and hip ached. A blast shield would probably be more appropriate, but hey, anything was better than another direct kick or blow. With infinite care, he blew a puff of air across the knuckles of one of Ellison’s clinched fists. The taunt body shuddered, but no howl or overt pain response. Progress.

Blair blew another stream of air, tracing the knuckles and out towards the fingers. A slight shift in position told him that Ellison processed the input, but without the defensive strike. Good for all concerned. He pulled a pair of natural cotton gloves over his shaking hands, a carefully conserved item from his own stash of supplies.

Calm down. He'll sense your nerves.

Steadying himself, Blair traced a feather-soft line along Ellison's knuckles, then made circles with a finger tip, feeling the ridges of the tendons in the back of the hand. The man's tight fetal position opened just a fraction. Slowly, trying not to think of the time, Blair continued, increasing the pressure. If he could work up to the facial area, where the human body was highly sensitive...

Another explosion, closer this time, shook the culvert. Time was working against them. Blair leaned a fraction of his weight against Ellison's back, steadied his hand and brushed the clean cotton glove across Ellison's cheek. Again, the shoulders dropped. Blair switched to a circular pattern with just a bit more pressure. Ellison groaned. A few more moments and he leaned ever so slightly into Blair’s touch. With his other hand, Blair eased his fingers under Ellison's hand and arm, finally cupping one of his ears in a cotton-shrouded hand.

Ellison pressed into his hand, and excellent indication that hearing was a major problem.

Gently, slowly, he slipped a standard muff over Ellison’s ear. Predictably, Ellison's taunt body uncoiled, relaxing into what must seem like blessed silence. Taking advantage of the moment, Blair attached the second muff.

The mission timer beeped abruptly, along with the mini-strobe it contained. Damn. Blair stripped it off his wrist and hurled it away down the culvert. He had a slim chance of success and didn’t need
the distraction. With smell and hearing modulated, almost any sentinel, trained or not, would respond to non-threatening touch.

Please, please, please.

Blair crawled back to his original position, boldly caught Ellison's face with both hands, pressing slightly at the other man's temples. Ellison's eyes fluttered, and drifted closed. Blair could feel another shudder resonate through the other man's body. Blair shifted, moving the heels of his hands under the chin and changing the pressure point.

That's right. Pay attention to me. Only to me.

This time Ellison's eyes opened. Even in the gloom, Blair could see when focus mastered panic. Impressive, and highly unusual. Irrational panic would be totally understandable at this point.

Blair pulled a card from his pocket. Printed in bold letters were the words, "Banks sent me." Ellison frowned, squinted, and shook his head. Okay, maybe he could see the card but couldn't read it. Fine visual focus was out. Again, not unexpected, but they'd need another way to communicate.

The com link crackled to life. "Sandburg! Sandburg, come in. You're out of time. Get back out of there!" Blair recognized Taggart's voice, but his attention was drawn to Ellison, who had reacted to the sound. He'd ripped off the muffs, and grimaced in pain. Did he recognize a familiar voice? Even if he had, it was too soon to attempt to process sounds at normal levels.

Blair pushed the muffs back into place, holding them firm. Ellison wasn't ready to expose his hearing in this environment. He shook his head wildly, trying to communicate an emphatic "No!" to his charge. He snarled into at the com link at same time, "We're getting there. Just leave me alone and…"

Another voice bellowed. "Sandburg, this is Banks. Get the hell out of there - now!" An explosion shook the culvert, uncomfortably close, followed by another. Before Blair could react, Ellison tore the com link off the body armor and crushed it. Blair's eyes went wide with shock. Ellison pounded on the tiny device with his fists. What could he possibly be doing? Another explosion shook their position.

Blair had visions of this slimy, dark culvert becoming a tomb.

"They're tracking the com." With a final blow, Ellison managed to smash the cover and the inner circuitry of the com unit. He heaved the offending device into the gloom, away from them. He came to rest on all fours, panting and shuddering.

Blair's jaw dropped. That was Ellison, speaking clearly and acting with coherence. Maybe they could communicate at some level, and get out of here. He tugged at Ellison's uniform and motioned for him to follow. He started to crawl back the direction he'd come. Abruptly, his chin thumped on the ground as Ellison caught him by the foot in mid-crawl and dragged him back. Blair pushed himself to all fours before he realized that Ellison was shaking his shoulder, demanding attention and apparently, an answer.

"Assault? Banks?"

Blair nodded, frantically trying to figure a way to communicate in this impossible situation.

Ellison pointed down the culvert and shook his head. "Too late." Another explosion threw them both to the side. Ellison scrambled up first and hauled Blair to all fours. He pointed to the backcarrier and Blair, with a lack of any alternate ideas, picked it up. Ellison started down the narrowing culvert. He
motioned Blair to follow, then paused and pointed to his own chest.

"Jim."

&&&&&

"The link went dead," Taggart shouted. "The bastards locked in on the transmission. They're pounding the length of that damn culvert. We're going to lose them."

Banks slammed his hand into the ground in futile rage. He'd managed not only to get his best officer killed, but essentially murder an innocent civilian. "Brown, send the word to keep our own fire away from their area if at all possible. And ask for a diversionary strike from the west. Draw their fire." Another blast sent all of them down for greater cover. In the distance, they could hear the heavy armor transports beginning to move again. The new commanders had finally gotten things moving. What a disorganized mess.

Henri Brown grabbed Banks' wrist, getting his attention over the din. "Captain, the main assault is behind schedule. There's still time. Let me try to get in there…"

"Absolutely not. That's a direct order. You understand me, Brown? Rafe, you too." Their superior's dark eyes flashed in Taggart's direction for good measure. Technically, Joel was attached to Major Incident, but in practice, their relationship didn't follow strict chain-of-command dictates. Taggart exercised his own autonomy whenever he chose to do so. "Don't even think about it, Joel. The best we can do is finish this thing and hope they're both still alive." Or we recover their bodies for honorable burial.

No one was happy with those directives, either spoken or unspoken, but duty was an inexorable master. Weapons were shouldered. As one, they streamed out of their makeshift bunker to join the assault.

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This is every guide's worst nightmare. And it's - he's - getting worse.

Blair squeezed forward, easing his body to parallel Ellison. For the fourth, or was it the fifth or sixth time, Ellison had collapsed to the floor of the culvert, overwhelmed by his own body. He was trying so very hard, but it was just too much.

The first time, they'd been groping their way through a low spot. Jim had flopped into a shallow puddle of stinking, murky water. Bringing order to the senses paled in comparison to keeping the man from drowning. Blair had managed to leverage him forward to a drier spot, no small feat considering their difference in size. Blair had strained muscles he didn't know he had, digging his feet into the walls and pushing back, dragging Ellison in his wake.

To his credit, each time Ellison rallied, but Blair had no illusions. Ellison wasn't mastering his senses, he was doing battle, struggling on by sheer force of will. The cycle was unsustainable, and they were nearing the end of whatever reserves Ellison was drawing upon to keep going. Ellison seemed to know where he was going in the ever-narrowing passage, but Blair knew he was hopelessly lost. His own survival literally depended on keeping an untrained, late-onset sentinel functioning under impossible conditions.

Jim still couldn't hear, he was sure of that. They needed a more stable, moderate environment to work to bring that under control. Communication was reduced to visual pantomime and touch. Blair had run out of misters. He'd used the last of them by that benighted puddle. Luckily, if you could
consider anything about this situation lucky, the air quality underground had been relatively constant once they’d escaped that horrible spot.

After the near catastrophe in the wet, Blair had been relieved when they moved onto drier ground. Now the pendulum was swinging the other direction. The ground under their hands and knees was powder dry. Each move they made threw a little puff of dust into the air, silhouetted in the gleam of helmet light. Blair could feel the tightness in his own chest, heaving from the combination of exertion and growing congestion. As bad as things were, if Ellison went into respiratory shutdown the results would be fatal. The man didn't know any of the tricks to slow his autonomic responses. He'd essentially drown in the fluids filling his lungs, blocking airways with gooey mucous.

Stop it. Just stop. Deal with the now. He needs your help now.

Blair scrubbed his filthy hands underneath his coat. The space was too tight, and time too short to properly clean them with wipes. He took three deep breaths, bringing his own respiration rate down. When their bodies touched, crowded together in the culvert, Blair was positive that Ellison was aware of the body next to him. If Blair slowed things down, Ellison seemed to be able to follow.

You can't panic and be of any help.

Blair stroked the back of his hand along Ellison's jawline, paused, and repeated the move. After nearly a minute, Blair's back cramped from the awkward position, but Ellison finally let out a long, shuddering sigh. Blair felt the stricken man's chest move more freely, taking in big gulps of air. When his eyes fluttered open, Blair inwardly recoiled at the fatigue and pain he saw. It was awkward, but Blair gathered Ellison's hands and pressed them between his own. Joint meditation was a common technique with well-matched guide-sentinel pairs, and it didn't work for everyone. Blair knew his own skill, and by some unearned miracle, Ellison responded to his modeled behavior with uncanny consistency. With so many other options unavailable, it was pretty much the only thing he could do.

Ellison opened his eyes, steadied his gaze and nodded. Blair squirmed back to give him room. With agonizing slowness, Ellison pressed himself back onto all fours with an audible groan. In a halting, unsteady crawl he kept going. Blair had to admire his determination.

They couldn't continue this cycle of collapse and rescue. Blair changed tactics. If Ellison was going to react so positively to touch, he'd better start using it at every opportunity. Catching his sentinel early in a sensory spasm was far better than wait for total collapse.

He's not your sentinel. He never will be.

Blair pushed that depressingly accurate thought aside. His personal difficulties had no place here. Concentrate instead. Find - hell - make opportunities to connect. During each minor halt, Blair asserted himself, even if it was only for a few seconds. Physical proximity was reassuring to anyone, more so for a sentinel. Ellison noticeably relaxed when provided firm pressure from Blair's hands; across the back when he could reach, or around the calf muscle when the culvert was especially narrow.

Classic anchoring behavior. The man had good instincts. And, somehow, he kept going.

The culvert opened up abruptly and Ellison rolled out of sight. Blair scrambled forward, horrified that Ellison had fallen off some sort of precipice. Instead, the culvert had angled into a wide, flat space. The surface seemed smooth and slick. Blair scrubbed a hand across the surface. Under a grimy layer, he found tile, definitely more tile. This was better, much, much better. No particulates in the air, no horrendous odors. It seemed partially enclosed, but Blair wasn't particularly concerned
with their location. Wherever they were, it was an improvement over the stifling confinement of the passages. He scuttled along the wall to press up against Ellison. Once again, Jim had curled into a defensive position. He had to be beyond exhaustion.

Improvising, Blair wrapped one arm around the man's back, using the other arm to grasp Jim's wrist. This position was used with sentinel children, surrounding them with a protective body, a physical buffer to the outside world. Blair wasn't large enough to form an effective shield, but it was the best he could do. "It's okay," Blair said softly. "Breathe through it. You're still here." Maybe Ellison could hear him, maybe he couldn't. It really didn't matter. The familiar mantra was reassuring to the speaker as much as the recipient.

To his relief, Jim pressed back against his chest, maximizing contact. For someone with no pairing experience, he adapted quickly. Blair searched his memory for everything he had ever read or heard about late-onset sensory enhancement. Most late-onset sentinels withdrew, closing out a world they no longer understood. Some reacted violently, some never recovered. An unusual combination in Ellison's background or temperament was generating a more flexible response. Blair tightened his hold, consciously slowing his breathing, waiting as Jim shuddered and trembled through the barrage of input. As long as Ellison could tolerate it, touch was still his most reliable means of communication and intervention.

Turning his cheek against the back of Ellison's neck, Blair studied their location. At first he couldn't make any sense of it. Then it dawned on him - they must be the remains of a holding tank of some sort. It would make sense. During the years of upheaval and civil unrest before he was born, most of the big country estates maintained sealed compounds, locked down behind gates and private militias. They would need their own water storage and power sources. He stretched for the first time since vaulting into the culvert, relishing the space. This seemed less oppressive. Maybe he wouldn't be entombed after all. The air was fresher than in the stifling culvert, and it actually felt comparatively safe.

Ellison gave a long sigh, and turned to face him. Blair let him go, then grasped his wrists and brought their foreheads together.

I am here.
I will help.

Finally, Jim leaned back against the wall, letting out another long breath. Blair kept eye contact and nodded his understanding. Since this area wasn't filled with clogging dust, and it was definitely easier to breathe. Maybe he would have a moment to get Ellison oriented, establish some real communication. Sentinel sensory control was hard, and full mastery took years, but certainly they could do better than just reacting to the next crisis.

Blair realized Jim was scanning the area, a vicious looking weapon at the ready. Where had that come from? Blair drew back, holding up the palms of his hands to indicate he was not a threat. Ellison looked at him and stated in a slow, flat monotone, "What's wrong with me?"

Right. Still couldn't hear himself, even when speaking. Maybe he could lip read well enough to communicate. Repeating an earlier move, Blair took Jim's face between two flattened palms and positioned them so they were facing each other. He used two fingers to motion between first Jim's eyes and then his own.

The meaning was clear - watch me.

How could he explain basic sensory control to someone who hadn't a clue? What experience or gesture would Ellison recognize and relate to? Blair had only the barest outlines of his adult life, with no details about his life experience. He needed something ubiquitous, something that would lend itself to pantomime. Then it dawned on him. A kid's flitter. The rite of passage for virtually every child, no matter their social standing. No one forgot controlling their first flitter, their first step into the
wonderful, exciting grownup world of personal transport. Blair vividly remembered taking the controls and careening wildly from one end of - well, he really couldnt remember where - just the horrified look on Naomi's face. Certainly Ellison would have a similar memory, no matter what his background.

Blair used his hands to outline the shape of a flitter, making certain that Ellison was paying attention. Blair mimicked climbing in, and grasping a typical direction rod. He pulled forward and back, as if he were speeding and slowing a flitter. After the third sequence of forward-back, fast-slow, he pointed to Jim's ears. Jim's eyes - dark blue, Blair noticed - followed every move. Blair held his clasped hands in front of him and drew them back slowly to his chest, the best "Turn down your hearing," gesture that he could come up with. Then he shifted around, brought Jim's hands together as if grasping the direction rod, and eased the protective muff off one ear. Frantic, Jim winced in pain and clapped his hands over the offending ears.

Yeah, that hurts. Blair motioned to try again, nodding his encouragement.

This time Jim eased the muff away himself. His frown deepened, but he didn't collapse back into a protective gesture. Awkward, unsure, but it must have made a glimmer of sense. He was trying.

Slowly, making sure Ellison could see his lips, Blair spoke. "Banks sent me."

He got a nod and a confirming, "Banks." Blair smiled reassuringly, gesturing for Ellison to continue. "What happened to me?"

"O. A. V." Blair mouthed each sound and kept his voice as low as possible. No sense in making things worse. He needed to convey information and model appropriate strategies to a man in an incomprehensible situation.

The lipreading apparently worked, and Ellison threaded the bare facts into a conclusion. "I'm not a sentinel!" he spat in denial. He paid for raising his voice with a cringe of pain, and clapped his hands over his ears. His expression seemed torn between fury and hurt.

Blair motioned downward with his hands, then shrugged. He ached for the guy. Even if you thought being a sentinel was great, latency was a lousy deal. At least Ellison was coherent and taking in information, even if he was rejecting it. All he could do was wait.

Ellison seemed to let the outrage pass. Blair could read when his thoughts shifted back to their present situation. His eyes glittered with alertness. Still in a crouch, rocked back on his heels. "Banks told them this wouldn't work. We're in a bad spot," he said finally. "We can't stay here."

Blair nodded in agreement. Then he shook his head and pointed to Ellison's ears. "Hearing first," he mouthed. "Try to increase. Slow."

"Cut the sentinel crap!" Ellison barked, and cringed again.

Blair raised an eyebrow. He pointed to Jim's ears. "Try."

It was clearly a painful exercise. After half a minute, Blair grasped one of Ellison's hands and adopted one of the standard guide-sentinel grips for coordinated concentration - his own index and middle finger flat against the sentinel's pulse point, with the thumb and other two fingers coiled in and around Jim's hand. There were dozens of variations, all designed to provide a baseline awareness of the supporting partner. He ignored Jim's startled glance, and resisted the predictable attempt to pull away. Once Jim relaxed, he arranged the man's fingers in a mirror of his own. Pulse to pulse. Heart to heart.
"Use it." Blair ordered. "Keep trying."

Jim frowned, but seemed to take the information in. Who knew what he was doing with it at this point? Processing was highly individual in sentinels. Extrapolating from typical early childhood sentinel patterns was useless. Blair had to take his cues from Jim.

Jim's fingers seemed to relax. A slight tilt of the head told Blair that Jim was, in fact, listening, and apparently without excruciating pain. A good sign. Finally, he shook his head and seemed to break off, pulling away from Blair's hands in the process. "This can't be happening. It's crazy."

"Did it work?" Blair asked pointedly.

Ellison spared him a scathing look. "Just because it worked doesn't mean I believe it."

"Impressive logic," Blair said sarcastically, and inwardly reprimanded himself. Not the textbook method of establishing rapport. Ellison's scowl seemed to emphasize the point. Blair waved him off in apology. "Leave it for now. You can hear and it doesn't hurt?"

Ellon took a moment. "I must - am I turning the volume down?"

"Probably, but you're a beginner. It's going to fluctuate." Ellison seemed to accept that. "If you lose concentration, it will bite you in the ass, but you can use the same process. Go slow, and don't panic. Can you make any sense of what you hear outside?"

Ellison shook his head. "Too much for me to sort out. There's a lot of action, a lot of live fire." Another pause. "West of us." He frowned in concentration. "I can get out of here, but we can't just make a dash toward the good guys."

Having experienced a bit of live fire earlier, Blair couldn't agree more. "Okay, new plan. We hide. What do you recommend?"

"Uh, what's your name?"


"Does your skin hurt?" Blair asked, not missing the accompanying flinch and frown. Time to sneak in some other queries, even if Ellison was resistant to the whole concept.

Jim rubbed his arms, clearly uncomfortable with the question, and with himself. "I guess. Yeah, I guess I notice now that my ears aren't killing me. Kind of between an itch and a bad sunburn." He coughed. "Why is it hard to breathe?"

Blair sighed in relief. They could converse more normally, and maybe deal with the dermal and respiratory issues. "You might be reacting to your clothes, or something you picked up while we were crawling around. It could be residual from the O.A.V. If we can find a place to hole up, I can make you more comfortable." Blair held up his hands, fending off the immediate protest. "I know, I know. You're not a sentinel. Just go with it right now."

"If I haven't lost my mind, how messed up am I?"

"You're not messed up, not really."

Jim gave him a look somewhere between skeptical and disgusted. "Hey, I was curled up in a ball,
screaming, in the middle of a covert operation. I don't know how you judge, but if that's not messed up, I don't know what is."

Blair couldn't stifle his grin, although crawling around underground in the middle of a security operation was hardly amusing. "I can see your point. Look, a lot of experienced sentinels have to be hospitalized after an OAV blast. Some die. You managed to put yourself in a protective zone, and allowed yourself to be called out when your environment was modified. Considering your circumstances, that's remarkable, not messed up."

"Curled in a ball and screaming is a - what did you call it - protective zone? I'm not impressed." Jim eyed Blair skeptically. "What exactly did Banks expect you to do? No offense, but you're not really big enough to drag me out bodily."

Blair shrugged. He'd argued the same points and still made the attempt anyway. "Get you conscious. Mediate the senses with a sedative, but keep enough awareness so you could crawl out after me."

Blair shrugged apologetically. "It wasn't a bad plan. They had enough sense to put two and two together and get you a guide." He gestured toward Ellison. "It sort of worked. I just wasn't fast enough."

"Can you keep me from going bonkers again?"

The question surprised Blair, considering all the denials. "Depending on the situation, maybe. We got this far, but you're barely holding on, right?"

Ellison leaned back against the tiled wall, clearly acknowledging his own weakness.

"That doesn't mean we can't try. We don't know anything about your levels, and your senses will be unpredictable. Don't fight it and let me help you." Blair looked apprehensively around their temporary sanctuary. "Just exactly what do you have in mind?"

&quot;&quot;&quot;&quot;&quot;

"Answer, you worthless...you're late!"

His angry shout echoed through the deserted reaches of Hargrove Center. He could barely stifle the desire to dash his comlink against the wall in frustration. If Sandburg expected to keep him waiting and still be paid in full, he had another thought coming.

He could practically hear his father's voice, chiding him for loss of temper. Such displays are beneath your standing. You are an elite. Act like it.

Two more weeks. Two more weeks and he'd be done with Rainier University and the Guide Accreditation Program forever, with its rules and restrictions and time wasting gobbledygook. He'd had it up to the eyeballs with calls to dedicated, unselfish service and ethics and care of the sentinel and contribution to society. He was an aristocrat. The lower classes were there to serve him, and being a guide didn't change that reality.

Soon enough he'd don the navy blue and red tunic of an Accredited Guide. His custom-made dress uniform already hung in his personal quarters at Ventriss Hall. Just this one last hoop to jump, the last project to turn in and he could move on with his life. Every detail had been arranged - his father had seen to that. His match, a sentinel attached to the Provincial Governor's staff and also a man of fine breeding, taste and means, awaited him. The work, if you could call it that, would be a trivial formality. He'd be placed next to the heartbeats of power. From there he could easily observe and influence, ever to the benefit of the family holdings, holdings that would eventually be his.
He'd waited a long time for this. Why should he waste his time completing tasks set for him by university professors who would never possess even two credits to rub together? Why defer to people who had brains but no breeding? What was money and influence for, if not to use them to make your life simpler and easier, to protect your position, and enhance the standing of your family?

The whole thing should have been easier. Sandburg should dance to his every whim without question. His father possessed the ultimate lever to ensure Sandburg's compliance, and yet the man still dared to push the limits of tolerance. Of course, he'd never informed his father of these academic transactions. According to his father, a little discipline in the name of academic competence was good for an eldest son destined to inherit and lead House Ventriss.

Brad Ventriss had heard that lecture often enough to choke.

So he'd negotiated his own deals, paid Sandburg's outrageous fees and tolerated the man's barely disguised his contempt. If he hadn't needed high quality academic work on a regular basis, if Sandburg hadn't been able to produce papers and projects that brought the highest praise, it would have been a pleasure to dispense with him, as he so richly deserved. Who was Sandburg, a penniless nobody with a scandalous past, to pass judgment on him?

Seething with resentment, he turned his fertile brain to other considerations. There were always creative ways to get what you wanted and punish those who annoyed you, all at the same time. His bodyguards were compliant. They certainly hadn't had much to do lately. He'd get what he wanted and make Sandburg suffer in the bargain. It would actually be entertaining.

"You tried to tell them, Simon," Taggart said gently. "It's hell to be right."

"Damn interfering bureaucrats." Simon stomped his left boot, trying to dislodge a chunk of mud. "A surgical strike would have been over before they even knew we were there."

Taggart held up his hands, shaking his head. "You don't have to convince me. I agreed with you, and said so. I hate to think of the casualties."

Banks gave up on the mud. "If Evans wants me, he can take me as I am. Glory seeking idiot." He marched into the temporary command center, Taggart at his heels.

Provincial Security Director David Evans, standing at the command station, glared in their direction as they entered, as if this fiasco was their fault. Banks ignored the attempt at intimidation. He made his way to the first row of chairs with head high and a challenging stare of his own. Despite his amusement, Taggart managed to keep his gaze down and bland as they took their seats. Leave it to Simon to announce his opinions just by entering the room.

They were apparently the last to arrive, which was understandable, since they had managed to push far forward of the other units. Light and fast had been Banks' point from the beginning. Banks had actively resisted when Provincial authorities usurped their jurisdiction in an ongoing operation. P.S.D. Evans was a politician, not an incident commander. Banks, with Taggart and the other security officers in support, had warned Evans repeatedly that stealth and surprise could defuse the current situation more effectively than brute force, and pleaded with the Director to leave things in their hands. After all, it had been a Major Incident case from the beginning.

Evans overruled their combined advice. Under his personal command the massive assault force had gone forward. The last sixteen hours had been one poorly executed disaster after another. From the looks of the shoulder flashings represented in this room alone, Evans had called up the entire
Security Division, including the military support wings.

"Anything to report?" Evans demanded. "We gave you the delay you requested, and it cost us dearly. Did you retrieve Officer Ellison?"

Both men stiffened such a blatant attempt to twist the facts. Still, Simon would do well to dissemble. Taggart could see the broad hands clench into fists in anger. Taggart gave his friend a nudge, a gentle reminder to hold his temper.

Banks ignored the false accusation and confined himself to addressing Evan's single demand. "The guide was inserted successfully. We know he reached Ellison and was working when the main assault commenced. We lost contact. Beyond that I can't say."

"You mean you haven't recovered a body," Evans snapped. "What a waste. The entire operation foundered on your stubborn insistence we rescue one man."

Taggart bit back his own retort. He leaned forward in his chair, giving Banks another hidden nudge with an elbow, reminding his friend to tread carefully. Entering a public dispute with a provincial officer, one step removed from the Governor, was treacherous. On the other hand, Banks would not allow such a brazen attempt to shift blame go unchallenged.

"With due respect, Sir, my views on the scale-up to an assault versus an insertion were made plain earlier and are on record, as well as my concerns with the timetable. Logistical issues slowed the assault, not infiltration of the guide."

Carefully and officially on record, Taggart noted inwardly, approving of his colleague's approach. In fact, a vid recording was safely tucked away in his carry pouch should the notes from that critical meeting somehow go astray, not to mention the factual mission and communication records. They would have no difficulty establishing that the disorganized deployment under the command of Evans caused the delay. Major Incident simply did something useful while everyone else flailed around in the darkness.

"Perhaps we should concentrate on our next move." That weary voice came from Abramo Carcione. Equivalent to Banks and Taggart in rank, he commanded the rapid assault units, highly specialized and heavily equipped, in concert with the military troopers. His tight-lipped expression must certainly reflect the high cost his unit had paid in the repeated frontal assaults, all at Evans' insistence. "Has there been any communication with Kincaid? And how did a minor fringe group get this kind of armament? My troopers were outgunned most of the night."

Nothing like getting all the issues out on the table. Carcione, also covered with muck from a long night slogging alongside his troops, apparently shared Banks' sentiments. He had no intention of falling on his sword to spare a misguided provincial politician the consequences of promoting a personal agenda. Evans was quickly losing control of his own briefing. Not to mention that he lacked the decency to inquire after the casualties.

"How is your sentinel, Abramo?" Banks asked gravely. P.S.D. Evans clearly viewed the question as another unwarranted interruption of his briefing, but Banks didn't care. He'd watched the man carted off on a biostretcher, barely able to breathe and writhing in pain. The episode had figured heavily in his decision to send Taggart searching for a guide.

"We lost Arken." The others in the room reacted with a wordless gasp. Arken Tinley had been decorated twice, both as an officer and a sentinel. To lose such a highly effective officer, to an illegal O.A.V. of all things, was an unimaginable blow. Carcione slapped his leg in disgust. "He has a wife and three little girls. His guide, Niko, refused her own damping medication until this morning in hope
of bringing him through. We may lose her, too."

"The families?" Taggart asked. Even in the midst of crisis, security forces of all stripes shared a strong ethos to care for their own dependents, outside and in addition to provincial structures. Commanders considered it a personal point of honor to respond immediately.

"My admin is at the hospital, but with all the casualties, he's spread pretty thin." Everyone in the room knew the unspoken reality. Carcione had chosen to go forward with his command, precluding any of the usual care and attention he would have devoted to the families of the injured and fallen.

"Say no more." Taggart rose from his seat, with a confirming nod from Simon Banks. Since they were operating in a combined unit, he could be spared during a briefing. Simon knew everything he did, and could easily speak for both of them. He collected the pertinent information from Carcione and left just as the shouting began in earnest.

Outside the command center, Taggart started searching the many pockets and pouches of his operations coverall for his personal communicator. The device, a privilege that came with rank, operated on a proprietary grid, making it free of delays and provincial monitoring. Megan Connor, their exchange officer from Austro-Pacific Province, still recovering from an earlier injury but ambulatory, could certainly assist at the medical center. His own wife, Marguerite, could attend to the families.

His conversations with both were brief. Not that he would have expected less. Megan was happy for any excuse to escape the confines of her guest officer quarters. Marguerite - well, Taggart had no illusions about how much he depended upon the light of his life. Tall, elegant, articulate and a trained musician, Marguerite had a gift for connecting with those in need, and was excellent at unsnarling the maze that was provincial social welfare. She could easily stand in the place of the incident commanders.

Taggart was about to rejoin the briefing when the persistent buzz of a civilian communicator, a device he normally didn't carry, halted him.

Of course! In their haste, he'd taken Sandburg's essentials for safekeeping. It seemed a small consideration. After all, he'd literally dragged the man into a potentially life threatening situation. Even if there had been time, Sandburg wouldn't have been allowed to contact a family member or a friend.

Taggart felt an obligation to the young man, who seemed competent, kind, and unexpectedly courageous. He might already be dead. Sandburg was operating without benefit of contract. Provincial authorities wouldn't automatically contact his employers or next of kin, or provide traditional end-of-life support. His affairs would be in total disarray unless someone with authority took charge. Under the circumstances, he might be in a position to assist, especially if their worst fears were realized.

The device had basic filters, but nothing that presented much of an obstacle to a serving security officer. Taggart opened the small screen and neatly subverted the privacy settings. He scanned through the messages and recordings, frowning more deeply as he went. Sandburg had hinted that some of his employment stretched the rules of academic integrity, but no names had been mentioned. As Taggart pieced together the gist of the recent communications, he made a contemptuous snarl. Well, here was another small detail Connor could certainly attend to.

In fact, she'd probably enjoy it.
"What is this place?" Blair asked. Not that he really expected Ellison to answer. His charge was having a very hard time of it.

Their flight to safety - if that was the correct term - alternated between bone-chilling fear and frantic activity. Running toward their adversary instead of away made no sense to Blair, but deferring to Ellison's experience seemed the best course. They'd slipped from the underground reservoir into a grove of small trees, ragged and splintered from earlier weapons fire. Ellison had led them on a zigzag course toward a wing of the main estate building.

Blair had spared little attention for their destination. Ellison seemed to have a knack for zoning in the worst possible spot, like standing exposed while weapons fire traced over their heads. None of the nice, safe, deliberate guide protocols were applicable. Blair had never improvised so much in his life, but somehow he dragged Ellison out of each subsequent zone and they plunged ever onward.

At least they were under cover now, apparently in or under some deserted area of the estate. Blair had no frame of reference from which to make a guess. The social divide between citizen and aristocracy was definitive. Ordinary citizens had no reason to flit around the estates of the landed gentry, and certainly not inside the private areas of their sprawling, palatial manors. Unfortunately, getting inside hadn't solved all of their problems. Blair just had more time to pay attention.

Ellison had barricaded them behind a doorway. The interior room they'd stumbled into was lighted and seemed cold, but not freezing. Blair couldn't guess at its original function, but cartons, old tools and a variety of odd pieces suggested storage of the unneeded or outdated. Neglected and rarely visited, which was probably ideal for their purposes. Provincial Security either had incredibly detailed advance intelligence, or they had been incredibly lucky. Blair had turned back to Ellison, fairly bursting with questions, only to find him collapsed into a heap.

After overcoming so much, Ellison's reserves were gone. His entire body vibrated with tremors. He curled in on himself. Without much coherence, he allowed Blair strip off his outer clothing and boots. Blair pitched them into a pile across the room. Ellison needed any possible irritants as far away as possible. He stripped off an inner shirt and an under layer, confirming his suspicions. Along with everything else, the man was reacting to his clothing.

Ugly weals were breaking out over the pale skin of Jim's chest. Blair bit his lip, cataloguing what he was seeing. Color pink to scarlet, raised edges, rapid spreading - all the marks of a systemic rather than a point-of-source incident. Unchecked skin reactions could spiral into full anaphylactic shock. Blair didn't have time to try a test patch with different medications or treatments.

He tore into a package of sentinel-friendly wipes. Just as with the clothing, success depended on minimizing irritant exposure. Unfortunately, the cleansing mixture on the wipes cooled as it evaporated, and Ellison shuddered at one more unwelcome, and undoubtedly painful, sensation. Blair kept up a near constant patter, trying to explain what he was doing, why it needed to be done, and that it would make things better, all the while wiping every inch of Ellison's exposed skin which he had access to.

He had one tube of dermal cream and no time to be timid. He slathered the cream across his hands, working it into a thin film that he spread in broad swathes across Ellison's chest. Every touch caused Jim to recoil, but Blair persisted, bat ting away Ellison's interfering hands.

"Stop!" he moaned. "It burns."

"No choice. We have to." Blair grabbed one of Jim's hands and pressed it flat against his own ribs. "Slow your breathing. Follow my pattern. Breathe when I breathe." Jim tried. While Blair pulled him forward to slather the skin of his back, his patient managed gasps and wheezes in a pathetic parody
of normal breathing. Now that he had a chance to look, Jim's face appeared swollen and puffy.

So, respiratory congestion along with imuno-epidermal accelerating syndrome. Ellison's reactions were every bit as bad as he could have expected.

It was cold in the barren room, Ellison was stripped down to minimal clothing, and Blair had few treatment options. He retrieved one of his precious natural fiber sheets from the very bottom of his backcarrier. Spreading it wide, he wrapped Jim's bare torso, praying to ancient and future deities that the floundering sentinel wouldn't react to that fabric as well. Shedding his own outer clothing, he pulled his own inner sweater around the sheet and tied the arms in place. Inadequate, but a bit of temporary warmth.

Obviously, they needed more. He couldn't work on sentinel issues and hold Jim upright at the same time. "Come on, man. Push with your legs. Help me." Flinging objects out of his path, he managed to drag Ellison towards the corner of the room. He took the opportunity to strip off the rest of Jim's uniform, leaving him barelegged and barefooted. Two hastily stacked crates kept him from listing away from the wall. He crammed whatever came to hand under Jim's knees, wiped down his legs and feet. That accomplished, he took the second fiber sheet, maneuvered it under Ellison's hips and wrapped it tight. The improvised position provided stability, access, and a little warmth. Now maybe he could do something useful.

"Don't think about your skin. Your mind can influence your body. Pay attention to me." Blair ruthlessly worked pressure points in Jim's hand. He took a quick glance under the fiber sheet. Was it his imagination or did the skin really look a bit less angry?


"Good. That's really good. Stay with me. Slow breaths."

Jim raised his head, staring intently into Blair's eyes. "Who survives this shit?"


On Ellison's next breath, a spasm rippled across his chest to sputter into a hacking cough. He gave Blair a withering look. Fine. If Ellison had enough spirit to be annoyed, he had enough spirit to keep fighting. From a guide's point of view, it was a hopeful sign, better than terror, panic or defeatism.

Blair kept up a steady litany of encouragement and mildly insulting advice. Some sentinels didn't respond well to comfortable coaxing. Jim definitely rose up when challenged. Hey, at this point, whatever worked. Even though he sounded like a heavy transport, his respiration was definitely deeper and clearer. Keeping one hand on Ellison's wrist, Blair reached awkwardly across the room and snagged his remaining supplies.

He wanted to keep this on a positive roll. Using his teeth, he tore open a plastaseal bag and crumbled the contents in his hand. He made these himself and carried them routinely, even though temporary guides weren't really expected to bring their own supplies.

"Here, try a couple of these." He placed a few small gooey chunks in Jim's mouth. "Don't swallow until you're sure your mouth doesn't itch or feel irritated."

The flavor apparently appealed to Jim, because he chewed with increasing enthusiasm. "Good," he murmured. "More." His voice sounded slurred. Blair had no way to determine if he was just exhausted, or crashing from systemic stress. What he wouldn't give for access to bona fide medical...
"Great. Have all you want. Your blood sugar levels have got to be low." Blair stifled his own anxieties and offered a few more chunks, answering the question he anticipated before Jim had to ask it. "It's mostly organic fruit and grains, seasoned with organic honey and blended with protein paste. All those senses firing take a lot of energy. A few calories should make everything seem a lot better."

Over the next ten minutes, Blair alternately fed and monitored everything he could see or touch without causing further discomfort. Jim's heart rate and breathing evened out to acceptable levels, and the advance of the rash seemed to abate. Jim sat up a bit straighter and shuddered. "Cold in here. Can I have my clothes?"

"We'll see." Blair rummaged around in the supplies. "Banks thought I was nuts, but I badgered them until they got this from some other unit's sentinel supplies." He held out a long-sleeved, slipover tunic. "The size probably isn't perfect, but test it against your skin. Rub it over your chest a bit and see how it feels." Jim complied and nodded. "Okay, pull it on and give it a try."

The shirt was a bit short in the sleeves, ending around the elbow, but Jim could get it on. He shivered and pulled the fiber sheet close around his shoulders again. "Is it normal for sentinels? To carry extra clothes like a little kid?" Jim asked. He sounded rather disgusted.

"Sometimes." Blair could see more explanation was needed, and mentally kicked himself. Ellison was having transition as well as sensory issues. "If clothing, or something on the clothing is a problem, it's got to come off. For some reason, sentinels don't find standing around naked the best solution." He fingered the fabric wrapped around Jim's shoulders. "This fiber sheet is organic cotton, woven to produce a low nap." Ellison looked confused. Fabric content and texture probably weren't high on his list of things-to-know. "Almost no one reacts to cotton, especially organic cotton. Low nap means it's smooth instead of nubbly, and creates a stable buffer with the environment.

"Right. Swaddled like a baby. I'm thrilled."

Blair let that one go. No amount of grousing would reverse the realities of late-onset. Better to concentrate on practical matters. "If you're okay in a couple of minutes, we can start adding warmer stuff over top."

He searched the backcarrier, and held out a pair of socks. "Put these on." Ellison complied, although Blair noted his movements were slow and clumsy. They definitely weren't out of the woods yet. "I have some short leggings," he said, holding out the tightly rolled garment. Ellison shook them out and stared. They were designed to be stretchy and light, an airy first layer on sensitized skin. They'd probably fit Ellison at mid-thigh.

"You're kidding. I wouldn't be caught dead in those - whatever they are."

"Think warm. Well, warmer at least."

"This sentinel thing is getting better and better. My whole life is either deadly or embarrassing." Ellison shrugged with resignation, and pulled the fiber sheet away from his legs.

Blair pressed firmly against his hip before he had a chance to rise. "No, don't try to stand up yet. Just raise your hips and I'll slide them on."

It was awkward, but they managed. Jim rearranged the fiber sheets more tightly around his shoulders, and Blair rewrapped his legs. His face was pale under the mottled tattoo of the retreating rash. Blair mentally scrolled through all the things he should be doing and couldn't. Ellison should be...
bathed. The air should be filtered and adjusted for humidity. Heated blankets. A small meal of fresh fruit and high quality protein would be ideal. Nutritional supplements to speed recovery. Damping medication to cool the immune system. Massage to counteract incipient muscle cramps.

"Back in the day, when petrol-fueled ground transport was still used, I think they called this a garage."

"What?"

"You asked what this place was. It's a garage." Ellison waved a hand weakly at a mound of cartons and boxes. "Back there, somewhere behind all the junk, is a rollup door."

"Oh. Yeah." Blair managed a wry smile. "I didn't think you heard that."

"I heard. Couldn't answer. Breathing seemed a little more important at the time. Could I wrap my hands up in a shirt or something? I'm still freezing."

Blair sorted through the pile of Jim's discards. Nothing was clean enough to be worth the risk. Noting the blue tinge around Ellison's lips, he surrendered another one of his own layers. Jim wound the cloth around his hands and continued. "They'd bring gasoline or diesel vehicles in through a door and unload. There was usually a service passage into the main house. Most places just sealed them up or forgot them when everything shifted over to hovercraft. Do you have anything else to eat?"

Relieved beyond words, Blair handed over more fruit bar and a fluid tube. He wanted Ellison to eat, but talking was good, very good. Anything distracting to stave off panic, and to keep Jim's mind off his myriad discomforts. "And you know this because? Or are the rumors right and the security services just know this kind of stuff? Monitoring vids around every corner."

He got snort of disgust from Ellison. "Right. The omniscient security service, reading all, watching all, hearing all." He shrugged. "Nothing so omniscient. I know because I grew up in one of these places. The Ellison Hall manor house is a lot like this one. Built during the same era, I suppose. I actually used to play in this place as a kid. We'd ditch the grownups and turn it into a fort. The Plummers were near neighbors."

Ellison Hall? Manor House? Jim Ellison, as in...oh, no. No, no, no.

Blair's jaw dropped as the pieces slid into place. Jim's ease of movement, his uncanny ability to pick a safe path under fire now made sense. Of course. And just when he thought things couldn't get any worse. He was a temporary guide for a card-carrying member of the landed gentry, a societal class with more expectations and entitlements than he had hairs on his head. "But...but you're a serving security officer!"

Jim crooked an eyebrow and kept eating. "You sound just like my family when I came back to Cascade, minus the outrage. Actually, it was worse when I broke the news that I'd taken an officer's commission in the military." He managed a wry smile. "You can relax, Sandburg. It's really not so bad. I haven't spoken to the family in years."

"But that can't be," Blair blurted out. It made no sense. Sons of the blood just didn't serve in the military, or security, or a host of other professions considered below their standing. Government service? At the upper echelons, perhaps. Occasionally, for the exceptionally gifted aristocrat chose an academic or artistic career.

He rocked back on his heels. Ellison didn't seem the type to lie. It might be conceivable that this particular Ellison was the youngest of many sons, allowing greater flexibility in life choice. Or from a
branch of the family removed from direct inheritance, like a distant cousin. It was common to foster distant relatives in the ancestral hall.

Noticing Ellison's cool gaze, it suddenly dawned on him how he must sound. Naomi had spent a lifetime teaching him the errors of blind prejudice and dangers of class branding. He should be mortified, forcing a beleaguered, battered man to justify himself. "I should apologize for my rudeness. I - uh - don't know what to say."

Jim snorted. "Relax. I live in the real world. I know what ordinary citizens think, and I live and work as one by free choice. Whatever negative opinions you may have about the landed class, I probably agree with." He shifted uncomfortably, and pulled the fiber sheet tighter. He sounded incredibly weary as he continued. "Besides, you haven't and wouldn't say anything I haven't already heard. Serving security officers aren't known for their tact. I don't use my ancestry to my advantage and eventually they let it go. Mostly."

"Accept my apology anyway. In fact, forget the whole conversation. You should rest," Blair said quietly. "Give your body a chance to recover." He cradled one of Ellison's hands and started to rub slow circles with his index and middle fingers along the inside of the wrist. He was gratified when Jim didn't pull away or object. "It's okay. Lean your head back. Close your eyes."

With a sound between a sign and a groan, Ellison's shoulders slumped, and he drifted away. Blair pressed close, using all of his skill to provide a protective cocoon inside what must seem like a shattered world.

Lady Caroline Plummer decided enough was enough. She emerged from her personal transport, adjusted her ermine wrap, brushed past the external guard and threw open the doors of the checkpoint. Her personal pilot jumped back, attempting to cover his retreat with a stiff bow. "Please excuse our delay, Lady Caroline. I'm sure this is all just a misunderstanding."

"Oh, I'm quite sure it is not," a second, rather young, voice said firmly. "The estate is closed, by order of Provincial Security."

The pilot threw an angry glare at the young officer as he emerged from the verification booth. "As I've tried to explain to this officer, Lady Caroline, the closure simply doesn't apply - "

Caroline Plummer cut off her employee with a wave of her hand, making no effort to hide her irritation. She'd eyed the tall, ebony-skinned young man before her with disdainful stare. She chose to deal with her staff first, gaining a double benefit. It allowed her to chastise poor performance and at the same time send a message of authority to this infant, overzealous officer.

She turned an imperious glare at her employee. "Pilot Nugent, you may retire. I'll handle this matter, and deal with your stunning incompetence later."

The man hesitated, a stricken look on his face. "But Lady Caroline -"

"Do I really need to repeat myself? Go!"

With Nugent's retreating footsteps tapping a rhythm on the stone tiles, she directed her attention to the real source of her irritation. Despite his youth, he seemed completely unperturbed by her presence. His collar flashings indicated he was a relatively junior security officer, but no longer bore the black tabs of a probationer. His uniform was crisp, with no details that would indicate a private tailor or personal fitting. Probably safe to assume he had no family or positional ties she needed to be
concerned with. He did look slightly familiar, but that could just be some vague facial resemblance to an acquaintance and not really a concern.

Charm, she decided, would clear the way. She made a show of removing her long cashmere and leather gloves. If the child had a brain, he would recognize the wealth such articles represented. "Officer, you are to be commended on your vigilance. Have you served in this post long?"

"No Lady Plummer." He bowed his head, an appropriate gesture recognizing her rank. So he wasn't a clueless clod, and he had some training in etiquette. "This is a temporary assignment."

"So you know who I am. I assumed we had some minor glitch in the authorization chip of the transport."

"The authorization chip is in order, Lady Plummer."

The reply was gently given and polite, but firm. Caroline stifled her impulse to explode in fury and berate the young man. Surely he could be cowed with a little insistence. "Then what can possible be the problem? Call your supervisor immediately."

"It is my duty to inform you there is a total flight restriction on your family's estate, Lady Plummer. As for a supervisor, the order carries the highest possible Provincial seal and is not subject to review. My orders are quite clear."

Well, that wasn't good news. She'd assumed her father was simply not answering her repeated attempts to contact him. All the more reason for her to reach the estate quickly and try to salvage something from his disasters. She could already be too late, and the time to coax her way in was past. "This is an outrage!" she blustered, slapping her open hand on the counter separating them. "I am Seneschal for my father. My position alone affirms you have no right to bar my access. The Security Services have no right to interfere with the administration of my family's estate."

The young officer, swallowed once, but was otherwise unmoved.

With a silken tone, she pivoted back to charm just as quickly. "With any order, there is always a review. I'm sure you're unit commander will allow me to pass. He'll be pleased you managed this discreetly."

The young officer straightened his shoulders, but kept his face blank. Annoying as it was, she had to admire his composure. Perhaps she should hire him and solve the whole problem.

"A security operation is ongoing, Lady Plummer. Until it is resolved, all access is banned. The order is specific in including members of the family. Direct heirs and their designees are mentioned specifically. I cannot, and will not, deviate from the order given."

Her heart twisted. Damn her father, the foolish, fanciful idiot. His infatuation with Kincaid had led to this, and the operation was no doubt completely justified. Her mind was racing. Physical presence would be ideal, but she had other strategies at her disposal. She would have to move quickly to minimize the damage. Now that she considered it, if she had to usurp her father's position during this crisis, being physically banned from the estate would actually work to her advantage. Actually, this young puppy might have done her a favor.

Not that she intended to retreat without a display of outrage. It would strengthen any later arguments she might need to make that she had no knowledge of her father's treasonous activities. "This is totally ridiculous, an insult to a family of long and established standing. I want your credentials cypher, young man. Immediately."
"Of course, Lady Plummer." He removed a small chip from the breast pocket of his uniform and placed it on the counter. "We have actually met previously, although I was quite young. Security Officer Second Tier Banks."

Of course. Now the impression of familiarity made sense. Young Daryl, son of Simon Banks, her former colleague during a mercifully brief interlude with Security Sciences. Interesting, but when ascending as her father's seneschal became possible, she'd left without a second thought. Well, Banks had always been a stickler for procedure, and no appreciation for the nuances of privilege. Like father, like son, apparently.

Recognizing a dead end when she saw one, Carolyn Plummer snatched the chip, slapped her gloves against her palm and swirled out of the checkpoint office with all the irate elegance she possessed. She allowed Nugent to assist her into the transport, and ordered him back into Cascade.

Her father's activities had certainly placed him beyond redemption. Duty, to herself and the House Plummer, now required her to preserve their collective position and their assets. If that necessitated the sacrifice of the current Lord to the state, she would willingly abandon her father. He could answer for his own actions, and bear the punishment alone.

Carolyn scowled into the gray rain. Out of disaster came opportunity, and she would need to move swiftly.

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Megan Connor tapped her foot impatiently. One look at her credentials cypher with its accompanying hologram, the mention of the name Blair Sandburg and that snot-nosed underling had opted for full retreat, babbling about a supervisor. A few simple questions should produce a few simple answers, not hysteria.

Citizens were always overreacting in the presence of the security services. What heinous activities could possibly be going on in a staid University Archive Center? They had plenty of real antisocials to monitor and pursue to fuss over minor indiscretions. This was a routine inquiry, a courtesy, not a full-blown investigation of interest to Major Incident. Why did ordinary citizens have to behave as if they'd been caught tapping the Provincial Treasury accounts whenever they saw a uniform?

She scuffed a shoe along her plastocast, irritated that even with repeated cell stimulation the broken bone beneath it still wasn't completely healed. It itched to the point of distraction. She was annoyed with life at the moment, sick of restricted duty, sick of smart mouthed teasing about her disability status. Not that the Major Incident guys weren't by and large a decent bunch. They'd treated her well, and the work Banks had sent her way - until the injury - had done credit to her status and record. She'd miss them when she rotated back to Austro-Pacific. Still, that Henri was a born practical joker, and completely incorrigible. She'd grinned through their infantile jokes long enough, thank you very much, and chafed to get back to real work. Which Taggart must realize, since he'd thrown this diversion her way.

Despite eagerly embracing the distraction, she was tired and fractious after a long morning. Accompanying Marguerite Taggart to attend Arken Tinley's family had sapped her energy, and left her with enough anger and frustration to cheerfully strangle someone - anyone. Such a tragic waste of a good officer, and such inconsolable grief. They'd shepherded the shattered widow back to her home, arranged for childcare for the little girls, all three under the age of five. Marguerite proceeded to organize a week's worth of child-friendly food and contacted family and friends to provide continued support.

Connor had been pleased to expedite the official end of things. Amazing how thick-headed
Provincial Citizen Services could be without proper direction. The eldest little girl was a budding sentinel, following in the footsteps of her father. With her mother overwhelmed with grief, she needed a respite guide. And that idiot fool from Family Services had actually expected to dot every "i" and cross every "t", file formal requests and wait for processing. As if it weren't obvious what was needed, and that the dependents of a fallen officer had every reason to expect expedited treatment. Connor had bluntly encouraged an immediate attitude adjustment. The resulting effort was acceptable, but the entire encounter had left her on slow simmer.

The cringing underling still hadn't returned. Fed up with the delay, Connor ducked behind the reception area, ignored a host of mildly outraged looks from the attendant staff, and walked briskly through the doors marked "Archival Restricted Area". She nearly plowed into said sniveling employee and a tall man in a well-tailored suit, no doubt the supervisor being sought. She was reaching for her credentials to repeat the standard introductory process when the man waved her off.

"My apologies, Officer Connor. "Archival Senior Supervisor Thadeus Greene. I was detained in the restoration area. It takes time to exit the climate control workroom."

Connor caught a fleeting grimace from the woman, who was practically wringing her hands in distress. Her own fatigue disappeared as she snapped into investigative mode. He'd lied, she was certain. Why resort to deceptions with so little provocation?

Greene took her elbow, and with a officious hand dismissed the woman. "Please join me. The resources of this university serve at your direction. Allow me to offer some appropriate hospitality in my conference area."

Rather clumsy, and an obvious attempt to isolate her from other members of the staff. How amusing. Overruling her original plan to be brief, Connor nodded and allowed Greene to guide her through a series of reception areas to a comfortable private office. She'd been an investigator a long time, and was quite accomplished at it. This overly solicitous welcome was as much a cover for guilt as the inordinately flustered reception. She'd forgive Taggart for enlisting her in the sad duties at the hospital. This little errand was shaping up as something downright entertaining.

She accepted tea and sweets, gently probing Greene's position and temperament. It was easy for an attractive woman, even a security officer, to appeal to male vanity. She could tolerate his flirtations and small talk when it served her overall purpose. She took note of the appointments and personal items in the office, which appeared oddly out of sync with the financial resources of a mid-level academic. When Greene was sufficiently at ease, and decidedly overconfident, she pounced.

"How very interesting, Supervisor Greene," she said with a charming smile, and placed the teacup delicately on the table between them. How foolish to serve her with china probably worth a month's salary. "Tell me about Sandburg." After just the right pause, she added, "Blair Sandburg. I believe he is in your employ." Actually, the series of messages Taggart intercepted left no doubt of that. Taggart's intent was that she smooth over his absence, so no untoward difficulties arose for the guide.

Greene tried to dissemble, and did it badly in light of what she already knew. "I don't believe so, but I could check our records. I'm not familiar with that name. Is there some problem?"

Again a lie, blatant this time. Connor almost laughed. Ah, the moment of truth, and here she hadn't had such fun since the accident. Which tack to take? Entice? Threaten? Or continue to fish? Megan allowed her smile to slowly drift away. "Supervisor Greene, the interest of Provincial Security is never casual. You do recall that my assignment is with Major Incident. You are here to answer my questions, not for me to answer yours. Perhaps you'd like to reconsider your response."

Greene had decent mastery of his facial expressions, but no skill with his body, which fairly vibrated
with tension. No one welcomed the attention of the security apparatus, but Connor could practically read his thoughts as he sorted his options, searching for what could he truthfully say that would reveal the least.

"Well. Yes, as I think about it, Blair Sandburg was affiliated with Rainier for a time."

"Yes," Connor said softly. "Continue."

Greene licked his lips, clearly struggling to retain some semblance of composure. "I really only know his situation in the most general terms. Any relationship with Rainier University would have been moot when his formal Sentinel Pairing was sealed. That was quite some time ago."

I am the hawk, you are the mouse. Connor picked up the teacup, sipped and looked at her subject over the delicate porcelain rim. "Please, Supervisor Greene. Apparently you prefer a more official setting for our discussions. I'm sure you'll devise an adequate explanation for the University Administration, who will no doubt be curious, when I publicly escort you to detention."

"Now, just a moment! You have no right -"

The teacup clattered to the table. "On the contrary, my investigative privileges have wide latitude. Allow me to share - shall we say - an observation with you. When a citizen is questioned by Provincial Security, their employers and acquaintances begin asking questions as well, simply as a matter of prudence should they also come under scrutiny. Have you considered what such curiosity might reveal that you would prefer remain private?"

"I've done nothing wrong," Greene protested, his calm facade cracking completely.

"Not criminal, perhaps. Maybe just unethical, or unwise," Connor snapped. "But I assure you, unless you tell me everything you know about Blair Sandburg immediately, this interview will cease to be discreet. I'll get what I want anyway, and leave you to deal with the fallout."

He capitulated, as she knew he would.

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Blair awoke with a start. How could he have possibly fallen asleep? Desperately trying to clear the cobwebs, he checked Ellison. Asleep, not unconscious. Breathing regular, if a bit heavy. Blair could just hear a soft wheeze with each breath. Hands and face slightly swollen, but the raging dermatitis had diminished.

Not bad, considering what could have reasonably been expected. His negligence hadn't generated another crisis.

Blair pulled the backcarrier into his lap to take inventory. He was basically out of sentinel supplies. A quarter tube of dermal cream, which represented less than half a normal dose. No misters. Only one remaining packet of wipes. The screen on the pulse light was cracked. Most of his sentinel-friendly emergency rations were gone. When Ellison woke, he'd need high quality protein and calories to rebuild his shattered reserves.

Clothing was another problem. Blair crept as quietly as he could to the discarded pile he'd stripped from Ellison's body. Every last thread was laden with irritants. If he'd tried to put any of these back on a fragile sentinel, any equilibrium they'd been able to establish would vanish like smoke. They might need to move at any moment, and they couldn't go running around with Ellison wrapped in a fiber sheet. How secure could the lowest level of an estate under siege possibly be?
The decisions were his, and his priorities were to protect the sentinel. What he needed obviously wasn't here, and if it wasn't here, then he needed to go get it. Damn the consequences. He carefully piled the remaining foodstuffs on Ellison's lap, where he couldn't miss finding them. He emptied the other useful items nearby. He needed the backcarrier, and, hopefully, Ellison could figure out how to utilize what he'd left. After listening carefully at the door, with one last longing glance, he slipped out.

"They're requesting a four hour cessation, followed by further negotiations," their crisis negotiator, Olsen Manning, reported wearily. "I have no means to evaluate their sincerity."

Provincial Security Director Evans was still in charge, much to the dismay of the assembled security line officers. In their collective opinion, his political sensibilities were finely tuned, but he was out of his depth in this type of high-stakes standoff.

"And Lord Plummer?" Evans asked.

"They still claim to be holding him as a hostage, Director," Manning said. He pushed away from the communication screen and looked towards Banks. "Captain, does that seem consistent with your earlier intelligence?"

"Frankly, no. Plummer was actively communicating on the part of the Patriot Brigade with other parties. S.S.I. Ellison visually confirmed extensive Brigade traffic in and out of the estate, including face-to-face meetings between Lord Plummer and Kincaid. Covert electronic surveillance and penetration of his financial records are consistent with Ellison's observations. Plummer's a willing participant, not a hostage in danger."

"Lord Plummer," Evans snapped, noting that Banks had dropped the honorific.

Banks bristled at the correction. "I find an individual actively pursuing armed insurrection undeserving of a hereditary title. We have extensive covert communication to back up that position. At least, our good Lord Plummer supposed his activities were covert. He vastly overestimated his technical skills."

"Be that as it may," Evans said dismissively. "Even if your intelligence was accurate, the relationship could have changed. The threat against Lord Plummer's life could be genuine. I don't see how we can proceed with an offensive operation if it places the life of a respected and highly ranked member of society at risk and negotiations are being offered. Particularly since the man was formerly a member of our own Provincial Government."

"When Connal Plummer is taken into custody, the initial charges will include treason," Taggart said, pointedly leaving absent the man's title in a subtle support of his colleague's position. "Even if the Patriot Brigade is using him as a human shield, it will not erase the man's earlier actions. In my opinion, it's misplaced to treat him with deference. He should be considered part of a hostile force, and we should proceed accordingly."

"We finally have personnel positioned where they will be most effective," Captain Carcione said. Of all of the assembled commanders, he looked the most worn and haggard. Banks had managed to catch a few hours of sleep. Carcione had opted to see the families of the fallen, only to hurry back for this briefing. "What if the Brigade is just stalling for time? In four hours, they'll have time to mount an improved defense, and our forces will bear the casualties." His voice broke, and he continued, "I'm not willing to sacrifice loyal officers like Arken Tinley and Niko Maeda for a traitor, even if the bastard was born an aristocrat." His stormy look left no doubt he would refuse to apologize for his
choice of words.

"A deception would be consistent with early Patriot Brigade incidents," Olson Manning said. "Their behavior in prior negotiations has been particularly duplicitous. I've been a negotiator for twenty years. I would strongly advise against a cessation. We're allowing them time with no securing gesture of good faith."

Evans had a difficult time controlling his anger. He was a Provincial Officer, with secondary ties to the aristocracy himself. Clearly he resented that these men dared to challenge his leadership. "It is my decision," he said, "and mine alone. Negotiator Manning, contact the Brigade. Agree to the cessation. Set an expiration time, and arrange for an exchange of proposals. Request that they release Lord Plummer as a gesture of good faith."

He stood, glaring at the assembled commanders. "That will be all, gentleman. Stand down. I will communicate further orders as the negotiations progress."

The message was clear. Leave immediately, and expect repercussions to result from your actions. The security officers filed out, well aware that they were now fighting on at least two fronts.

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The basement was a maze of interconnecting hallways, and odd series of adjoining rooms. Blair encountered few locked doors. He prowled quietly, searching drawers, cupboards and cartons for useful items. So far, a deserted laundry area had yielded up clothing that would fit Ellison. In an adjacent room, he found and pilfered half of a stash of nutrition bars. He took care to re-stack the remnant, hoping to conceal from the casual eye that an intruder was lifting supplies.

One pile of military paraphernalia yielded two plastaseal containers, which he promptly filled with water. Two packs of medicated wipes joined the collection. He crammed an immediate aid kit into the already stuffed backcarrier. He hadn't located any sentinel specific items, but that would have been like opening a nameday gift and finding the Four Sacred Treasures. He was far more interested in items that would sustain and support Ellison for at least the next twelve hours.

Certainly, someone would track them down by then.

He could hear the tread of footsteps on the floor above him. Lots of people. Hopefully, no one would descend to this lower level and find their hiding place. He couldn't help but listen when a conversation seemed particularly clear. Mostly it reached his ears as an unintelligible muddle. It was tempting to sneak closer, maybe to the head of the stairs and try for some really useful information. The impulse was overruled by his more immediate priorities, utmost of which included getting back to Ellison, preferably without anyone discovering him prowling around the depths of hostile territory.

Checking the corridor, he retraced his steps. He had a few heart stopping moments, including opening a door to an empty room when he expected to find Ellison. Obviously, his attempts to keep an accurate mental floor plan of this level had failed. He had horrifying visions of fruitlessly searching through the seemingly endless rooms and never discovering his stranded sentinel again, or worse, running into some thug from the Brigade. It took a good ten minutes before he realized he needed to go one corridor farther before turning west. At least he thought it was west. He really didn't care as long as Ellison was still resting comfortably behind the door.

To his great relief, Ellison was still resting, although his eyes flickered open as Blair padded across the room. "Hey there," Blair said, keeping his voice at the level of a whisper. "How are you feeling?"
Jim sat up, stretching awkwardly, which dislodged his flimsy coverings. He snatched at the fiber sheet, tossing the ends back over his shoulders. Blair caught a brief glimpse of exposed forearm, which didn't look more irritated than when he'd left.

"Other than knots on top of knots from sleeping like a pretzel," Ellison groused. "And I'm cold. This slipover thing doesn't trap any warmth." He stretched again.

Blair started tugging items out of the backcarrier. "I found you some clothes." The handed a cotton shirt, rather outdated, with buttons down the front, to Ellison. "I have more, but you need to try one piece at a time. Make sure that you don't react to it and make things worse. Just pull them over the top of what you've got on already."

Jim snatched the shirt and shrugged into it eagerly. He doubled the fiber sheet and tucked it in around his legs. He tried to do the buttons and struggled.

"Let me," Blair said. "Don't be insulted. Your hands are a bit swollen. It's normal when you retain fluid." Jim gave him a puzzled look. "You were having a systemic reaction, involving skin and respiration. Your body floods the tissues with fluids as your immune system tries to fight whatever invader it thinks it sees."

"I was being invaded?"

"The sentinel body recognizes almost everything as a potential invader. Sentinels can recognize and react to astonishingly tiny amounts of allergen."

"I've never had allergies."

"Even ordinary stuff that never bothered you before can be a problem. There's enough gunk on your clothes to send a city of sentinels into anaphylaxis. Let's not even talk about all the dust you breathed in."

"That's why I have a rash? And why my chest feels like lead?" Blair nodded, relieved that Ellison was asking coherent questions, and seemed to be moving beyond outright denial. "You wiped me down with something cold. And put some kind of cream all over me, right?"

Blair nodded again. He didn't like to think of how little cream was left if they had another crisis. "You responded well to the dermal cream. We were lucky."

"I hurt all over. What gives with that?"

Blair checked under the edge of the shirt. Things looked okay. He handed Ellison some loose, drawstring pants. He kept a steadying hand under his elbow as he clambered to his feet. "Don't worry about it. It's all part of the immune response. You cough or shiver, and your muscles tense. One of the first things you'll learn is how to short-circuit your autonomic responses. Eventually, you'll be able control your body before it turns on you."

Ellison's frown was stormy. "So that's why a sentinel has a perpetual babysitter. Great. I can hardly wait."

"Don't try to take it in all at once. In the long run, you'll find a lot of positives, not just negatives." Blair pulled over a carton and motioned for Ellison to sit. "You need to eat some more." He offered a fistful of nutrition bars. "Take your pick. I got us some water, too."

He watched Ellison gulp down mouthful after mouthful. No choking, no swelling, and no complaints about the taste. "You know, a guide isn't a babysitter."
He could see the anger flood Ellison's expression. "Name a functioning adult who wants to be joined at the hip, who needs to be dressed and hand fed. I've served all over the planet. I've served offworld. And now you tell me I should be thrilled with a constant shadow who will manage my daily life so I won't die. I'm basically crippled. How do you expect me to feel?"

"No. Just no. You will have a job, the same one you have now, in all likelihood. Your guide's job will be you, and you will be his or her only priority. Assist, not control. Enable, not restrict." He grabbed Jim's wrist. "When the pairing's right, it's better than a partner, better than a spouse. It will be the other half of your soul. It will be like suddenly having wings and a wide sky to fly." His voice caught, and he turned away. "Finish dressing and have some water. I think I dropped something outside."

With hardly a look, he raced out and to the end of the hall, as far from Ellison as he dared. His own words echoed in his mind: half of your soul, having wings. He shouldn't, couldn't utter the rest in Jim's presence. Overcome, he sank to his knees in remembered pain.

The sealing of Sentinel to Guide didn't cripple.

That only happens when it ends.

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Megan Connor hobbled down the pavement, fury mounting with each painful step. Not wanting any prying eyes to observe her status with Provincial Security, she needed to use the public tram until safely out of range. She'd had to sacrifice her own body for it, but this outrage was just too delicious to waste. The Patriot Brigade incident was still ongoing, but she needed to speak with Taggart and Banks sooner rather than later.

She'd started the day in crisp dress uniform. Three responsibilities had been tasked to her by her tandem commanders, Taggart and Banks. Task one: tending the family of Sentinel Tinley, struck down in an OAV attack. A sad duty, but one Connor was honored to perform. Task two: visit Rainier University and speak on behalf of one Blair Sandburg, the Guide they'd recruited in haste to assist Ellison. Taggart had been quite clear. Sandburg's service, though temporary, had been both willing and exemplary. Major Incident was honor bound to ensure he suffered no penalty from being unable to appear for scheduled employment.

That had been the intent. Stop by the University Archive Center where Sandburg had part-time employment, ask a few quick questions, assess the situation and insist, with the full weight of Provincial Security, that the man be treated generously. Instead she'd stumbled into a nest of illegal activity, centering around the Archive Senior Supervisor, Thadeus Greene. In Connor's opinion, the man, with his fine education, impeccable clothing and prestigious position, was the witchetty grub of the academic world.

They could pinch off the head of Supervisor Greene at any time, considering how poorly he'd covered his sordid little schemes. Once that spineless worm had broken, less than fifteen minutes of her time had revealed just how many credits Greene had pocketed from Sandburg's off-the-books employment, and Blair Sandburg was just one individual. Worker exploitation by a Provincial agency was a serious crime. All those expensive trinkets he apparently craved could easily cost him his position, livelihood, and substantial fines, along with a hefty detention sentence.

In keeping with Taggart's intent and her own outrage that a person of authority would so abuse a fellow citizen, she had insisted Greene make right his actions, at least in Sandburg's case. Despite his shaking hands and pleas for leniency, she'd insisted upon, and then supervised, a generous transfer of funds to Sandburg's credit account from Greene's personal funds. The amount matched a
conservative estimate of the amount Greene had siphoned off for his own pleasure. In her looming presence, he also completed the necessary paperwork to register Sandburg as an official auxiliary employee, effectively ending his off-the-books status. The next time Sandburg worked, he would enjoy the full benefits of his labor.

Not bad for a few hours of investigation and a bit of indignation.

At the moment, Connor favored using the prospect of sure conviction to pressure Greene into serving their needs. The man could be an invaluable, if unwilling, confidential informant. They could certainly encourage Greene to maximize Sandburg's level of employment. Judging from Taggart's concern for Sandburg's wellbeing, she was confident he'd concur.

She was then ready to move to Task three. When Taggart had broken privacy on Sandburg's civilian communicator, a name had tumbled out, Brad Ventriss. Surprising, if not shocking. On the extensive most-wanted list maintained by Major Incident, Ventriss was near the top, and of special interest to Taggart. Suspected of murder, blackmail and extortion, Taggart had diligently worked the original case, never quite able to circumvent the screen of protection provided by wealth, privilege and an indulgent, mutually corrupt Lord Ventriss. They lacked a final element of definitive, incontrovertible proof, and the case was considered open. Very open, and of highest priority.

From what Taggart could glean, Ventriss was expecting Sandburg to deliver some academic materials for a fee. When Sandburg hadn't shown up for the delivery, his messages had clearly crossed the line from irate to threatening. Eager to exploit a golden opportunity, Taggart had thrown the investigation her way, with maximum latitude as to her methods.

She hadn't been assigned to the original case. Ventriss didn't know her. Leaving the uniform behind, she'd sought out Lord-elect Bradley Ernest Augustus Ventriss incognito. An offer to produce Sandburg's data pod resulted in instant access to the young man's palatial living quarters, no doubt financed by his indulgent parent. Connor arrived, provided one of her standard false identity cyphers, and introduced herself as a go-between for the now unavailable Sandburg.

Ventriss had fallen on the opportunity like a starving dog. Apparently, the item being transferred was Ventriss' final Accreditation Project. Tempting enough, but Connor wanted more than just this one audience with young Ventriss. With Taggart's approval, she produced a standard-issue data pod, courteously loaded with an altered version of the project Sandburg's was contracted to provide. As she had hoped, Ventriss verified the introduction and the conclusion, with only a cursory examination of the remainder.

The bait was taken. When he discovered the tampering, he would have to seek her again, which was exactly her intent.

As much as she enjoyed working undercover and luring the truly reprehensible into a trap of their own making, things didn't always go according to plan. Project in hand, Ventriss promptly refused to pay the agreed upon fee. She'd used the ensuing argument, all caught on covert vid, to reveal the extent of his illicit behavior. Falsifying academic work could easily get him tossed from the Guide Accreditation Program. That would probably be a service to all Sentinels, present and future, but too modest for Connor's tastes.

From earlier conversations with Taggart, she felt she had a measure of the man. Dancing just shy of entrapment, she pushed, and pushed hard. Ventriss' arrogance and temper spiraled quickly into violence. He ordered his squad of bodyguards to rough her up and toss her into the street. Assaulting an officer, with corroborating evidence, was enough for a conviction, but Connor had her sights set higher. Ventriss had not been careful of his words. Future threats toward her own person and Sandburg were specific and detailed. Even if Ventriss used his private group of thugs as his tool of
choice, they would still have him.

So here she was, bursting with news, standing on the street with ripped clothing, blood smeared across her cheek from a cut above her eye and a swelling lip. Damn, more disability time. And her leg still itched under the cast.

Where was that ridiculous civilian tram?

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Cracked or not, the pulse light still managed a pale glow. It blinked off at unexpected, and usually inopportune moments, but was certainly better than trying to trail Ellison in the pitch black. Their goal was the old servants’ quarters, where Ellison was certain they would find a way of communicating with the outside world without alerting their adversaries. Blair still couldn’t quite wrap his brain around the entire scheme, and had actively tried to squelch the entire idea. Ellison might be the typical security force tough guy, but he was also a late-onset sentinel and incredibly fragile. The slightest thing could set off a reaction Blair would have no hope of containing. His oh-so-logical arguments had been about as effective as a child begging for a second bag of candy.

The conversation still flitted in his head.

"Sandburg, I know way more about this than you do. We stay here, we get caught in the crossfire, or discovered and captured."

"You've got to listen to me. We barely have your senses under control. No, listen! I know you hate the whole idea, but these are facts. Your respiratory efficiency is border-line. At a minimum, you need medical stabilization for your immune system, and basic training with sense modulation. This could get you killed. And for what?"

"Fine. Say we stay here, you fuss with all this sentinel mumbo jumbo, and they find us. You have no concept of what the Patriot Brigade does to hostages or prisoners.

"I know they're the bad guys -"

"No, you don't know. Not really. What we tell the citizenry is a shadow of what really goes on. We don't release the information about the tortures, the mutilations -"

"But your senses -"

"Compared to the Brigade, my senses, as you call them, are a hangnail. Wrap your brain around it, Sandburg. Acid dripped on the skin. Fingers, toes, noses, ears lopped off. Teeth yanked out of the skull. Injected drugs that turn you inside out. I'd never walk out of here alive. They wouldn't spare you, either."

"Fine, but answer this. If we need to stay out of their way, why is it better to go prowling around? The more we move, the greater the chance of getting caught. I told you I heard footsteps above. Lots of them."

And then Ellison had grinned; a wicked, feral grin that could have taken the sunlight out of the world. "I have something different in mind."

"What? Disguise? I ask you, do I look like I can pass for a paramilitary? Don't laugh, man. That's a serious question."

"Sandburg, you look like a musician who escaped the evening entertainment. No, disguise, as you
say, isn't an option."

"So?"

"So, Lord Connal, pompous idiot that he is, invited these guys in. They're openly using the main hallways and public areas. There are other alternatives that will keep us out of sight."

"What? Levitation?"

"Smartass. These places have been remodeled dozens of times over the years, but the main living areas, the ancient cores, all date back to the times of stricter social order. Separation by occupation and class."

"News flash. It hasn't exactly changed."

"Save the social theory analysis. The ancestral parts of these estates are riddled with passages that were used for the servant class to complete their duties without being seen."

"But Lord Plummer would know - have them watched."

"Not hardly. Connal Plummer never had an adventurous, insightful, or productive thought in his life. His own kids prowled all over this old pile using the servant's passages and it never once occurred to him to check."

Blair had to admit it sounded reasonable, but he wasn't willing to surrender so easily. "And you would know this? Or is this an educated guess?"

Ellison actually snickered. "I was raised as a gentleman, and gentleman don't kiss and tell. However, I might have known someone who was sneaking in and out with the eldest daughter for romantic purposes."

"A misspent youth. I should have known."

"Point being that I know the layout and we can get around without being seen. There's a vertical lift that used to bring supplies up to the kitchen. How are you with heights?"

"Lovely. If he ever saw Taggart again, he was going to throttle the man."

So he'd lied, and said he was fine with heights. Maybe not totally a lie. After all, he'd survived Taggart's flying. He'd kept his eyes shut in the so-called lift, which was actually a tiny box hung from cables over a dark shaft that apparently extended to the planet's iron core. Not a journey he'd care to repeat.

They'd dodged through the kitchen, through a cupboard that was actually a door and into a warren of dusty passages. They carried their shoes, or in Ellison's case, boots - padding through endless hallways and narrow, precarious stairways that rose steeply between floors. Dust lay thick, and Blair shuddered when the inevitable cobwebs crawled across his skin. Occasionally, Ellison would pause and scrub grime from small metal plates mounted on the walls. On the third stop, Blair finally got a good look at one that read "Large Dining Room". Blair realized they marked passages into the public areas of the house, and Ellison was using them to orient himself in an otherwise unintelligible maze.

Blair could barely see, so Ellison must be accessing sentinel-enhanced vision, even if he didn't realize it. In fact, Blair was having a very difficult time keeping up, other than the brief stops when Ellison checked their location. Logic dictated that a recently emerged sentinel wouldn't suddenly start using
his senses without difficulty. It was just too good to be true.

And then it wasn't. In the middle of another narrow, creaking staircase, Ellison wobbled and grasped for the handrail. The wood rail and support brackets, long weakened with age, gave a sickening crack, and tore away in his hand. Reacting on instinct, Blair dove forward, hoping to break Ellison's fall. He managed to get one arm flung forward, cushioning the man's skull, which would have otherwise bounced off the stair tread.

Ellison's face was twisted with some unspoken agony.

If he'd been stronger, or his position less awkward, that might have been the end of it. They could have fumbled their way to the next landing in safety. Instead, gravity had its way. With both Blair's arms protectively wrapped around Ellison's upper torso, they began to somersault together toward the last landing.

The world went black

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Lady Carolyn Plummer kept her gaze forward, resisting the temptation to gape at the ornate furnishings around her. In just a moment, the door would open, and she would be escorted into the very heart of aristocratic life, its center of governance, and she must play her role perfectly.

The Hall of Lords, a rambling, six story stone edifice, boasted everything from ballrooms to classrooms, recreational facilities to administrative offices. The landed families which had survived nearly two hundred years of global turmoil guarded their success jealously, and merely entering the building never failed to spark a moment of pride in her soul, reminding her she was one of the elite, the chosen, and entitled by right to the position she enjoyed. She had played here, danced here, married here. Even when she ascended to her current position as her family's seneschal, she had not accompanied her father down this hallway. Only heads of family were allowed here. When she crossed the threshold, she would do so as the presumptive heir apparent, petitioning the inner circle on behalf of the besieged Plummer family. Depending on her skill and persuasiveness over the next hour, her allegiance to her own half-mad father would be severed, and she would emerge the de facto head of the Plummer family.

Her escort rapped twice, opened the heavy door and motioned her through. Mastering her own fluttering heart, she moved forward, bowed to the members of the Executive Council of Lords, and seated herself in the lone chair placed in the center of the room for her use. She knew these men, but not as near equals. Lord Martin Harcourt, the current Presiding Officer, had stood as witness to her infant dedication in the blood, which formally sealed her to the Plummer family. Lord Lawrence Northbrook had fostered her for two summers. Lord Vincent Chan and Lord Gregory Wylie were former confidants of her father. At the far end sat Lord William Ellison, as always, an enigma impossible to read. Like father, like son.

Lord Harcourt, as was custom, began the interview. "Lady Carolyn, is it true? The ancestral home is under siege?"

"It is. I was turned back at the security perimeter. I thank all of you for attending to this crisis so swiftly." Carolyn took a deep breath. He next statement would seal her fate, for good or ill. "As I indicated in my petition, my father is completely under the sway of Garrett Kincaid. Judging from the disposition of Provincial Security, his actions are without a doubt treasonous. If action is not taken immediately, the lands and financial assets of House Plummer will be subject to seizure by the state."
She looked slowly from one face to the next, artfully striking what she hoped was an expression balanced between regret and duty. "I plead with you to remove him from his hereditary position as Head of Family. Only your swift action will save my family from total destruction."

"You have evidence?" Lord William asked.

As ever, he was swift address any problem. There were few shades of gray for the Head of the House Ellison. Would he be her ally, or oppose her? She would know soon. "I have," she answered. "I believe you will find it compelling."

With that simple statement, she rose and began her formal petition.

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"Damn it all to hell."

Simon Banks nudged Joel Taggart, seated next to him in the Major Incident rendezvous point. Rafe and Henri Brown, recently returned, also looked up, anticipating an explanation of their captain's ire. Banks gave the two lower ranking officers the barest shake of his head. He had strong rapport with his unit, but some things weren't to be shared with the rank and file. Reading the Senior Negotiator's message verbatim would fall into that category. Olsen Manning was of equivalent rank, and a personal friend. He'd been extraordinarily candid in his message.

Banks handed his private communicator to Taggart, allowing him to read the text of the message. Taggart also knew Manning well and would keep the pithy nature of his remarks in confidence. Taggart scanned the text, sighed and grimaced in disgust. "Can't fault Olsen."

"He's a good man," Banks agreed, accepting the return of his device. "It was a mistake not to insist on a good faith gesture. Release a hostage, confirmation of life, something."

"He warned them this would happen," Taggart said. "A four hour delay and all we get is a demand we can't possibly meet, more threats to hostages that might not even exist, and more delay. A five year old could have written the script for this."

"This is why politicians should keep their grubby paws off security operations," Banks said ruefully. "We've frittered away any advantage we may have gained." The less senior Security Investigators present could probably guess the identity of said superior, but it was more correct to be circumspect.

"How long do you think - our superiors - will banter back and forth?" Taggart's obvious irritation faded into concern. "You know what I'm thinking."

Banks didn't even have to nod in the affirmative. Evans would continue down the path of sham negotiations past any point of reason, if only to avoid the admission of an error. As long as Evans remained in overall command, Garrett Kincaid and the Brigade had a clear upper hand, and would ruthlessly exploit it. "He'll stew over an appropriate answer, and then be shocked when the Brigade pivots and proposes something entirely different. Manning will have his work cut out for him."

"We're missing something. What could the Brigade possibly hope to gain?" Taggart asked. "Some massive credit transfer that isn't complete? Leveraging Lord Plummer? Executing some escape plan?"

Banks leaned back against the crumbling stone of their shelter. "The first two, maybe. Escape? Not possible. We've got this place locked down tight."
"I'm not so sure, Simon," Taggart said doubtfully. "The estate is huge. Maybe we don't have it covered as well as we think we do."

"Begging the Captain's pardon."

Banks acknowledged the formality of the request with an equally formal response. "Yes, S.I. Brown."

"We've been thinking," Brown said, with a confirming look towards his partner. "Talked to the imaging boys. They think that that water system Ellison and the guide were using is still intact." He let the statement hang for a moment.

"Actually, Captain, they're really sure about it," Rafe chimed in. "Meaning the two of them are still probably okay. If they couldn't come out, they either stayed in or -"

"Or they went inside," Banks said, finishing the thought, a definite gleam in his eye. "Oh, yeah. Unconventional. Risky. Ellison would be just crazy enough to try it." He crossed his arms and glared at his two junior officers. "Well, hop to it. Com units aren't the only way to communicate. Start figuring out how Jim would send a message out, and how can we send a message in."

In the wake of their departure, Banks looked at Taggart and snorted in disgust. "The Health Optimization folks can go hang themselves. I really need a cigar."

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Jim Ellison opened his eyes and saw - nothing.

His first thought was that he'd been captured and thrown in sensory deprivation. Sentinel or not, the technique was favored by Brigade thugs because it was so disorienting. Then he rubbed his hand across the surface beneath him and remembered. The servant's passage - and then a sound that had shrieked through his brain.

Maybe that explained the crushing headache.

Without warning he retched violently, a wave of nausea that rolled up his gut in an uncontrollable spasm. What was that stench? Like raw meat, or the smoking ruin of casualties on a battlefield. He could be in an abattoir or a forward base battle morgue instead of the back passages of a genteel country estate.

Blood? Sandburg?

He scrabbled along the floor, searching with his hands, and discovered Sandburg's limp body. He pulled his hand away damp, and the odor assailed him again. Then he knew - blood - and the scent pounded into his cheekbones as if a physical blow. How could blood, from a fresh injury, possibly affect him this way? Had Sandburg bled out?

Gagging into one hand, he managed to roll Sandburg over to his back. He cried out in pain and cringed away from a blinding sheet of light, only to realize it was just the measly pulse light, still emitting a feeble glow through a cracked and hazy screen. He blinked and squinted, trying to focus. A nasty gash across Sandburg's temple oozed blood, but that was no life-threatening injury. Judging by the smell, he'd half expected to find the man's throat slashed.

Jim rocked back on his heels. This must be what Sandburg had been trying to explain. His senses were lying to him, way out of proportion to reality. He coiled inward on himself under the combined onslaught of pain - the headache, the light that seared his eyes, the scent that seemed to burn through
his sinuses with each breath. He fought against losing consciousness again.

It took time to force himself to act. Whatever had happened, Sandburg needed attention. Opening his eyes as little as possible, he moved the light to a ledge that ran along the hallway. At least that kept it from piercing directly into his eyes. He could see, sort of. Every move made the headache throb unbearably, but he pushed on. He moved Sandburg into a less contorted position, and searched for other injuries. He found none.

Looking around, he realized the backcarrier was perched precariously halfway up the stair. He noticed the shattered handrail, and then it all made sense. He’d freaked out again, fallen, and taken Sandburg with him. Gritting his teeth, he crawled up the stairs. A quick search of the backcarrier yielded a package of wipes. Not steady enough to stand and walk, he inched down the stairs on his butt and back to Sandburg's side. He dabbed at the blood crusting around the gash, and felt the knot forming across the man's brow, the heat rising under the skin.

That seemed to rouse Sandburg. He groaned and pushed Jim's hands away.

"Easy, Chief. We need a quick equipment repair here." With a little more confidence, he wiped the wound clean. He gagged again, but the smell of blood was receding.

Sandburg grabbed clumsily at his shoulder. "Are you okay? Something with your senses knocked you on your ass."

"I figured that out," Jim said, relieved that at least Sandburg seemed okay, if a bit shaky. "Why the hell didn't you get out of the way?"

Blair brushed the question aside. "Can you remember what it was? A sound? A smell?"

Jim rocked back, balancing on his heels. "I think it was a noise. When I came to, the smell got to me." He gagged slightly and swallowed hard. "That little dab of blood is nothing. Guess I'm not out of the woods on that one."

"How long -"

"I don't know. What exactly happened before I smashed you in the fall?"

"You collapsed on the stairs. Tore the railing right out of the wall. I think we rolled all the way to the bottom." Sandburg tried to sit up. He needed an assist and turned decidedly pale. "Tell me about the noise."

"I think - it was this horrible, high-pitched wail. I've never heard anything like it."

Sandburg frowned and shook his head. "I didn't hear a thing. It could be an ordinary noise, but now you're hearing it as a sentinel. You must have had a hearing spike. They can be incredibly painful."

"Enough to knock me cold?" he asked.

"Afraid so, man."

Jim shook his head. "This whole sentinel thing just gets worse and worse." He hesitated, and then added, "I think it happened with smell, too."

Sandburg looked ready to blurt something out, and then seemed to catch himself. Jim wondered if it was something just too scary to speak aloud. They stared at each other for a moment. When Sandburg added no further comment, Jim figured it was time to regroup and move on.
"Okay, that was bad, but we should get on with it. One more floor and I think we can find what we need. We can be a little more cautious this time, so neither one of us takes a header down the stairs. You wouldn't happen to have anything for a headache, would you."

"I do, and happy to say it's sentinel friendly." Sandburg struggled to his feet. "We can take a few minutes. Don't be too discouraged. Spikes happen." He squeezed Jim's arm in reassurance. "When you've chosen your guide, you'll practice. Control will come, and you body won't ambush you like this. Just the fact that you're still holding it together - well, it will get better fast. I promise.

Jim could only nod, and hope it was true.

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Garret Kincaid, self-styled leader of the Patriot Brigade, stared angrily at the man crouched on one knee before him. Without warning, he grabbed the first heavy piece of equipment he could touch and struck. His hapless victim tried to duck, and only suffered a glancing blow.

"I'm doing the best I can!" he shouted, bringing his hands up defensively. "I told you the power source would be a problem. It was across the second frequency threshold before cutting out this time." He tried to crawl away, only to be brought up short by Kincaid's minions. Two burly Brigade members, marked by their armbands, with the distinctive starburst and eagle insignia, pulled him to his feet and held him in front of their leader.

Kincaid would have taken great satisfaction in lining up a second, more punishing strike. He stayed his hand - just barely. He could beat this guy's brains in later - after he'd gotten what he wanted from him. Instead he leaned close, screaming into the man's face. "Fix it! You hear me? Fix it! If this thing isn't operational within the hour, you start losing pieces of body parts."

His victim, cringed back against the powerful hands that restrained him, remained defiant. "You can threaten me all you want. Sonic cannon are touchy. The frequencies have to build and align to get harmonic resonance. If the power supply isn't stable, the resonance cycles diverge and the cannon won't cross the thresholds."

Kincaid looked across the room at his treasure, a max force sonic cannon, its focusing mechanism gleaming like a gray pearl. A sizable portion of Plummer's assets had been used to acquire it. Having one in his personal possession merited a life sentence in high-security detention. Not that he considered that a major concern. If he was ever arrested, life in prison was the least severe of the penalties he'd face.

He clenched his fists in frustration. The plan was perfect. A series of carefully placed, full capacity sonic pulses would decimate the forces ringed around the manor house. Nothing like casualties to get attention, and proper respect. Even better, the devastation would ensure their escape. While the security forces around the estate were down, his men, all wearing the appropriate shielding gear, could pack the cannon up, move it almost anywhere, and strike without warning. Use it repeatedly, with massive loss of life, and he could bring the Provincial, even the Continental, government to its knees.

But the entire scenario was going to collapse if the cannon would not fire properly. The two earlier attempts got no further than a piercing whine before crashing the power supply.

He couldn't stall with fake negotiating initiatives forever. The cannon was a game changer. Without it, inevitably the security forces would storm the compound and undo years of maneuvering. Even if he escaped detention, how long would it take him to rebuild, to recruit loyal Brigade members, to find another vain, credit-loaded, aristocrat to exploit? No, he was not going to let this opportunity slip
through his fingers. This worm of a tech specialist was going to make it happen.

Every man had something, someone, he wasn't willing to sacrifice. All he needed was to provide the proper motivation and he was certain the difficulties with the cannon would miraculously be solved. Kincaid snatched the man by the throat, squeezing hard. "I want that sonic cannon," he said in a commanding voice, escalating to a scream. When he chose to, he could rattle the windows with his volume. He gestured towards the lethal object across the room. "I don't care how it works, or what you have to do. I want results! That cannon will be operational within the hour." He shook the specialist in time with each word. "I need to be blowing people off the face of the planet by then or you'll have more to worry about than your own personal discomfort." He released the choking, sputtering tech, allowing him to collapse limply to the floor, coughing and hauling in frantic gulps of air. Kincaid allowed himself a small smile of satisfaction. Now his technician was in the proper frame of mind for further encouragement.

Holding out his hand toward one of his men, he was given a palm-sized communicator, adjusted to maximum broadcast level. The sound of a young girl weeping filled the room. Kincaid raised his voice, making sure everyone could hear, including the frightened tech, still on his knees. "Lieutenant Titus, you have a person of interest for us?"

A terrified wail rebounded through the space. "Daddy!? Daddy, he's hurting me."

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"You see this, Chief?" Blair peered over Ellison's shoulder "This taps into phone lines that were laid down in the last century. Telephones are a relic, but no one bothers to take them out. Too expensive to pull all the physical wiring. But if you know what to do, they send a pulse that our guys can pick up."

"What about the Patriot guys? Won't they catch it, too?" Blair looked hastily around the room. It was a long abandoned servant's room, essentially a tiny garret tucked up tight under what must be the attic, furnished only with a rickety bed, a straight-backed chair, a footstool, and a chest of drawers, all made of wood and from another age. If discovered, it certainly didn't look like a place where they could take a stand and hold out. Blair had visions of some over-muscled Brigade thug tossing him out the window. "Do we really want them looking for us?"

Ellison looked up from the small device he was trying to splice into the wire. "In theory, they might. But it's such a long shot, I'm hoping our guys are the only ones listening, and I'm sure they will be. Well, they will be if anyone has a moment to think about it."

"Explain to me again why anyone would pay attention to a technology so outdated that no one uses it and you only see it in history books."

"Because it's part of our training. Banks and Major Incident won't give up unless there's a confirmed kill on me, and they certainly aren't going to quit looking for you."

Blair looked off through the grimy window of this unused, neglected room. For some reason the joyless realities of his daily life hovered close to the surface. Searching for Ellison he could buy. He was a colleague and highly valuable. But come looking for him? No, he was the definition of expendable - an anonymous, temporary assistant who would never permanently pair with a sentinel again. The rest of his own society had written him off. Why not Banks and company?

"Not hardly," he muttered grimly. It was almost a reflex, giving his innermost thoughts verbal reality. For that one brief moment, he hadn't even considered that he might be overhead. His voice wasn't even an intelligible whisper.
Ellison's head snapped up in surprise. "Right up until this second you've been Mr. Positive. What's the deal?" He straightened his hunched shoulders and stared. "Of course they'd come after you. Banks would never turn his back on a civilian."

Blair regarded Ellison's intensity with a bleak look. "Just forget it, okay? I didn't mean anything by it. How close are we to transmitting?" He pulled the wobbly footstool over and took a seat, acting as though nothing in the world was more interesting than with the mystery wires.

Ellison stopped working completely. "Yes, you did. What happened? You get caught in one of the Captain's pre-mission pep talks? Look, Banks is great at giving those 'Let's take it on the chin for the team' speeches, but you couldn't think that crap was meant for you!" Blair didn't answer, his face drained of any hint of animation. "Really - look it's just not important. It was just a dumb thing to say. Is there something else we need to do to catch their attention? Wave from a window or something?"

Ellison favored him with a long thoughtful look. "Once I get this done, that's not a bad idea. I'm sure the tech guys have all kinds of audio equipment trying to eavesdrop on the Brigade. We have emergency pulse codes that we could tap out on any hard surface."

"Would glass work? How do you do it?"

Ellison flipped his splicing tool around and tapped on the floor: three quick taps, three slow taps, then three quick ones. "Who knows? It could work. They'll be looking for offbeat ways I might be funneling information to them -. " He broke off suddenly, looking a confused, even a bit scared.

Blair wrapped a firm hand around Ellison's wrist, fearing another series of debilitating spikes. "What is it?" he whispered softly. "What sense?"

Ellison had dropped his equipment and rocked back on his heels. "That's impossible. That can't be."

"Nothing's impossible. Tell me."

"I swear I heard Garrett Kincaid's voice. I must be going crazy."

Blair squeezed the man's wrist more tightly. "Don't panic. Sentinels hear through walls all the time. Do you really know his voice? I mean well enough to recognize it?"

Ellison nodded hesitantly.

"Then trust yourself. We came up all those flights of stairs. We might be closer to where Kincaid is. Look, you can turn your hearing up just like you turned it down. Try to follow that voice to the source. You're not crazy, you're a sentinel."

Ellison reached out blindly, and Blair grasped the hand. "I'm your anchor. I won't let you get lost. You can do it. Don't be scared."

And then Ellison cocked his head just a tiny bit to the left, a classic sentinel posture. Blair counted four long breaths. No disasters so far. Then Ellison's eyes went wide, almost panicked. He vaulted to his feet, hauling Blair with him.
"They have a cannon!" he hissed. "A sonic cannon! They can kill everything in the wave focus out to five miles."

Something in Blair's gut flipped. He'd seen vids of the destruction caused by sonic cannon. Horrific. They were banned for a reason. "Are you sure? Maybe you didn't hear it right."

Ellison froze, but his grip made Blair's wrists began to ache. "They can't get it to work. They've tried twice."

"The sound," Blair hissed. "That had to be what zapped you on the staircase. It makes sense. Totally unfamiliar and intense."

Ellison nodded absently, but his concentration was still focused on the unseen conversation. "They have - they're beating a tech. Threatening him." His eyes went wide and a look of anguish crossed his face. "Bastards. Worthless bastards. They have his daughter and they're hurting her. She's just a little girl - ." His voice trailed off and he swayed precariously.

"Ellison! Ellison! Turn it down! Let it go!" Blair eased him to the floor.

Ellison looked pale and shaken. "Is that a zone?"

"Close. You pulled yourself away from the brink this time. That's good. Really good." Blair stroked his thumbs across Ellison's temples. "Headache?"

"Worse than before, but it doesn't matter." Ellison gathered his paraphernalia, stuffing the items into the backcarrier. "We don't have time for this. We have to find that thing before they have a chance to use it." He started to rise but couldn't manage more than wobbling on his knees.

"Whoa! Let me work on this a second," Blair said, pulling him back down to the floor. "Your head hurts for a reason. Ever had a migraine?"

"That would be 'no'. Why?"

"Well, you don't want one, and that's exactly what you'll get if you go haring off like that." Blair moved his fingers skillfully along the brow and cheekbones. "These are pressure points. Bundles of nerves that sort of speak to tight muscles, redirect blood flow, that kind of thing."

"Why does that work?" Ellison asked, gasping from the pressure of Blair's fingers in a new spot. "It hurts, but then it feels better."

"It's complicated, and not really important. The short version is pain reactions will run away with you just like a sensory spike will. Things can get exponentially worse in a hurry, so it's generally more efficient to take a little time for preemptive action, rather than lose hours or days recovering from a full-blown sensory episode." He smiled gently. "When you get some training, it won't seem so intrusive. It will be second nature, like putting your shoes on before you go out the door." To Blair's relief, Ellison seemed to accept the explanation.

The success was short lived. Abruptly Ellison pushed away and struggled to his feet. "We don't have time for this. A headache isn't much compared to a couple thousand lives and a little child being tortured. We have to find that thing before they have a chance to use it."

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"Officer Connor, I have the files and the reader you requested. Where would you like them?"
Megan Connor looked up from the opposite end of the interrogation area. She'd commandeered one of the circular meeting tables and was surrounded by a jumble of archival material from a host of Provincial entities, including Law and Justice, Order and Protection, and Citizen Services. It was already chaos, but she hastily cleared a space. "Set it up right here. What took you so long? I made the request hours ago."

"I was informed that the you were otherwise occupied with the medical staff." The young man, a member of the Major Incident support staff, shuffled uncomfortably under Connor's severe gaze.

It had been a long day, and Connor was in no mood for lame excuses. "Getting a few bandages doesn't bring an important investigation to a halt. I certainly shouldn't have to chase you down for a simple archive retrieval."

"I apologize. It won't happen again." With nervous hands, he set up the reader and began entering vid cartridges. "Is there anything else I can get you? Captain Taggart indicated that all further requests be handled without delay. He seemed particularly concerned that you stop for a meal."

"Taggart should remember this is a security organization, not preschool," Connor snapped. The man made no move to leave, and she realized it was pointless to try to subvert Taggart's well-meant intentions. "A sandwich please, and a pot of tea."

"Captain Taggart mentioned you favored the occasional sweet."

"Fine. Then check back to see if I need any additional records pulled. And don't be late."

By the time he reached the doors, she was already engrossed in the newly delivered reader and its trove of information. After enduring the regrettable but necessary medical treatment, she'd spent hours reexamining the original Ventriss case documentation. Despite all their efforts, Major Incident had never quite built a prosecutable case against Ventriss. The young man seemed extremely aware of what constituted incriminating evidence. Yet one mention of Sandburg, and their slippery quarry discarded all previous caution. They could certainly charge him for violating her person, considering they would have ironclad vid evidence. Connor, however, wanted more. Brad Ventriss should suffer the penalties for his earlier transgressions, and Blair Sandburg just might give them the leverage to tie all their loose ends into a coherent case.

Finding a connection between the two men was proving difficult. Blair Sandburg himself was an unexpected enigma. Before appearing at Rainier Provincial University at the shockingly young age of sixteen, he had none of the usual records of a provincial citizen; no public academy education, no enrollment in health enhancement programs, no art or physical enrichment participation, no youth service hours. His University admittance was solely based a birth register entry, confirming citizenship, and indicating one parent, Naomi Sandburg, combined with eye-popping test scores.

The trail became clearer after University enrollment. Sandburg had blazed through the standard curriculum, and pursued advanced studies in Anthropology while maintaining dual enrollment in an early placement program for Guide Accreditation. Records from Rainier indicated that his professors regarded him highly, and expected him to pursue a successful career in academia. Then at the last moment, to the surprise of the senior faculty, he abruptly accepted full Guide Accreditation, turning down a previously accepted position on a prestigious research team with Dr. Eli Stoddard. Even Connor, recently arrived in the province, recognized Stoddard's name. Eli Stoddard served prominently as a governmental advisor, specializing in Sentinel-Guide issues, at both the Provincial and Continental level. Current University personnel reported that Sandburg graduated as a Guide of the highest caliber, and had been paired with a sentinel of elite status and skill.

And there the trail went cold. How did a young citizen, with such clear giftedness and achievement,
end up six years later taking temp jobs from the Guide Placement Center and off-the-books money at the University for work far below his obvious skills?

After Sandburg’s certification and pairing, he disappeared again. Connor could find only one official reference bearing his name, in an unlikely source, admittance to Cascade’s Provincial Medical Center with an unusually incomplete reference to severe injury. The medical files were under seal by none other than the Guide Services, specifically, the Guide Standards Commission.

The Guide Services didn't give up their secrets without a fight. Connor had been battling to overcome a never-ending list of delays and obstructions. Not that the agency had prevailed, as evidenced by the recently delivered reader and files. She was confident that somewhere, hidden in the newly available files, was the link that tied the two men together, and that the unlikely connection would provide Major Incident with the means to bring Ventriss to account.

Rubbing fitfully at the thin scar line across her brow, the remains of the gash inflicted by Ventriss' thugs, she began to read.

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They were back in the servants' passages. Blair initially deferred to Ellison's expertise. Ellison's strategy was to search a few specific locations, relying on his youthful memories of the estate. So far, the results were not encouraging. As the search continued, Blair realized it was time to insist on a revised plan. Ellison was correct. They were operating on borrowed time. The more energy he expended scrambling through the estate, the fewer reserves he had to keep his sensory network under control. Despite Ellison's misgivings and the size of the area they were trying to search, sentinel hearing was the logical means of locating either the child or the technician working on the deadly sonic cannon.

"Stop a minute," Blair said, grabbing hold of Ellison's clothing to haul the man back.

Ellison whirled on him, fists clenched. "We don't have time to stop and fool around! If you can't keep up, just wait here."

Blair's temper snapped. "I can keep up just fine. You're not thinking straight. You're wasting the one great advantage you have."

"Forget the sentinel crap. It's just a problem. We can start working a grid. We'll find it."

"How big is this place? Like you said, time isn't on our side. A systematic search will take too long. You can use your senses."

"For the love of -"

"Give me three minutes. Please."

Staring icily, Ellison dropped his hands to his side. "You win. Three minutes. No more."

Blair pulled him to sit on the second stair tread. He settled himself on the landing, facing Ellison, grasping each hand in his own. "We're going to focus on hearing. You managed to regulate it earlier. Close your eyes, try to completely relax. I'm going to talk you through it. Focus is everything."

After a scathing look, Ellison reluctantly closed his eyes. Annoying, but at least he was trying. "Listen to my voice," Blair said, slipping into the gentle, rhythmic tones of a working guide. "Open your hearing. Imagine a sphere, slowly growing larger."
Ellison gave a tiny nod. Blair considered his strategy. They could search for Kincaid. Ellison said he knew that voice, but Kincaid wouldn't necessarily stay with the cannon during repairs. Besides, Ellison clearly recognized him as an adversary, and Blair needed him to maintain an element of calm.

The technician was just another adult male voice. Ellison wouldn't have enough input to separate that voice from the multitude of other male, adult voices. No, the little girl was the key. Her voice would stimulate inbred sentinel instincts to protect, and would be distinct compared to the other occupants of the estate. "Good. We're expanding the bubble, very slowly. Find the child. Her voice is there. She might be crying. She's frightened. Discard what you don't want and move on."

Ellison's grip tightened and his head tipped.

"That's it. She's there. Above or below? Find the direction." Then Blair took a chance. "Imagine your vision following the path of sound. Where is she?"

Ellison gasped and his eyes flew open.

"Below. Almost right below us, a couple of floors at least."

Banks recognized the look of triumph on Brown's face. "What have you got?"

"We found them. We're sure of it." He tapped a code into a small square device, set in on the ground and stepped away. A hologram of the estate sprung into three-dimensional relief. "The surveillance guys beat the estate level screening. They've identified certain members of the Brigade with physical signatures on file. They can't get all of them, but that's to be expected. Their membership is pretty fluid." Brown tapped another code. Pale red figures populated the hologram, some moving, some stationary. "Nice coup for them, since the Brigade is pretty good at countermeasures. The large group on the second floor they're pretty sure is the estate staff being kept under guard. No one's moving in or out. Then they noticed something. A couple of hours ago they picked up a Gemini."

Ellison was pressed up against the wall, listening intently. Blair stood behind him, hand clasped around Ellison's nearest elbow. They'd threaded their way down one floor and to a small room near the center of the estate. He spoke softly into Blair's ear. "One guy and the little girl."

"How do you know?" Blair whispered. Sentinels with little experience had difficulty interpreting the input they got. Questioning could often aid overall accuracy, even if the query was ridiculously generic.

"Heartbeat. I can hear two heartbeats. One fast and shallow, one slow." Ellison's eyes widened in shock. "Can I do that?"
"Yes," Blair said, nodding in encouragement. "Of course you can."

"Okay. Weird. She's sniffling, scared out of her wits. And I hear snoring."

"Definitely not the little one."

"Got that right. Sounds like a damn warthog." Ellison pushed away from the wall. His hand was poised over a palm-sized lever visible in a recessed niche. "I'm going in. If there's any resistance, push this down and get out of here. Go back to the servants' quarters and lie low."

"Wait! Don't go!" Blair hissed.

But Ellison was gone.

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After mining the Guide Services reader files for hours, Megan Connor found it. "I'll have every last one of you up on obstruction charges," she snarled softly. "Damn your devious, double-dealing, black hearts. I've got you cold."

If she hadn't seen the original birth registry, she would have missed it. The key was Blair "Jacob" Sandburg. After poring through Guide Services candidates of appropriate age and gender to no avail, she finally noticed an odd subgroup. Unlike the other thousands of candidate entries, these were referenced under the single name, Jacob, and sealed under the highest levels of encryption.

Really, amateurs shouldn't dabble in these areas, not when an official security operation was in progress. Attaching the encryption module to the reader, Connor began selecting possible subversion codes. On the eighth try, less than ten minutes later, all was laid bare. She began with those mysteriously sealed medical files, the demarcation line between Sandburg's successful, officially sanctioned life which launched him as Accredited, paired Guide and his later existence, unpaired and in the shadows.

Connor inhaled a sharp breath as she read. Sandburg had been stunned twice at maximum level, then severely beaten, nearly to the edge of death. Stun devices were only legal for the official security forces. That alone should have been sufficient to produce an arrest and conviction of Sandburg's assailant. Instead, the Guide Services sidestepped the Law and Justice investigation, placed Sandburg in isolation, and sealed the records for an extended course of treatment. Odd. Nowhere in the shockingly long list of procedures and reconstructive measures was mention of his sentinel. It was common practice for the healthy member of a sentinel-guide pairing to attend the ill or injured partner, often staying in the treatment room for days or months. No, in Sandburg's case, his paired sentinel had simply vanished.

So many questions. Had the sentinel been killed outright in the attack? Was that the reason for Sandburg's unpaired status? That made no sense. Bereaved guides or sentinels were encouraged to pair again. If they declined to do so, they were highly sought in advisory capacities. Connor pursued this new tack until she selected a previously rejected registry of disciplinary action. And there, again, she discovered the elusive Jacob.

Megan Connor was a tough, no-nonsense, impartial member of the Security Forces on two different continents. She'd never met Blair Sandburg, but the fact that Taggart, after a brief encounter, held the man in high regard was endorsement enough. What she read in the disciplinary file was heart breaking. Blair Sandburg, Senior Accredited Guide, had been injured by his own sentinel in a savage, unprompted attack, the final, crowning episode in a relationship fraught by repeated incidents of sentinel misconduct. Reading through the list of offenses, Connor was at a loss to understand why
Sandburg had stayed beyond the first month. After the stun attack and beating, the pairing was officially severed by the Guide Standards Commission in a ruling that emphatically cleared Sandburg of any wrongdoing. The sentinel was censured, meaning that Guide Services would assign no guide for the lifetime to the sentinel.

If there was no misconduct, why had Sandburg been shoved off into an underground existence after such an egregious attack? And why was the sentinel not rotting in detention or a behavioral rehab facility?

Another tangent, but this time Connor was certain the information she sought would be shielded by more than just encryption. Someone, or some entity, had gone to great lengths to protect the sentinel from both prosecution and exposure. To that end, although blameless, Sandburg, despite the official ruling of innocence, had been essentially treated as the guilty party. Eventually, she found the tracks of another hearing, buried so deep that the significant names had not been disguised. Two prominent individuals had been called to testify, one in Sandburg's defense, the other advocating for the sentinel. The archive recorder had been sloppy, or assumed that no one had the ability or desire to burrow this deep.

The witnesses were listed by name. Megan Connor allowed herself a surge of elation. She finally had a concrete, in-the-flesh, lead. How fortunate that interrogation, friendly or not, was one of her specialties.

She called up a transport for immediate service, with a triumphant smile on her face. This was the stage of investigation she lived for, the solving of the puzzle, the narrowing of focus onto guilty. Cursing her plastocast and her aching muscles courtesy of Ventriss' ungentle attentions, she hastened to the transport departure bay.

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"Impressive takedown, Ellison. If you decide to get really mad at me, let me know. You'd probably catch me, but I'd at least like the opportunity to run."

Ellison looked up from the Brigade guard he was expertly trussing. "Always the smart ass. This is what I do."

Blair could testify to that. Ellison's move through the servant's door, across the room, followed by some sort of headlock that dropped his quarry in a silent heap had been swift, sure - almost elegant - a controlled, measured violence. "I don't know, tough guy. I'm pretty quick." Blair flashed a grin. For the first time since he'd come to Ellison's side in that wretched water system, the man had moved with true confidence and dispatch.

Ellison tied off the last bond with a flourish, thoroughly gagging his captive. "Never happen. As we say in the Services, pack a lunch, because you'll have to run a long way." Grabbing the collar of the trussed man, he dragged him a few feet to unceremoniously thrust him into a cabinet. "And quit calling me Ellison. As much time as we've spent together, make it Jim. I insist."

Blair turned his attention to the child. "Can you sit still, for me, Lana? I'm just going to help Jim with the bad man." The girl in his arms hiccupped and gave a timid nod. Blair gathered an armful of cushions off the elegant furniture in the room and crammed them around their prisoner. "If he comes to, he can kick all he wants and not create much noise. Keep them off our tail for as long as possible."

"Good thought. For a civilian, you think like one of us." Ellison closed the cabinet door and wedged it shut with a heavy chair and ottoman. "Can you carry the girl?" Blair scooped Lana up and
whispered in her ear. "We're taking you to a secret place. A place you can wait for your Daddy, okay? But you have to be really, really quiet. Will you promise?"

Lana managed another nod, but she was clearly still frightened. It wouldn't take much to send her into a round of sobbing that would betray their presence. If there were just some way to reassure her. He searched the furniture, the shelves for some item to focus her attention. The elegant knick-knacks that filled the room didn't hold much promise, but he settled on an carved stone figurine. His expertise from another life identified it as Native American, probably Athabascan, very old and very valuable. He had a moment. Ellison - Jim was busy disabling the hinges on the main entrance door, anything to slow down their inevitable discovery. "See this, sweetie? Blair said, pressing the carving into her hand.

"It's a doggy."

Blair had to smile at her childish sweetness. "It's a special kind of doggy called a wolf. Wolves are very protective of their little ones, and this one's going to take care you. So you can close your eyes, hug him close and nothing bad is going to happen."

"Chief, I'm done. We need to go. Can you manage?"

Blair gathered Lana into his arms and slipped through the passage door. With a soft swish, the mechanism closed, plunging them back into the feeble half-light from the pulse lamp. Ellison immediately darted away, retracing their path up the stairs. Blair clambered behind, trying to match the pace of the man leading them through the maze.

Their destination was the same servant's garret. At Blair's direction, Ellison settled on the floor to listen. The room had an L shape, and Blair carried the child to the window at the end of the L, as far as possible from the door. He padded the wide, bare window ledge with his coat, set her down, and bundled her up.

Blair judged Lana to be seven or eight. Despite the risk, he would have to leave her here alone. Ellison couldn't search for the sonic cannon without a guide. No matter what her promises, a child her age was bound to get bored and start exploring. That eventuality they absolutely couldn't afford. He needed something to distract her. Digging into the backcarrier, he pulled out a small notebook and pencil. "Lana, I'm going to give you a very important job. I want you to sit in this window and be very still. Every time you see something new, I want you to write it down. Can you do that?"

"Uh huh. Like that big tr'port under the tree?"

"Exactly like that," Blair said, patting her hand. "Remember how we hid the bad man in the cupboard? If the other bad men find him, they might come looking for you."

"To catch me again?" Lana began to tear up. "They were mean. I don't like them."

"I don't like them either, but this is a secret place and your wolf is here to watch. No matter what, don't leave this room. Even if someone calls your name, don't answer them. This is really, really important."

"Like hide and seek. When your friends try to trick you into coming out."

"Exactly like that. This is a safe place, and we need you to stay here where we can find you, so we can come back and take you home. Now I have to go help Jim look for your Daddy, so you be good, and watch like a big girl."

At the last moment, he turned back. After all, what could it hurt? It would just be one more engaging
thing to do. He pulled a Continental gold coin, a good luck piece from - well, that didn't matter. "I have another big job for you. Every few minutes, I want you to tap on the window, very softly, just like this." He demonstrated, tapping the metal against the glass ever so softly; three fast, three slow, three fast.

Lana smiled. "Fun," she whispered.

"Yes, fun, but very, very quiet. And when it gets dark, curl up right here and go to sleep." He tucked the coat in around her, and left her the last two energy bars. "I have to go now, okay?"

He pressed a kiss to her forehead and went to join Ellison.

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The transport was swift, automatically shunting other civilian and government traffic to the sides to allow the higher priority vehicle through. Connor tried to rest by propping up the plastocast, hoping that would relieve the throbbing in her leg. Obviously, she'd far exceeded her rehabilitation guidelines.

The home of retired Provincial Minister Eli Stoddard lay at the center of a quiet, refined neighborhood reserved for upper status Rainier University employees. Connor considered it meritorious that the man had never deserted his original housing assignment as his fortunes rose to the governmental level. Before she'd hobbled her way to the front door, a tall, white-haired Stoddard was already awaiting her.

"Investigator Connor, please come in. I understand you're on loan to us from Austro-Pacific." He grinned mischievously at her surprise. "Even in retirement, I have excellent sources. Please join me in the study. I have some excellent tea and sweet cakes awaiting us."

Connor couldn't help but be charmed, and gladly accepted his offer. Stoddard escorted her into a comfortable first floor room, lined with shelves of books. He waved toward the selves with an airy hand. "Yes, I've never overcome the love for the printed page, even though that makes me multiple centuries out of date. My graduate students tease me unmercifully, although they never give me credit for my contemporary vid skills." A more typical data terminal and vid reader did, in fact, perch on a small desk in the corner. Four high backed, leather armchairs were drawn up around a low table, decorated with beautiful wood inlay, upon which rested a tray with the promised tea and sweets.

Connor accepted the warm tea with gratitude and an audible sigh. "I apologize for arriving with such short notice."

"Nonsense, S.I. Connor. I live a quiet life these days. A bit of excitement and a new face is always welcome. You have some questions, I understand."

Connor had debated on the trip over how to handle this interview. Something about this man suggested that she could be direct and frank. "Yes, sir. We have an open investigation that seems to connect with an individual you have some knowledge of. Guide Services has been less than forthcoming. We were hoping that you could fill in some areas which are unclear."

"You do realize that I still function as an Advisor Emeritus for Guide Services, and a lesser position with Sentinel Services."

"I do. Your assistance can be shielded under privilege if you wish."

"Not necessary. I'm too old to have much fear of reprisal, the rare blessing of retirement. I can act as
my own agent. Ask away, young woman. I'm sure we'll find a means of accommodation."

Connor chose to proceed without preamble. "Please tell me about Blair Sandburg."

Stoddard closed his eyes, as if in great pain. "Is he dead, then?" His face crumbled. "I loved that boy like a son. He didn't deserve the pain and rejection he was given." His bright blue eyes glittered with unshed tears. "Tell me the circumstances. I'm not being an idle gossip. Please understand, I would like to make the arrangements personally. He'll be interred in our family crypt, with people who adored him."

Connor frowned. "No, sir. Blair Sandburg is very much alive. Was there some reason you expected such news?"

Stoddard's face reflected relief at her news, combined with true anguish. "Blair Sandburg is a tragedy of the first order. You must be aware of the hearings, or you would not be here." Connor nodded. "After the hearings, he refused to see me, under some misguided notion that to do so might place me at risk. He's suffered horribly, bearing a stigma he in no way deserves. He's a pale shadow of his former self. For a guide of his sensitivity, living in limbo has emotional and physical consequences." He looked down at his long fingers, wrapped around his china teacup. "He's steadfastly refused any help I, and others, might have been able to offer."

"Why was he in such dire straits, sir? Nothing I've uncovered makes any sense, but I'm sure he's the key to our case."

"Politics and money, my girl, the twin plagues of society in any age. His sentinel should have received the harshest penalties. Blair should have been immediately placed in some useful role, with all the resources and privileges of his status as a Senior Accredited Guide at his disposal. It's a travesty of the highest order."

"Why was the sentinel allowed to escape prosecution?"

"The young woman was, and is, a beautiful, willful, spoiled child with aristocratic heritage. Her parents died when she was quite young. She was fostered, with shocking indulgence, I might add, in the highest circles of Cascade's society. Her childhood records indicated she was talented, erratic, with a not well-hidden streak of sadism. Had someone intervened firmly, her deviant tendencies might have been redirected. At a minimum, Sentinel Services could have placed constraints on her placement with a guide. Provided supervision. Something."

"Instead, she was tutored privately and trained as a sentinel in an exclusive sensory academy in Europe. The danger she represented to any guide, and society at large, was actively concealed by her extended family. Credits changed hands, and there was clear evidence her scores were tampered with before they were sent from Europe. Once Sentinel Services accepted the falsified scores, she was not required to provide any additional information."

"That's highly unusual, isn't it?"

"In the extreme, and it's not only unusual, in my opinion, it's criminal. If Sentinel Services had been actively involved, any testing would have revealed her instability. Ultimately, her previous transgressions would have been uncovered. It only happened because she was individually sponsored by Rainier's current Chancellor, Marie Edwards."

Connor imagined another puzzle piece sliding into place. "The other witness at the hearing."

"Just so. When Blair was injured so severely, Edwards actively tried to squelch any inquiry."

Fortunately, the situation was so dire she was overruled and I was called in for consultation. I personally investigated the case on behalf of Guide Services. I had to resort to Provincial and Continental judicial authority to uncover her early records.

Stoddard vaulted out of his chair, pacing as he spoke. "Alicia should never have been placed with a guide. Edwards' sponsorship was a sham, bought and paid for with sizable donations to the University." Stoddard's demeanor changed dramatically. He was angry, virtually outraged. "Edwards shamelessly accepts gifts of patronage which are poorly disguised bribes. Despite the clear evidence, she still managed to influence the decision of the Sentinel Standards Commission. When the disciplinary hearing resulted in such a travesty, I resigned from the University in protest. Unfortunately, I was able to provide no relief to Blair."

"Her activities have escaped notice?" Connor asked. Official corruption was a major responsibility of Major Incident, considered equivalent with armed insurrection. Captain Banks would pursue this connection relentlessly if it could be substantiated.

Stoddard's expression became hard and determined. "Thus far, her powerful friends have both protected and used her for their own ends. It is academic dishonesty of the highest order, and, no doubt, criminal conduct. No one within the University system has been able to call her to account."

He rose from the chair and retrieved a carved wooden box. "This is your lucky day, young woman. This box, and others I have in my possession, contain all the sordid details. It only lacks the official muscle to push it forward. Muscle I'm afraid I lacked, other than empty protest. May I finally be able to do right by Blair, and the honorable callings of Guide and Sentinel."

Connor placed her hands on the smooth wood, moved by the passion in his voice. She had no doubt about his veracity. "I need names, sir. The name of the sentinel, and of her protector."

"May the ancient gods curse them all. Alicia Bannister was the fosterling and favorite of House Ventriss."

"I can't do it!" Ellison slumped back against the wall, heels of his hands pressed against his temples. "It doesn't work!"

Blair slipped his hands underneath Ellison's desperate pressure. "Jim, pay attention. Put your hands flat on your knees. Slow down your breathing. Concentrate on nothing outside your own body."

With firm fingertips he pressed Jim's temple, cheekbone and jaw. "Your head hurts because you're fighting yourself. Imagine a bright river. Let the pain and the tension flow out through your fingertips. That's right." For all his inexperience, Ellison seemed to follow directions better than most. Maybe it was the whole military, security training. Blair could visually observe Ellison's tension ease. His shoulders dropped, and he let out an involuntary sigh. "Better?"

"Better. I still have to find that cannon, Chief."

Blair inwardly noted the nickname, which Ellison had used several times. A good measure of his growing ease and confidence with a guide. Considering the difficulty most latent sentinels experienced, that was an extremely hopeful sign. Blair pushed away the regret that twisted in his gut.

He isn't yours. Help him and prepare him for his eventual pairing.

With effort, Blair forced himself back to the task at hand. "There are too many male voices for you to sort through. It requires way more training than you've got. We've got to narrow down the search area before we try your senses again. Can you predict what kind of place in this pile would be good
for a sonic cannon."

Ellison's voice lost all its frustration. For him, this was familiar ground. "Yeah. Exterior room. Upper level, but not necessarily roof level. The cannon needs a good, firm base. In this place, a marble floor would be ideal."

"And the servants' passages, they loop around each floor?"

Yeah." Ellison's voice sort of trailed off. His head canted slightly. He was listening again.

It was like watching a transport shift into hyper mode. Good. He'd moved from panic to productive action, which was pretty good for a rookie. With a light touch to Jim's elbow, Blair redirected his effort. "Don't try to do it from here. We'll go to the most likely floor, and start checking rooms. Besides hearing someone talk, what else associates with cannon? Some smell, or a distinctive sound? You're the one with the knowledge of weapons."

"They use massive amounts of power. Sometimes the focus prongs need cleaning, so there are solvents."

"Then you might be able to hear the hum from the power source. Smell is tricky, but searching for the solvent might work. Pick a floor and let's go."

They were getting better at this. Blair hooked a hand in Ellison's tunic and concentrated on mimicking his steps. When there was a pause, he brought his free hand to Ellison's shoulder, providing firm connection. Ellison probably didn't realize this was classic sentinel-guide grounding and support, but that was immaterial at this point. He would have a transition coach, followed by a training guide, and ultimately, his pair partner, who would take care of that.

They'd made so many loops through the old estate, Blair no longer had a viable directional sense. Ellison seemed to be able to pin down location effortlessly, but that was part of his occupational training. He made a turn off a stair landing - Blair wasn't sure which floor, but high - and began to pace purposefully, pausing by each passage door. After thirty seconds or so, Blair would urge him onward. No point in expending energy on point sources when what they needed was a broad survey.

Blair was so absorbed by the rhythm of movement, the moment of success caught him unawares.

"Here. It must be here. The power source sounds like a damn volcano."

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"Come on, Jacoby," Connor said irritably. "Universities aren't the Provincial Credit Repository. Crack the archive shield wall and get on with it."

The Network Specialist glared at her, and she cheerfully ignored him. She was so close to linking the cases, she could justify being a bit obnoxious. After all, the Province paid the man to do this, and she was in a hurry.

Minutes dragged by. Connor paced silently behind the seated specialist, peering over his shoulder occasionally. If her presence got on his nerves, she didn't care. She wanted results, not comfort. At last he looked up and sighed, "Got it."

"Excellent. Place the evidence seal on the data transfer, and don't wander off. I may need you again."

"S.I. Connor, I have other duties," Jacoby said, still scowling.
"Not for anyone that outranks Taggart and Banks, or for a case that has higher priority than murder and assault," Connor retorted. "Now go to the break room and sit. The coffee's pathetic, but you'll survive. Just be there when I need you."

She dismissed him, barely registering his fading footsteps. Her vid screen began to flood with any Rainier University record pertaining to Brad Ventriss or Alicia Bannister. Using the extensive information from Eli Stoddard, she had a pretty good idea of what to look for.

As she hoped would be the case, the Ventriss clan had been a bit sloppy at the University level, counting on their bought and paid for Chancellor Edwards to deflect any difficult situations. With a Rosetta stone like Stoddard, their tracks were child's play to decode. Laid side by side with the disguised vid records from Guide Placement, the chronology was transparent.

After Sandburg's pairing with Alicia Bannister, trouble cropped up almost immediately. Sandburg filed incident reports with Guide Services, which were forwarded to Sentinel Services, which made the routine referrals to Rainier for additional sentinel coursework. As the severity of infractions escalated, individual retraining and counseling was prescribed. Each time, the Rainier remedial programs were displaced with independent training supervised by none other than Edwards, who wasn't even certified as a Guide Trainer. Alicia Bannister would have been removed from pairing long before the assault without Edwards' constant interference.

In an interesting parallel, Lord-Elect Brad Ventriss had been an indifferent student in Rainier's introductory programs at the time of the Sandburg-Bannister pairing. Connor found at least three notations made by professors that Ventriss was benefitting from tutoring provided by Sandburg. Two years later, as the sentinel-guide pairing neared its death spiral, a carefully worded communication between Sandburg and his mentor Stoddard referenced a cessation of assistance to young Ventriss, indicating that Sandburg was being pressured into activities he considered increasingly inappropriate.

The aftermath wasn't difficult to piece together. After severance, a barely healed Sandburg was released from medical treatment, with the Ventriss clan and Edwards actively subverting what should have been a prompt reinstatement to his proper station in society. Although Guide Services and the Standards Commission had officially cleared Sandburg, political expediency apparently won out. Unwilling to properly advocate for one of their own, Guide Services allowed him to slip into a netherworld of innocent but presumed guilty.

Megan stared off into space, trying to remember everything she ever learned about severance. Security personnel were trained as part of emergency medical assistance to provide damping drugs to disrupted pairs, but beyond that, her level of knowledge was sketchy. She did know the aftereffects of severance often persisted for a decade or longer, particularly if there was no subsequent pairing. Sandburg would have been extraordinarily fragile. Instead of being nurtured and supported, he'd been cast aside with virtually no income to support himself and little contact with the Guide Services. It was a miracle he'd survived.

More importantly, why hadn't he protested? Stoddard would have helped. She was missing something.

She easily accessed Sandburg's credit accounts. Accepting positions through Guide Placement would have been doubly wrenching for a guide recovering from severance, yet Sandburg had done so. Deposits were sporadic, barely enough to provide housing or sustenance. Gradually deposits increased from other sources; work at Rainier's Archive Center, private academic tutoring, part-time employment for a data entry firm. A group of deposits had no notation of source but were heavily clustered around critical periods in Rainier's academic calendar, such as final examinations and project submission windows. Connor had a fairly good idea what those deposits represented.
Circumstances had driven Sandburg into violation of his academic honor, even though he had clearly resisted such activities earlier with Ventriss the younger.

Connor smiled. Sandburg hadn't gone down without a struggle. Every major academic project or paper Ventriss submitted during his Guide Accreditation matched a substantial deposit of credit in Sandburg's meager account, the amount often triple what Sandburg usually deposited. Ventriss was dependent on Sandburg, and the price was very dear. Connor believed in law, rule of order, and doing right even when difficult, but she had to admit Sandburg's actions fulfilled her sense of justice. Sandburg was surviving against all possible odds, yet had the grit to insist a high premium from the aristocratic family who had so abused him. No wonder Ventriss had flown into such a virulent rage.

And in that hatred lay his weakness, the leverage they'd lacked for an earlier conviction. She needed to speak with Taggart. Connor expected Taggart would object strenuously, and they would need Sandburg's cooperation. What she had in mind was risky, but considering Sandburg's misuse by the Ventriss family and their minions, the star-crossed young man just might consent.

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"Captain, we've got it!" Brown and Rafe practically fell over each other in the haste to give their report.

"This better be good," Banks growled. "God knows, nothing else in this operation is moving forward."

"We didn't agree to another extension of negotiations, did we, Captain?" Rafe blurted out.

"That question's above your pay grade," Taggart said severely. Despite the tone of voice, his facial expression telegraphed a different sentiment.

Reassured, Rafe broke into an apologetic half grin. "But?"

"We're still sitting here in the rain, aren't we?" Both younger officers snickered. Taggart was usually the picture of propriety, and rarely resorted to sarcasm unless severely annoyed.

"Well maybe this will brighten your day," Rafe said. "We're picking up a tap code from one of the upstairs windows."

"What?" Banks snarled. "You're sure?"

"Positive. The surveillance group confirms it."

"Did they ping for a response?" Taggart asked.

Brown hesitated. "Well, that's a problem. No one seems to receive our response ping, but someone's repeatedly giving the tap. And it's sporadic, not machine generated."

"It's not definitive, Simon," Taggart said. "The higher ups would never go for it."

"Look, Captain," Rafe countered. "Jim uses those tap codes as a joke all the time. He'd expect us to recognize it as a personal signature."

"I agree," Brown added. "It's Ellison to a tee. Realistically, would we expect him to receive and respond under the circumstances? Let's just say those nutcases found him, and he's under watch. He'd have to be covert. Or he could have delegated to someone, like Sandburg, maybe. He wouldn't have had time to teach him all the ins and outs."
"Can you pinpoint a location?" Banks asked tersely.

"Yes, sir." The expression of both younger men brightened. As Taggart said, they were all tired of waiting.

"Then put some eyes on it. Find out what's in that room and calculate the range. Rafe, commandeer a flitter on my authorization. Hit the nearest supply area. Brown, find me a stickee."

Taggart quirked an eyebrow. "Extending the perimeter, Simon?"

"Yeah? Let Evans have his tea party with the Brigade. I'm tired of sitting out here doing nothing. Let's go get our boys."

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"How did people ever live this way?" Blair hissed.

Ellison neatly closed the peephole and answered in the same whisper. "This is an upstairs sitting room. Only the most trusted, personal staff of the Lord and Lady would serve up here. It was part of their job to check before entering a room so the family wasn't interrupted at an inopportune moment."

"I still think it's crazy."

"It was and is," Ellison whispered firmly. "I can hear the guard outside the door. The tech is alone, about ready to lose his mind. He can't get the power stable, and he's worried about his little girl. You have her bracelet?"

Blair held up the dainty string of yellow beads. Proof of life, Ellison had called it. Reasonable, but the concept made Blair shudder. Kincaid using a child hostage had to be the definition of evil.

Ellison produced his weapon, another aspect Blair didn't really want to consider. "Your job is the tech. Keep him quiet and get him out. Make sure he knows we're here to help him and Lana. I'll bar the door and disable that cannon. On three."

Blair tensed as Ellison signaled in the dim light - one finger, two, then three -

Again, Ellison was astonishingly fast and smooth, moving with a surety Blair couldn't help but admire. When the kneeling tech looked up, Blair gestured for silence. At least his appearance was reassuring. He certainly didn't look like a member of the Patriot Brigade. He came forward, holding the bracelet stretched across his fingers in plain sight. "She's safe, we have her hidden. Come with us! We're getting you out of here." He tugged the man to his feet, steering him toward their escape route.

Ellison had wedged the door closed with furniture, and was standing over the cannon, looking a bit perplexed. The cannon's sleek, deadly looking sides didn't reveal an obvious means of disabling it.

The tech had turned back. "The cannon is under hand and voiceprint lock," he whispered. "We can't tamper with it directly, or I would have done it. The thing's immoral. If you want to stop it, the power source is the only way."

Ellison suddenly stiffened. Even Blair could hear the tramp of footsteps down the hall. The tech panicked. Obviously, they truly were out of time. Blair pushed the man towards the safety of the passageway.

"Sandburg! Give me a hand!" Ellison was trying to lift the power supply. Blair dashed over and
grabbed hold. He wasn't sure what they were doing. Was Ellison trying to steal the power supply? Then their direction made clear what Ellison had in mind. It made sense. They were four stories up, it was quick and the results would be - definitive.

With a heave and a shattering crash, they pitched the bulky, box-like object through the elegant paned window. It bounced off the estate walls to land below with a reverberating crunch. Blair leaned out the window for a look. Metallic debris was sprayed in all directions. Of course, the noise was a problem. Footsteps were pounding in their direction, obviously having heard the commotion. The obstruction at the door would give them a few moments, but not much more. "I thought we were trying to be sneaky and quiet," Blair quipped.

"Plans change." Ellison shoved him towards the passage, and gave Blair a wicked grin. "I can't wait to see what that ass Lord Plummer thinks of my little renovation. I always did want to break things in this place. It was kind of fun."

The door panel whooshed closed behind them.

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"What the - Captain, you'd better come see this!"

Banks joined Brown at the far-viewer - "The Eyes" - as it was referred to in the service. "Came from one of the upper floors," Brown said excitedly. "It looks like someone heaved it through the window."

"Taggart. Come take a look at this. What is that thing?"

Brown was hastily scanning up to the point where the spectacular crash originated. "Captain, that's Sandburg - and Ellison - at the window. I'm sure of it."

Taggart was already examining the wreckage with his own viewer, which was a necessary part of his bomb defusing duties. "Power source. Something pretty damn big." He glanced at Banks with undisguised apprehension. "I'd say heavy ordinance. These guys aren't negotiating, Simon. They're getting ready to attack." His mouth tweaked with amusement. "I'd say Ellison just altered their plans. That's one way to negotiate."

Banks was already barking into the command channel. "You heard me! Major offensive weapon! That's right, Ellison disabled it, but he's in there without backup. We have visual confirmation. No, no doubt. We need to move now." He turned to the small group gathered around him. "Where's Rafe? I want that stickee on the original window where the tap code originated."

"Captain, Ellison left the window, but there's a lot of activity in that area," Brown said. "Someone check the holo."

The three dimensional projection still glowed behind them. All attention was drawn to the movement of red figures, most of them rushing toward the fourth floor exterior room, easily identified with its shattered window. "Look," said Taggart. "There's our Gemini. Heading up, and it looks like they picked up a buddy."

"Ellison and Sandburg, without a doubt. Hard to tell if they freed a hostage or took one." Banks looked up as Rafe arrived at a dead run. The flitters could be seen just rising over the tree line.

"About time," Banks groused. "Tell the pilots to prep for immediate launch."

Between gasps, Rafe managed a, "Yes, sir!"
Banks gestured toward the holo. "Track the Gemini. If they go anywhere near the tap code room, fire that stickee. And Brown?"

"Sir?"

"Don't miss, son. Don't miss."

&&&&

They were pounding up the stairs, trying to run and talk at the same time. "Where's Lana? Is my little girl okay?"

Blair shoved the man firmly in the small of his back. "She's fine, but we need to move. Follow Jim. I'm Blair."

"Sean Keiler. I don't have anything to do with -"

"We know. Jim heard."

"He's a sentinel?"

"Yeah. Just keep going."

Keiler didn't require a lot of urging. He bolted after Ellison, with Blair bringing up the rear. They reached the narrow servant's hallway and sealed the passageway. Ellison led the way toward their tiny hideaway. Lana, startled by their entrance, looked up with huge startled eyes. "Daddy," she cried, scrambling out of the window seat. Keiler was immediately engrossed with his daughter.

The commotion of shouting on the lower floors began to drift into Blair's hearing.

Ellison smirked. "Kincaid just discovered we messed up his little toy. Too bad, so sad."

"They'll be searching for us with a vengeance." Unable to keep the panic out of his voice, Blair asked, "What now?"

Ellison flashed him a wry grin. "I thought you had that part of the plan."

"Very funny." Blair looked across the room, where Keiler was comforting his child. "We can't let those two get -"

"No. We can't." Ellison seemed to gather himself, a grim determination settling across his features. "You stay with them. This is as good a place as any. I can draw them off."

Blair pulled at his elbow. "Not a chance," he snarled. "Self sacrifice isn't an option."

"You're a civilian, Chief. So are they. It's my job to keep you safe. I can keep them diverted until the good guys finally come in."

Blair lost his composure. "Don't be an idiot! You really think I can keep them safe? I haven't got a clue. You're worth more to us living and breathing than throwing yourself to the wolves."

"We don't have time to argue about this -"

"Then listen to me and quit wasting time. It won't work anyway." Blair pointed toward the Keilers. "They know those two are in the estate somewhere. We either get out or hide, and we need your sentinel senses to keep us out of harm's way. Besides, you're the one who knows the layout." He
swallowed hard, trying to keep his emotions out of his voice. "If it comes to it, I'm a better diversion than you are."

I have a lot less to live for…

And that internal admission brought a flash. Premonitions happened sometimes, part of the mild empathic component entwined in guide genetics. They were disconcerting, like existing simultaneously in a parallel universe. He hadn't had one since Alicia, seeing himself strangling and choking in his own blood, her crazed laughter beating down on him along with blow after blow.

That one had very nearly come true.

In a weird, dual reality he saw Ellison notice and frown, calling his name. He couldn't answer. In vivid clarity, he saw, felt himself slipping from a great height, clawing fruitlessly at the air, the wind roaring through his ears, the ground rushing up to shatter his body. After this brief window of vibrancy with Ellison, so soon to end, it was almost a relief, an end to the bleak years that had depleted his soul after Alicia.

A moist sounding splat jolted him to awareness and ended their debate. They both whirled toward the sound, Ellison cringing from the abrupt assault of an unfamiliar noise on his hearing. Before Blair could process what he was seeing, Ellison was scrabbling at the window. "A stickee! They know we're here! Get over here and help me."

He pulled the gooey mass from the outside of the window. Blair tried to help disentangle the unfamiliar objects. Obviously, this was a learned skill he didn't possess. Ellison was already activating a com unit, which crackled to life. The conversation was distorted with static, but enlightening.

"Ellison. Do you read? Repeat, do you read?"

"Banks. What's your situation?"

"One child, two adult male civilians. Captain, they have a sonic cannon. We disabled the power supply."

"Nice touch. A bit dramatic."

"Well, it seemed okay at the time. Captain, it's gonna get a bit hot in here in a minute."

"Try for the roof. We have rescue flitters on standby."

"Copy."

Keiler already had Lana bundled tight. Ellison handed both him and Blair a palm-sized black oval. "Security-level stun pods. The civilian cartridges are pinpricks compared to these. They're directional, about a three hundred degree arc. Max strength the closer you are, but arms-length is best. Any closer and you'll catch some of the pulse yourself. Should give you two or three solid pulses."

"Those animals aren't touching my little girl again," snarled Keiler. "I'll kill them with my bare hands first."

"Evade if you can," Ellison said firmly. "A fight only slows us down. Speed is our friend." He glanced out the window. "Banks must have kicked someone's ass. Units are moving forward, and the flitters are up." They clustered by the door of their sanctuary, and Ellison continued with
instructions. "There's a transport bay on the roof." He stared pointedly at Keiler. "Your job is to get yourself and your little girl on the first flitter. Nothing else. Sandburg and I will only go after you are in the air."

Keiler clearly understood the implication. He nodded his agreement and began to whisper urgently to Lana. Blair noticed she had the carved wolf clasped tightly in her small hand.

Ellison pulled Sandburg off to the side. "Kincaid might try to run. He has a history of abandoning the troops to save his own skin. The roof may be a little crowded when we get there."

"We'll be okay," Blair said, trying to sound more confident than he felt. They were going up, and the frightening image of plunging to his death nearly overwhelmed him.

Gesturing to Keiler to wait, he said, "Stay till I check." Once they were outside the room, Blair darted around and planted himself in the path to the servant's passageway. "Ground your senses, and pay attention to me." Ellison tried to shove past him, and Blair neatly sidestepped. "Something knocks you on your ass, I'm dead." He held out his hands, and Ellison reluctantly placed his palms on Blair's own.

"Prosecutor Sanchez, we're asking for a warrant of suspicion, not a full Hearing of Justice presentation."

"S.I. Connor, I can appreciate your eagerness. I worked the original case with Captain Taggart, and appreciate the difficulties. No one wants to incarcerate Bradley Ventriss more than I do, but his high status remains a formidable challenge. Unless we have a near-perfect case, he'll avoid justice again."

"No one's above the law," Connor said tartly.

"I would agree, but for some, the road to conviction is a bit steeper."

Connor shifted in her chair and tried to stifle her impatience. She'd spent extra time preparing her presentation to avoid just this scenario. "You have to admit, Minister Stoddard is a compelling witness. I would think his assertions are above reproach."

"Again, I would agree. If I were more certain of the testimony we would receive from Guide Services, the decision would be more clear-cut."

"Prosecutor Sanchez, you are in a position to compel their cooperation. They certainly won't be able to deny what is in their own records when Stoddard is sitting in the witness dock."

Sanchez closed the vid reader. She had a reputation as a proactive, assertive prosecutor, but she'd been burned once by this case already. Connor sensed she was going to choose to play it safe.

"S.I. Connor, I concur with your assessment. I officially accept your referral of the matter of Lord-Elect Bradley Ventriss and Blair Sandburg, citizen and Senior Accredited Guide. However, I intend to delay the register of Finding until I have met personally with Minister Stoddard and A.S.G. Sandburg."

Connor clenched her fists in irritation. She'd expected better. Taggart would be furious. Unfortunately, there was a very fine line between pressing Sanchez for action and alienating her entirely. "Ventriss may use the delay to his advantage. There may have been flags on the files I accessed."
Sanchez stood, clearly indicating an end to their conference. "I will make every effort to secure the pertinent evidence so the Finding, when it goes forward, is not impaired. Please schedule an appointment with Blair Sandburg as soon as he is available."

On this point, Connor felt it necessary to prod. "I trust you will schedule your conference with Minister Stoddard at the earliest opportunity."

"No, and on this point, I must remain unmoved, S.I. Connor. Approaching such a high ranking governmental personage would be provocative unless Sandburg's testimony makes the way clear." She gestured toward the door, just in case Connor hadn't gotten the earlier hint "Thank you for bringing this matter to our office. I wish you well with your continued investigations."

Connor hobbled out, sincerely wanting to kick Sanchez in the backside of her expertly tailored suit. Actually, if she managed to destroy the stupid cast in the bargain, it might be worth it.

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"Listen first. Keep everything low."

Ellison glared at him, but complied anyway.

"You should be able to hear the flitters," Blair said softly. "You might be able to focus your hearing directionally. Imagine turning your hearing like a cone, up and away."

Ellison nodded, with a tiny smile of satisfaction. "Incoming. And voices. We have company." Keiler joined them. He shifted Lana and displayed the stun mod in his palm. Ellison drew his service weapon again, infinitely more lethal than the stun pods. "Remember what I told you. Right behind us, and go for the flitter." He held up a clenched hand. "On three."

Blair bunched the back of Ellison's tunic in his hand, determined to stay close. His free hand held the stun mod activated and ready. He'd sworn to himself after Alicia he'd never again use any object as a weapon. The idea sickened him, but his sentinel, even though temporary, was his priority. No one was going to approach Ellison without resistance from him.

Ellison burst onto the roof, Blair stumbling in his wake. He had a bare moment to try to see everything at once. A tight group of men, faced away from them, their attention apparently drawn by the incoming flitters, which were swooping at high speed toward them over the trees. By any standards, he and Ellison were hopelessly outnumbered. The flitters were small. Several large, determined men could easily overwhelm them before they ever loaded their innocent civilians onboard.

With swiftness Blair couldn't hope to match, Ellison clubbed the nearest Brigade member just over the ear with his weapon, dropping the man bonelessly to the roof. He caught a second in mid-turn, and struck him hard enough to send him reeling to his knees. The rest wheeled to face them, their faces contorted first with surprise, then anger.

"Cascade Security! Drop your weapons!" Ellison's order rang through the air, echoing over the noise of the flitters. In the momentary pause that followed, time seemed to slow - Blair had a sense of watching himself from a great distance as the men sprang to the attack. Jim fired his weapon twice, bringing down two. Blair hurled himself sideways, away from the weapon's zone and in the direction of two more advancing from their right. As his shoulder connected with the chest of the nearest man, he pressed the stun pod, knowing with certainty that he would be too close to completely avoid the stun pulse. All three crashed together to the rooftop.
Blair's vision whited out. He blindly kicked toward the nearest body, hoping to inflict as much damage as possible. A sickening crunch followed by a howl of pain confirmed he'd been lucky. His vision cleared just enough to realize one man was down and still, a lucky hit from the stun pod. The other was writhing on his knees, hand to his face, with blood pouring from a shattered nose and mouth. Blair struggled unsteadily to his feet. The first flitter was struggling to get Lana and her father aboard. It wouldn't take a lot of interference to prevent a safe rescue. Regretting the necessity, Blair delivered the most punishing kick he could manage to the man on his knees. The effort nearly took Blair off his feet, but his target went down on his face and stayed there.

Ellison was exchanging blows with three men, with another standing off to the side. Ellison seemed to be temporarily holding his own, but superior numbers were going to tip the scales. Guessing from vaguely remembered news vid footage, one of the combatants was Kincaid. The onlooker, elegantly dressed and silver-haired had his back turned toward Blair. He was bending over, rummaging in a large black duffle which had been abandoned when he and Ellison had launched their attack.

Four targets, but the ones of immediate concern were the three ringing Ellison. If only the flitter would hurry! Blair pushed himself upright using a narrow, knee-high stone parapet that ran along the perimeter of the roof. Blair knew he didn't have the balance or speed for anything sophisticated, and he could be certain of only one additional stun pulse. He had to generate maximum damage and reduce the odds in Ellison's favor.

He chose the nearest broad back, gathered himself for a headlong rush and plowed forward. Raising the stun mod over his head, he struck savagely, connecting at the base of the man's neck. Blair pressed twice, delivering a double pulse in the vulnerable location.

Was that someone leaping from the flitter? His vision was gray and narrow, as if he were peering down a long tube. Blair was knocked sideways. He stumbled awkwardly, trying to stay on his feet. Without meaning to, he floundered in the direction of the onlooker he'd chosen to ignore. The man looked up from the bag he was searching. His lapel bore an elaborate insignia, twinkling in the sun with gems and gold. Just as Banks had suspected, here was Lord Plummer, actively aiding Kincaid.

Plummer surged to his feet, his hands clutching a long, wicked-looking stun rifle. Blair grabbed for it. Even if he couldn't wrestle it away, he could keep Plummer from aiming it at Ellison or one of the flitters. He latched on with both hands with grim determination. No matter what, Plummer was not getting this weapon free to turn on Ellison.

The man spun, dragging Blair in a wide arc. Blair stumbled in his wake, unable to catch himself and do anything other than hold on. Abruptly, Plummer changed direction, propelling Blair backwards. He felt something hard catch him at the back of the knees. He twisted, still holding onto the weapon with grim determination, hoping to pull Plummer down to his knees with him.

In one horrifying moment, he understood Plummer's intent. The man's momentum had propelled Blair to the parapet. He was crumpled across the narrow ledge, listing sideways, hanging precariously over open air. He scrabbled for a hold on the stone edge with one hand, refusing to completely relinquish his grip on the weapon.

He could hear shouting. Was Ellison safe? He couldn't see. Plummer, screaming in rage, mouthing words he couldn't understand, seesawed the weapon violently back and forth, breaking his hold. Unbalanced, he felt his body tip and roll over the edge. With exquisite slowness - or was it an infinitesimally small fraction of time - he knew the portent had become reality. He'd cheated death once with Alicia, but five fingers on crumbling stone edge wouldn't be enough to save him a second time.

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The clarity of their report, the eyes-on confirmation of Ellison's presence, Taggart's identification of the generator as weapons-related should have been definitive. Banks roared his protest when Provincial Security Director Evans dithered about sending an immediate coordinated assault on the estate. The man was far more concerned with covering his own errors that the safety of the men who served under him.

The rescue of Ellison and three civilians, however, was totally under his deployed unit's purview. He could confidently leave Taggart in charge of bringing more force in behind the initial penetration of two flitters. The first flitter, smaller and more mobile, took the lead at maximum speed. Their job was limited. Get the civilians, especially the child, off the roof. Disregarding normal protocol, Simon Banks chose the second, larger four-man flitter, and tasked himself with assisting Ellison.

Taggart and the others would follow as soon as more transportation could be secured. As the flitters rose in tandem, Banks looked back. Taggart's fist was raised in the "all go" salute, followed by an open-handed gesture toward the estate. The rest of his team would be right behind them.

Flitter rides, with so little between the passenger and open air, always brought a rush of anxiety mixed with anticipation. As his vehicle cleared the last set of trees, Banks could see a struggle transpiring on the rooftop. Ellison, obviously buying time for the civilians, had drawn the action toward the west corner of the roof. The telltale shimmer in the air indicated he'd already fired his weapon, and at least two men were down. He was still heavily outnumbered, and being pressed on all sides. Sandburg was nearby, entangled with two other Brigade members. The first flitter, hovering neatly over the east corner, was already loading a man and a child.

Banks slapped the elbow of his pilot. "We don't have much time. Go in hot. Drop me down in the middle if you have to."

"Covering fire, Captain?" the pilot asked. The four-man was fitted with ion pulse, up to the lethal level. Banks had the authority to order it, and to determine the lethality. He mentally tallied the combatants. Even with the most optimistic evaluation, including his impending contribution and counting Sandburg in as an auxiliary, which he definitely was not, the numbers were still easily two to one in favor of the Brigade.

"Authorized. Stay on max stun unless you see more than hand to hand. First sight of any weapon, take them out."

Banks didn't even have time to remind himself how much he hated jumping out of flitters before he was away, arcing down towards Ellison's opponents. Sometimes it was a pain to be "big and tall", as Taggart put it. Uniforms required special requisition. Seats didn't fit, low overhangs smacked him in the forehead. Then there were other times, when being the biggest guy around was downright handy. In this case, the stars were aligned to near perfection. Banks timed his drop and centered two size 14 duty boots right in the middle of Garrett Kincaid's back. Smashed between the rooftop and Banks' hefty frame, the leader of the Patriot Brigade stayed prone, gasping for breath. Banks only needed to step gracefully off his back.

Lovely. Really, it was a thing of beauty, almost worth jumping out of the flitter.

Ellison, never one to miss an opportune moment, reversed his weapon and brought it up under another adversary's chin. A better swan dive you would never see.

Banks spun on his heel, weapon at the ready. Taking no chances, he fired on two men just struggling to their feet. The area was dotted with motionless or groaning men. He was about to congratulate his officer when two things happened at once. The ion pulse boomed out its distinctive report, and Ellison let out a spine-chilling bellow. He brushed past Banks, and sprinted toward the edge of the
roof.

The target hit by the ion pulse was crumpled by the parapet. He was of no concern. For a moment, Banks' only thought was, after all this, Ellison had, for some inexplicable reason, lost his mind and was about to leap off the roof to his death. For a heart stopping moment, his body teetered on the ledge, legs stretched out in a deadly balancing act.

Banks caught him by the waist at the last possible moment, and hauled back with everything he had.

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For Ellison, at the end, it happened so fast.

Instead of getting away when he could, Sandburg tackled one of the men he'd been battling. Ellison felt the rebound from the stun pulse. The damn fool! Sandburg hadn't maintained any distance at all! The man went down, but Sandburg lurched away, reeling from the stun pulse. He couldn't spare enough attention to see how bad the damage was. Somewhere Plummer was still lurking on the roof and unaccounted for. The man might be a spoiled, self-indulgent, misguided weasel, but he was still dangerous.

It took only a split second, an unexpected, urgent impulse. Ellison felt it down to the core of his being. Find Sandburg. Protect him. Protect the Guide.

Then the flitter appeared, and Banks dropped - literally. The moment Kincaid and his thug were down, Ellison felt his vision spiral in to a pinpoint, excluding the rest of the universe, like a microscope zeroing in on a cell. He saw the moment Sandburg twisted over the parapet and saw the ground, the horrified look on his face. Saw him drop. Saw the single hand, and the aged, rotting stone crumbling into fragments under his fingers, loosening his grip. Slipping. Falling. Ellison moved without thinking, grasping, barely able to restrain the drop of their combined weight.

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Banks heaved again. Ellison's chest was across the ledge. Keeping a hold, Banks crawled hand over hand, keeping constant pressure opposite the pull of gravity on Ellison's body. He could hear Jim shouting, pleading, in an exchange he couldn't quite understand or participate in.

"Don't let go!"

"No! Pull you over! Jim, stop! Let go!"

Banks worked a hand up to Ellison's shoulder and pulled back. For the first time, he caught a chilling glimpse of Sandburg dangling by one hand, Ellison struggling to keep himself on the ledge while maintaining a grip on Sandburg's wrist. Like links in a chain, the three of them lay there, stretched to the point of breaking.

They needed more help. The flitter couldn't land. There was no one else. Could Taggart get there soon enough? Banks shifted his feet, planting them securely at the base of the parapet, and wrapped both arms around Ellison's waist. "Jim! I can hold us! Reach for him!" He felt Ellison release his hold on the ledge, and lean farther over the edge. The pressure of the combined weight of both men wrenched his arms nearly out of the sockets. Banks pulled harder, acting as their only counterweight.

"Come on, Chief! Give me your other hand!"

"Can't! Too far."
"Try!"

"I - can't - let me go!"

"Don't you dare! REACH!"

Banks heard the thud of boots, and then there were other bodies, other hands, more strength added to their struggle. He staggered back, his place taken by more men swarming their position. He heard Jim's cry of triumph as Sandburg's head and chest were dragged back onto the ledge.

They ended up in a heap at his feet. Banks braced his hands on his knees, chest heaving from the exertion. Sandburg had been awkwardly dumped on top of Ellison, who was sprawled on his back. Jim was trembling under Banks' hands, from exertion or emotion or exhaustion - take your pick.

Before the press of the other rescuers interfered, Banks caught Jim's soft declaration, and Sandburg's halting response.

"Guide. My Guide."

"Sentinel."

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"Just how big is this damn place?" muttered Banks. The arrival of the Major Incident unit had essentially ended the siege, but the rest of the security apparatus was slow catching up. P.S.D. Evans was running true to form, right up until the end. His team was stretched perilously thin. Banks had prisoners that needed to be secured in at least four different locations, and an untold number of areas to seal for evidence collection, all stretched from roof top to the first floor, where he was now waiting for Taggart.

"Sorry, Simon," Taggart said as he jogged through the door. "We're doing fine, considering. What happened to Ellison? Brown said he was having a really bad time."

"If it keeps up like this, I'm going to have to put in for a desk job," Banks said, his shoulders slumping. "This sentinel stuff is going to take years off my life. As if Ellison wasn't high maintenance to begin with."

"High maintenance, maybe," Joel agreed with a sympathetic grin. "But no one can argue with his results. So what happened?"

"He was absolutely on top of things until - " Banks said, not hiding his worry. "All the way down from the roof, Jim was rattling off intel like he usually does, locating rooms we need to be secure, areas that would support a case against Kincaid and Plummer. Absolutely adamant we sequester the Keiler family. Then he just started to shake, said he couldn't see - damn, Joel! Jim has all the eyewitness incident information. We need him functioning, or we lose the guts of our case. Kincaid could cast enough doubt that he'd make bail."

"If that happens, we'll be back where we started. He'll bolt, and pop up again when things cool down."

Both men looked toward the corner of what must be a sitting room, although Banks couldn't necessarily determine function from the furnishings. All the rooms looked hopelessly over-decorated and repetitive to him. Sandburg had pulled Ellison into an isolated corner, virtually hiding behind a wall of furniture, separating the duo from other members of Major Incident. "How are we doing otherwise, Joel?"
"Rafe's with the father and the little girl. Minor injuries, but the medics are worried about trauma for the child. Emotional complications. I found the bastard who hurt her stuffed in a cupboard, just where Ellison said. I sent some of the backup guys to lock him up tight."

"At least we're getting some backup. Did Keiler agree to a safe house?" Banks asked.

"Can't get there fast enough," Taggart said. "Connor is on her way to take charge as soon as they're out of medical. We're giving our favorite Aussie a real workout."

"She loves it," Banks said. "When she's free-lancing, I usually need to start worrying. How bad is it?"

"Even dragging that plastocast around, she's done us proud. I sent her to see Sandburg's employer and keep him out of hot water, so to speak. Cracked an illegal employment ring and gave us a new lead on Ventriss. Interesting backstory there, but it'll wait."

"Ventriss?" Banks waved a hand wearily. "No, don't tell me. I'm sure I'll be thrilled, but for now I have enough on my plate. Is that sonic cannon under wraps? Please tell me that piece of evil junk is secure."

"Oh, yeah. Not going to let that thing get mishandled. Put my bomb squad guys on it. It's not really their area, but they're better prepared than anyone else we have available. They've got the evidence team securing the power supply Ellison chucked out the window."

"Good work. That thing is way above my pay grade. The prisoners?"

"Brown's got Kincaid and company just down the hall. We sent out for extra restraints. Quite the party. Medical team is in there, too, but they're not doing anything but basic stabilization. No injuries serious enough to have anyone leave custody. Lord Plummer's half out of his head."

"Serves Plummer right. I authorized the pilot to pulse to max and above if anyone showed a weapon. Don't expect me to apologize," Banks said darkly. "The man should be stripped of his title and lands before the month's out. Before the day is out."

"Captain Banks?" Banks turned to acknowledge the unfamiliar face and his female companion. They were civilian but official, both in uniform with shoulder flashings that indicated sentinel and guide. "Ed Winter, Captain, Sentinel Commandant for Cascade Province. Sentinel Services was contacted by your medical team. It's standard procedure for any sentinel in distress, I assure you."

Winter made no attempt to hide his concern. "And Cascade has already lost one fine sentinel. I'm here to ensure we don't lose another."

"Before that we had no clue."

Winter gestured toward Sandburg and Ellison. "If we might approach?"

"What about Sandburg?" Taggart asked.

A look of surprise crossed Winter's face, but he quickly regained his composure. Banks was puzzled.
Why would a provincial commandant recognize the name of a guide who hired out through Guide Placement?

In the ensuing pause, Winter spoke first in a calm voice. "For observation only, I assure you. We are not here to impose or supplant a current working relationship."

Banks had no reason to refuse, but he glanced quickly at Taggart. Without a doubt, he'd noticed the Sentinel Commandant's reaction. His colleague nodded his consent. Reassured, Banks waved their guests forward. As quietly as possible, the four of them approached close enough to hear Sandburg's gentle, steady instructions.

"Pay attention to me, only me." The two men were kneeling, facing each other, with Sandburg using his body to block off an area of isolation. "This is normal, Jim, perfectly normal. Adrenalin took over, and your senses operated on instincts you didn't know you had. Once the crisis was over, your conscious mind took over, and things got out of control." He cupped his hands over Ellison's ears. "I know it hurts. You're off autopilot and everything's wonky. I lost our stuff, and I don't have anything to use. Just stay with me. Talk to me."


"I know." Sandburg pressed his forehead against Ellison's, his hands tracing a repetitive path from shoulder to elbow. "Breath with me. You can do that. It will help."

"The young man is doing an excellent job," Winter whispered to Banks. "Quite remarkable for a temporary relationship. With your permission, may Guide Sonya Kim assist?"

Banks hesitated again. Sandburg had gotten them this far, and he didn't know this pair. They seemed sincere. "His decision."

Kim, moving silently, knelt to the side of Sandburg. "Guide Sandburg, I have supplies," she said in a low measured tone. Banks could barely hear her, but he saw Ellison flinch.

Sandburg spared her a quick glance. "Muffs. A mister. Citrus if you have it."

Banks watched, fascinated, as Sandburg covered Jim's ears with some kind of fluffy thing that miraculously stayed in place. Jim sighed in immediate relief. Kim placed a tiny cylinder on the floor nearby, twisting it just slightly. Banks heard a slight hiss. A few moments later, he could barely detect the odor of lemon.

"We have damping drugs available," Kim continued. "The medics can administer, or I can."

Sandburg shook his head. "I think he can handle it, if we can give him a break. You're with Sentinel Services?"

"Yes. Can you outline the current parameters?"

"He's had no training. Online only days, but displays extremely high sensitivity levels. Home and work site haven't been modified. He'll need an orientation suite and full support."

Banks had no idea what an orientation suite was, but both Kim and Winter apparently did and nodded. "Already arranged," Winter said, leaning forward to speak to the kneeling Sandburg. "We've also assigned a sentinel specialist physician to handle the post-emergence medical evaluation. Will you be available to assist?"

Banks noticed an abrupt transformation in Sandburg's posture. Suddenly, he was tense and troubled.
"That's entirely up to Sentinel Ellison." After a pause, Blair added, "Please arrange for him to have a transition coach and a full selection protocol at the earliest opportunity. He extraordinarily gifted, and deserves only the best."

Kim stood and backed up two paces. Both she and Winter gave a deep, respectful nod, almost a bow. Some agreement had passed between the three, and Banks realized it was clearly both important and distressing to Sandburg. Unfortunately, he didn't understand the subtext of the simple exchange.

He wondered if Jim did either.

He didn't have long to think about it, or question Commandant Winter. Brown was tapping him on the shoulder. "Captain, I think you'd better come with me. Provincial Security Director Evans has arrived and crashed our detention area. We seem to have a difference of opinion when it comes to the prisoners. I don't have sufficient rank to keep him at bay."

Banks swore vehemently under his breath.

"Go," said Taggart. "I'll handle this."

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Banks seriously wondered how he'd erred in a previous life. P.S.D. Evans was enough to drive a man to drink.

"Kincaid's trying to convince them it was all Plummer's show," Brown said quietly as they entered the room. "Plummer's so out of it he can't even mount a protest. Keeps asking when the polo match will start. What's polo, anyway?"

Banks shrugged, trying to catch up to the ongoing conversation. "Some kind of old-fashioned game - with animals, I think."

"I was here at the invitation of Lord Plummer," Kincaid shouted, still in full rant. "I didn't know a thing about a sonic cannon."

"What the hell is he doing out of restraints?" Banks growled.

"Lost that argument in the first five minutes," Brown replied. "I would have opted for leg irons. Guess who overruled me?"

"Evans," hissed Banks. "Time for me to spoil the party. If they throw me out, get Taggart." He strode forward. "Director Evans, this man's assertions constitute a complete contradiction to our in-action reports. I strongly advise he be secured until all the evidence can be reviewed."

Evans looked offended. "He doesn't appear to be any kind of a threat, Captain. Surely we can err on the side of civility." He glanced in the direction of Lord Plummer. The message was fairly clear. Evans was more concerned with causing himself problems with the aristocrats who formed a fair portion of his support group.

"On the contrary, Director, the allegations are so serious civility is of no issue." Banks wished for all the world he could avoid this confrontation, and prepared to stand his ground. If only he could get Ellison in here. His presence and testimony would leave no doubt as to the truth.

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The sentinel medic removed the monitor from Ellison's wrist. "His vitals are reasonable, but this is only a minimal scan. It basically tells us he's not dying right this instant. We don't know what his immune system is doing, or an in-depth picture of the major organs. He needs a full medical workup."

"I'm fine," Ellison snapped. He was already trying to push himself up and off the sofa they'd used for an exam area. Blair barely managed to keep him from rushing off before he got his balance. "Sandburg and I have been doing just fine without you and your poking and prodding. The more you hassle me, the worse things get. Why don't you go hover around someone who wants you?"

Blair was doing his own hovering just behind the now seated Ellison, his hand resting between Jim's shoulder blades. The position gave him an immediate confirmation of Ellison's respiration, and if he pressed firmly enough, heart rate. He seemed irritated, but calm. Ellison couldn't possibly know anything about grounding, but Blair suspected he was using a mild form through nothing more than instinct.

"They're not being unreasonable," Blair said, pressing his fingers in a subtle pattern along Jim's spine. "You've put a lot of stress on your system. You have to admit, this isn't exactly easy." Ellison looked over his shoulder and gave him a disgusted look. Blair stood his ground. "Jim, we've been lucky more than competent."

"I have a job to do." Ellison peeled off the monitor strips with obvious irritation.

"Sentinel Ellison, we appreciate that," Commandant Winter said in an understanding tone. "Sentinel Services exists only to maximize your safety and effectiveness. Your vocation is as important to us as an integral part of your sentinel status. We have no desire to unnecessarily inhibit you in performance of your duties. At this point, you can't appreciate the risk you're taking. The precautions we're recommending are only prudent."

Blair felt Ellison's muscles tense under his hands. "I'll be prudent after the suspects are processed. Kincaid's as slippery as a Leonid eel. I'm the only one who can give the in-action reports. Whatever nonsense you want to do can wait until then."

"Perhaps a compromise would be appropriate," suggested a feminine voice. Guide Sonya Kim stood a full head shorter than her partner, Sentinel Winter. She seemed to Blair a quiet, gentle soul, but in no way timid. "Sentinel Ellison, your performance has truly been exceptional, but it's like burning the candle from both ends. You really could be in danger. If you doubt my word, ask Guide Sandburg."

Ellison turned and glared his direction. "Sorry, Jim. She's right. I'm scared to death for you."

Ellison replied with a sullen scowl. "If you haven't all noticed, my job entails risk. I make those choices freely. Now let me get on with it."

Guide Kim was not so easily deterred. Blair approved of the strategy. He suspected Ellison was innately polite to women unless severely provoked. "Allow us to run the preliminary sensory screening. When that is complete, we'll shadow your activities." She held up her hands, silencing Ellison's immediate protest. "No interference whatsoever. We'll just be available in case there is a critical need."

Ellison continued to argue. Blair gripped his shoulder. "Three minutes, Jim. Whatever you need can wait that long. If it wasn't important, I wouldn't recommend it. Please."

Ellison sighed. "Fine. But in three minutes I'm walking out of here."
The scan was simple, used for initial screening for heightened senses. Ellison's scores raised eyebrows from every trained person in the room. Sonya Kim bit her lip, Commandant Winter gave a low whistle of surprise. Blair had a pretty good idea of how high the readings would be, and was almost afraid to look. Curiosity won out. Blair had to work very hard to not freak out immediately. Ellison was in the superior range in all five senses, and he'd been officially online less than forty-eight hours. Blair wondered what the reading would be when his responses weren't worn down with nearly constant stress.

True to his word, three minutes after relenting, Senior Security Investigator Ellison was on his feet and out the door.

Blair's immediate worry was that Ellison - Jim, he reminded himself - had to feel like death warmed over, and was more fragile than he wanted to admit. Ideally, Blair would have persuaded him to follow good reasonable advice, but nothing he could say would be convincing. Jim was totally focused on completing his job, whatever that was. At this particular moment, his job seemed to consist of joining Banks in a donnybrook that included Provincial Security Director David Evans, an incoherent Lord Connal Plummer, Garrett Kincaid, an indeterminate number of judicial advocates, the Senior Provincial Prosecutor and half the Province's security officers.

Ellison glared at the yelling mob, and spared an equally disgusted glance for the unwanted entourage that trailed in their wake. In truth, Blair was relieved that the Sentinel Commandant and his Guide were still in attendance. At least they could attest to the fact the Blair had repeatedly advised Ellison - Jim - that he immediately begin the support and evaluation processes recommended for a sentinel latent. If anything really serious happened, they had the authority to overrule just about everyone in the place and make sure Jim's well-being took precedence.

The medic wasn't such a benign presence. Him they could lose. After seeing Jim's sensory scores he was absolutely livid, demanding immediate hospitalization. Jim had dismissed it out of hand. Now that Jim was engaged in official duties, Blair became the full focus of the man's ire. He continued a sotto voce litany of the consequences Blair would suffer for his incompetence. Blair was certain the medic would have decked him out of sheer frustration. Luckily, Brown seemed to sense the open hostility and loomed protectively. Brown's size alone was pretty effective deterrent, and all Blair could do was insist that as a temporary Guide, he had no authority to force Ellison submit to treatment, which was absolutely true. Until Ellison submitted to a formal pairing, no one else had the legal right to interfere on his behalf. Well, unless he was unconscious and in danger of dying.

Blair didn't want to think about that possibility.

If a sensory crisis occurred, Blair was confident the immediate response would include him, and that was the best he could hope for. He had no right to expect more. Jim may have received him as Guide in a commitment sense on the roof, but that was informal, a response born of crisis, not the real thing. Jim couldn't possibly understand the implications of his behavior, and certainly didn't realize how profoundly unsuited Blair was for consideration. Although he was totally committed to Ellison's safety, Blair was already preparing himself for the moment he would exit the stage.

At least Jim seemed to be handling the noise level satisfactorily. Blair allowed himself to pay a bit of attention to what all the arguing was about. At that moment, Kincaid jumped out of his chair and began pacing the room, gesturing wildly as he asserted his total innocence. P.S.D. Evans was nodding as if convinced. Blair was shocked. How could anyone be so stupid? He should have been paying more attention, been less preoccupied with his own rumination, because he was unprepared for what happened next.

"That's a lie," Ellison said, in a voice that echoed through the room. A dead silence followed.
Judging from the shock on a few faces, Jim was speaking way out of turn. Even Kincaid closed his mouth with a snap.

Evans broke the silence. "S.S.I. Ellison, your service in this matter is noted, but this is a judicial issue. An unsubstactiated opinion has no place in this discussion. Captain Banks, please restrain your officer, or remove him."

Blair sucked in his breath in shock. This wasn't his area of expertise, but that was a pretty obvious slap down, and certainly not an accurate reflection of current circumstance. Jim had been inside the estate, the closest to the action. What was going on?

Ellison didn't back down a bit. He whirled to face Evans. "With respect, I have every right to speak. My testimony will be registered with the court as firsthand observation by a security officer. Garrett Kincaid was in direct control of the sonic cannon. He was insistent that it be made operational, and made clear his intent to use it. He arranged to torture a child to secure cooperation." He looked directly at a sneering Kincaid. "I heard every word."

"Now just a minute!" Kincaid shouted. "He's nothing more than a disgruntled security man with an axe to grind. Ellison and Banks have a history of trying to persecute me personally." He focused all his charisma on Evans. "Surely you can appreciate my position. Those of us engaged in the political arena understand how government functionaries overstep their authority." Banks bristled, but before he could respond, Kincaid shifted his focus. "What were you, Ellison, a fly on the wall?" He waved his hands wildly. "A complete fabrication. I demand that you release me immediately."

"Mr. Kincaid is a bit uninformed," Jim said coldly. "I heard the conversation myself." He glowered in Kincaid's direction. Blair was shocked at the contempt in Ellison's voice. "Sentinel senses allow that, you know."

"You're no sentinel," Kincaid said mockingly.

A little half smile flickered across Jim's face. "You're sure about that, are you?"

Blair froze. He wasn't an empath in the dictionary sense, but experience had taught him he could accurately perceive intense emotion. The virulent hatred billowing off Kincaid nearly took him off his feet. He moved closer to Ellison, instinctively feeling the need to offer protection. He ached to warn Jim off, but what could he say?

Jim was totally focused on Kincaid. "Ask these guys in the uniforms. They just measured my senses. Ask them if I'm a sentinel, and capable of overhearing a conversation."

Kincaid's charm and persuasiveness seemed to vanish. He was a coiled snake: swift, unpredictable, lethal.

Ellison seemed unaffected by the transformation. He returned Kincaid's stare, daring him to ask.

Kincaid's posture suddenly relaxed, harshness and fury replaced with a casual smile. "How convenient. After all these years, you of all people suddenly become a sentinel." He threw back his head and laughed, but his eyes darted rapidly around the room. Chuckling to himself, he ambled toward Lord Plummer and an ornate wall cabinet.

Blair felt the shift. His mother would have called it aura. Blair acknowledged the existence of such things, but never felt they applied to his own life. It was nearly a physical blow. Triumph. Unrestrained, gleeful triumph.

Evil.
"Stop him!" he shouted. "No!" He darted out in front of Ellison, throwing his arms out, a flimsy barrier, but all he possessed.

Kincaid had a cabinet open, something in his hands. Realizing the danger, Brown was moving, so was Banks, but it was all too late. Blair threw himself at Jim, frantic, trying to push him away, to cover all of his body at once, knowing all the while it wouldn't help, wouldn't save his sentinel.

When the O.A.V. went off, the screams of Commandant Winter and Jim joined his own.

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Megan Connor had never tried to run with the accursed plastocast, but she did now. She stumbled onto the porch of Stoddard's immaculate home, balanced on her one good leg and kicked the door in.

"Minister Stoddard!" she shouted. A long crack opened in the plastocast and pain shot up her leg. She clumped in, oblivious as the crack parted and pieces of the cast slowly separated with each step. "Minister!"

Stoddard came at a run, in stocking feet with a lovely piece of toast in his hand, dropping dollops of jam in his wake. "Investigator Connor - what -"

"Shoes. Get shoes." She was already dragging him towards the door. "You're needed, Sir. At once!"

The cast gave a loud crack and a chunk fell away. Shoes in one hand and toast in the other, Stoddard snickered.

"I didn't like it anyway." She propelled him across the small forecourt and into the transport. Her driver snapped the doors behind them and lifted off.

"Is it Blair?" Stoddard asked. He dropped his shoes to the floor of the transport. He stared at the toast, then shrugged and took a bite. "This jam is too good to waste. What happened?"

"Kincaid," Megan said. "I don't know the details. The bastard set off another O.A.V., practically at the feet of two sentinels, our officer and the Sentinel Commandant for Cascade."

Stoddard choked. "Are they alive? Is he under arrest?"

"Barely, and yes, although in the case of Kincaid, I wish they'd just set a pulse weapon and melted him." The transport screamed through a tight turn, throwing them both sideways. "It's chaos at the sentinel treatment center. Banks sent me -"

"Of course," Stoddard said. "Say no more, my dear. I can imagine. With Commandant Winter disabled, there's a power vacuum. You need an advocate for your officer and Sandburg." The transport banked again. "Hand me that shoe," he said. "Then I need to give you a list. I'll need documentation to bolster my - our position. Blair Sandburg is not going to be savaged a second time."

Megan smiled. "I love it when I have a willing coconspirator."

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Simon Banks stood shoulder to shoulder with Taggart, blocking the door to the treatment room. For a place that was supposed to be dedicated to the treatment of sentinels, there sure was a lot of
shouting going on.

Commandant Winter had been whisked into the room across the hall. His Guide, Sonya Kim, had been pale with fear, but had never left his side. On the transport over, the irritating medic had proven a godsend. He alternated between Winter and Ellison, supporting the two guides in their frantic efforts to stabilize the sentinels. Ellison was in worse shape, balancing on the edge of death.

Banks had been able to commandeer transport, but beyond that, he could only watch in confusion and contemplate the formal charges he intended to file against P.S.D. Evans. The two sentinels would never have been in danger if the fool hadn't turned Kincaid lose to roam around the room. At least they had Kincaid in custody under a definitive charge that no one could argue with. A roomful of witnesses had seen him deploy the O.A.V., which in the presence of a sentinel, carried a murder charge of its own.

For now, he had other problems.

During the frantic transfer from the estate, Ellison had managed a few brief moments of consciousness. He'd clung to Sandburg, shrinking away from the medic and any other stranger who'd tried to touch him. When they'd arrived at the treatment center, a horde of sentinel specialists had attempted to remove Sandburg and hijack Jim's treatment, with disastrous results. Ellison had been screaming, begging Banks to send them away, that Blair was his guide. That was just before his heart faltered for the third time.

Banks figured Jim's wishes had been made clear and acted accordingly. They might have shortcomings in the understanding of sentinels, but Major Incident possessed their own brand of authority. He could browbeat a gaggle of over-trained medical civilians. Besides, on official paperwork required by the Service, he was Ellison's medical designee. He and Taggart had physically cleared the room, and now remained as a barrier to further interference.

"Simon, we have incoming," Taggart said, gesturing down the hall. A vigorous looking elderly man with white hair was pushing through the decidedly unhappy cluster of medical and support personnel. One of them recognized the trim, tall man striding through their midst. "Minister Stoddard! Have you come to address this outrage, sir?"

"I have indeed," Stoddard said. "Clear this hallway, and stop shouting. I want two medics and full access to pharmacy. Prepare the Level IV treatment suite." He stopped and glared angrily at their astonished faces. "You know who I am, and you heard me the first time. I can bring the weight of the universe down on your heads. Get moving. Or are you going to try to allege that I don't know how to take care of a sentinel, too? I was doing this when you were still in swaddles."

He continued their direction, Connor in his wake. She was grinning, and dropped chunks of plastocast with each step.

Banks opened the door. "Dr. Stoddard, I presume. I must say, sir, I like your style."

Stoddard started through, then paused. "You know what I need?" he said, clearly indicating Conner.

"Yes, Minister. With all due haste."

The door closed. Banks regarded his slightly disheveled officer. Megan Connor unorthodoxy was usually worth overlooking. "What happened there?" he asked, indicating the beleaguered cast.

"Another chunk hit the floor. "You could be detained for environmental degradation."

"Someone can try," she said. "I feel like hitting someone." She broke off another large chunk and
extracted her foot from the remains, and left the sorry debris in a heap. "Good riddance. I'm to go to Guide Services, sir, with your permission. Minister Stoddard has a rather extensive wish list. Documentation, he calls it. At earliest convenience, I need to bring you up to date. Our inquiries have taken an interesting turn."

The two Captains exchanged indulgent looks. Connor and Ellison were two of a kind. The Captains were accustomed to assigning either one of them to a relatively innocuous investigation, only to see them veer off at a breakneck pace in an unexpected direction, usually with spectacular results. "With all due speed, Connor, with all due speed. You might want to requisition a pair of shoes before you go."

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Blair looked up at the sound of the opening door. Not that he expected any assistance or cooperation. Since no large bodies rushed in intent on removing him, he went back to work. As long as no one messed with him, he didn't care who showed up. "Come on, Jim," he pleaded. In the hour they'd been sequestered, Ellison had steadily drifted into an ever-worsening state. "Breathe, pause, exhale. Air in, air out. Nothing else matters."

He fumbled blindly towards the table, his fingers searching for a recently abandoned medication tube. A hand met his. He looked up in surprise. "Dr. Stoddard," he whispered, reverting back to the honorific from their earliest acquaintance. Blair had been eighteen; a simpler time, full of promise for the future. Tears pricked at his eyes. He loved Eli like the father he'd never known, right up until the moment his world had shattered like so many shards of glass. "But -"

"It's all right, son." Stoddard drew close, and draped an arm around Blair's shoulder. Blair remembered painfully how many times Eli had comforted him from this pose, mentoring him through the vagaries of academic and guide training. "Banks explained the situation. You were correct to override aggressive intervention. How is he doing?"

"I don't know. I really don't know." Blair's voice cracked. "Is there any citation in the literature for recovery from not one, but two, O.A.V. exposures?"

"Probably not. But if anyone can give him a chance, you can. Banks said he asked for you. You're his chosen. That counts for more than all the specialists in the Province."

Blair's eyes got a far away look. Other times, other memories, none of them good. "Not anymore. That's all over - I'm probably killing him. I should step down."

"Don't," Stoddard said sharply. "Forget all that. What's the first lesson for being a good guide?"

Blair answered without an effort of conscious thought. "Trust your instincts." He seemed a bit surprised by his own voice.

"Tell me what you see, what you feel."

Blair turned his attention to the still figure on the bed. "His initial reaction was horrible. He was in terrible pain. Full sensory cascade. His heart faltered three on the way in. When we got here, and they started with aggressive intervention - his heart stopped. " Blair picked up Jim's closest hand, working the pressure points, slowly moving from one spot to the next. "He hasn't uttered a sound since the last code. Maybe I'm making things worse."

"Full retreat zone?"

"I - I don't think so. I think he knows I'm here. I think he's trying, but he's just so tired. His reserves
are gone. He's too disciplined to panic completely, but it must be so confusing."

"Communication?"

"I was able to take the auditory muffs off. He seems to turn to my voice. He's on the edge of having a major dermal reaction. The dermal cream worked earlier, but I don't think it's going to stave it off. His symptoms are edging into critical. I can't judge what's happening internally. He was tearing at the probes. He doesn't need any additional pain. With no training, he just doesn't understand. I took them off." He looked at Stoddard with a bleakness that reflected his fading hopes. "Another totally irresponsible action, I'm sure."

Gently, Blair pulled back the covering sheet. Even in a low light environment, Stoddard could see the severity of the reaction. "How many doses so far?"

"Two, and it's already wearing off." His finger drifted along a particularly angry circular hive, scarlet and spreading. "It's going to spiral into systemic. I'm sure of it. He doesn't have any coping strategies. So many things are too risky." Blair gave way to the sob that had been threatening since Ellison first went down. "I can't lose him, before he's even had a chance."

"I told them to prepare a Level IV suite. I think you should use it."

"Thank you. I was afraid - no, you're right. But I don't want anyone else touching him. Not yet, anyway. He can't stand any more stress. His heart's too slow as it is."

"I agree. You and I can manage the transfer. If we can't manage, those two mountains of humanity outside the door certainly will, and Ellison would not react to them as a threat."

Blair gave a small chuckle that faded into anguish. "A pretty intimidating pair, aren't they? Dr. Stoddard, Level IV is -"

Stoddard was already drawing the portability unit into position beside the bed. "Young man, you're not thinking. Considering what you've gone through, I can't judge that too harshly. Before we invented all this fancy equipment, what did sentinels and guides do? There are other approaches, even though we've abandoned them for all this fancy technology. Think about your research."

"The Temple of the Sentinels?" For a moment, Blair knew he'd lost his fragile hold on composure. "What the hell do I care about the religious practice from an ancient jungle society -" His irritated voice trailed off, his eyes wide.

Stoddard was already securing the sheet around Ellison's shoulder and torso. "I never had any doubt about your innovative thinking. Always was your strength." He moved to the foot of the bed, ready to take Jim's feet. "Shall we begin the transfer?"

&&&&

Brad Ventriss waited impatiently for his two bodyguards to return. He'd requested a personal transport from the family fleet, a bit more anonymous than his custom designed model, although he turned down his father's offer of a chauffeur. This was a personal matter. He didn't need his father weighing in with an opinion.

His two underlings reappeared, slipping out of the converted warehouse, displaying the skill he paid them for. Unobtrusive, careful - but already shaking their heads. Damn. Now that his final project was sitting in the Guide Program Office at Rainier, he wanted to clear the slate with Sandburg in the worst way.
It had been difficult to track down Sandburg's residence. He'd never bothered before. As long as Sandburg delivered, it hadn't been worth the effort. Once the final project was registered, his motivation was sufficient. For a shocking amount of credits, which his underlings had spread at the University and the Guide Placement Center, the information had finally been revealed.

This was the third time they'd called at Sandburg's residence. There was absolutely no sign of the man, not here, not at the University Archive Center, not at any of his usual haunts. If they could locate him, Ventriss' plans included a long, exquisitely slow entertainment. The old gardener's cottage on the estate had already been prepared. When he was done, Sandburg would vanish without a trace.

His two men boarded the transport, confirming their negative report verbally. No sign of occupancy since their last visit. He waved to them to proceed, closed the privacy screen and brooded as the transport lifted off. Maybe the woman was the key. Sandburg had never used an intermediary before this. Well, Sandburg was clever. Maybe he'd anticipated a malicious move on his part.

So who was she to Sandburg? Perhaps he shouldn't have been so precipitous with her. Maybe she'd warned Sandburg, and he'd made the decision to preemptively drop out sight. The security vids at his residence would have her image. Maybe he could trace her, confront her and locate his quarry that way.

The transport arced gracefully out of public flight paths, swiftly gaining altitude, bypassing in their turn the commercial, corporate and security flight paths into the priority flyways. Traffic thinned immediately. Another advantage of his father's transport, they were entitled to fly at the higher altitude, reserved for those who qualified by the virtue of ancestry or position.

In the distance, he could see the stately brick buildings of the Rainier University complex, and swore vehemently. He was so close to dismissing the whole Guide infrastructure, and leading life completely on his own terms. There had to be a way to find Sandburg and make his satisfaction complete.

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Using the most gentle motion he could manage, Blair positioned Jim's hands across his chest. The liquid in the tank sloshed softly against the padded sides and settled into a smooth, almost glassy surface. Even to his nose, a faint, pleasant herbal scent permeated the room.

He kept his hand in place, noting the terrible slow thump of Jim's pulse. Had they been too slow? Waited too long? Blair had detected the underlying puffiness in Jim's tissues when he and Stoddard had lowered him into position. Definitely systemic edema. The hives flamed a hideous scarlet, another dangerous sign that Jim was slipping into a generalized hypersensitivity episode. His breathing was shallow and labored. If more fluid built up in the lungs, his breathing would only get worse.

He didn't need a monitor to tell him that Jim's system was shutting down.

The Level IV treatment suite was supplied with every possible device approved for sentinel critical care, none of which Blair felt he could use. Jim's combination of untrained status and the full assault of the OAV rendered them useless. In the next suite over, Guide Kim was probably making full use of the entire repertoire, but Commandant Winter was an accomplished and experienced sentinel. His body had a better chance of responding positively to treatment, rather than categorizing new stimulation as an attack and retreating.

Blair was certain Jim's overtaxed system would simply collapse. He'd draw inward and stop trying.
That valiant heart would stutter to a halt - for good. Jim needed to be coaxed, not compelled with demands he couldn't interpret. He needed simplicity, not technology, chemicals and sophisticated monitoring.

The tank in the treatment room was typically used for sensory deprivation. Most sentinels in crisis responded by resetting their senses to a baseline level, allowing productive intervention. Blair had a different intention. He appreciated the irony. He'd dealt with the consequences of false accusation for years after Alicia. Now he was embarking on a path that could be genuinely viewed as radical, perilous and irresponsible. But if it gave Jim a chance? Anything was better than watching this brave man slip away inch by inch. Dr. Stoddard was right. His research, abruptly abandoned when he'd paired with Alicia, suggested another path, a path that just might hold out some hope in Jim's highly unique predicament.

The accepted literature emphasized the ancient temple pools as a means to heighten senses. His research, still unpublished, hinted at another use - treatment. Would Jim have trusted him enough to consent to the approach? Could he ever forgive himself for proceeding on his own tenuous authority, without Jim's knowing and fully informed consent? He'd taken a moment and explained the situation to Captains Taggart and Banks, the two people who seemed to know Jim best. Both had pointed out that the Jim Ellison they knew had never been afraid of taking a risk, or being a bit unorthodox. They were also adamant that Jim had made his wishes known. With that endorsement, Blair had chosen to continue.

For sensory enhancement, the sentinel consumed a potent herbal tea. Some, in fact, most, of the ingredients had been lost to time. For treatment - or so Blair believed before abandoning his academic pursuits - the herbal preparation was distilled into a decoction and added to the water of the tank. It was less invasive than drinking a potion. They had no hope or recreating the original herbal ingredients exactly, but they weren't operating totally in the dark. Stoddard had endorsed his hunches, and used his considerable stature to have their choices delivered to the treatment room. Blair had been grateful for his mentor's calming presence and his steady hand as they prepared and administered the treatment.

He was dimly aware that Eli had slipped from the room. So like him, to provide unstinting support and then step back, trusting his younger colleagues to assert themselves. His heart twisted. Eli Stoddard, for all his efforts over the years, deserved better for his mentorship of Blair Sandburg. He'd never really been at liberty to explain everything to Eli. What a mess he'd made of things, such a burden to the man he so admired.

Blair moved around the tank to stand behind Jim's head, and began to trace patterns along his brow.

I'm here. Don't give up, Jim. You can come back. Don't give up.

&&&&

Banks rubbed his eyes, vainly attempting to wipe away the fatigue. He and Stoddard had retreated to a small waiting area not far from Ellison's treatment suite. Taggart had returned to Major Incident, but Banks, at Stoddard's urging, had remained at the treatment center. One of the center's attendants brought cups of astonishingly bad coffee. "Dr. Stoddard, I gave my approval, but I'm not sure I completely understand what Sandburg is doing. And why is everyone else around here ready to lead a lynch mob?"

Stoddard settled his tall frame into one of the institutional chairs. "You're very new to this sentinel thing, aren't you?"

All Banks could do was nod. The man was an expert in the field. Why not be honest and get the
information straight from the source?

Stoddard's expression was sympathetic. "It's complicated to explain, but I'll do my best. Under certain circumstances, a sentinel's heightened sensitivities essentially go on the rampage. Sensory thresholds lower, and even ordinary stimuli become intolerable. The fight or flight mechanism kicks in. The immune system overreacts. If not interrupted, it becomes a feedback loop. We call a sensory spiral, or a sensory cascade. If left unchecked, major organ system collapse under the strain."

"And that's what an O.A.V. does?"

"Precisely. Deliberately designed to induce total overload. Experienced sentinels are trained their entire lives to respond to sensory triggers which divert a sensory crisis. You could think of it as a reset button to break the feedback. That's one of the major responsibilities of a guide, to prepare a sentinel for the moment such intervention might be needed."

"Which Jim wouldn't have?"

"Correct again. He's latent and untrained. For experienced sentinels, there are two generally accepted strategies. One is an interruptive stimuli, intended to get the sentinel's attention and break the feedback loop. Things like freeze rods, auditory stimulators, scent capsules, even massive infusions of stimulatory drugs or hormones are all designed to do that. Blair's argument, and it's valid, is that Ellison wouldn't recognize any of those things as attention-getting, but as more attack, deepening the sensory cascade rather than relieving it."

Banks nodded. It sounded logical to him.

Stoddard continued. "The other approach is with drugs that specifically counter specific symptoms. You might stimulate heart rate and respiration directly, intubate to increase airflow, or use antihistamines and steroids to reduce inflammation. It's dangerous for any sentinel. Their systems are, by definition, sensitive, and you can easily overshoot the desired level, and the drugs interact with each other. Your Sentinel Arken Tinley died from a drug interaction. Because he's a latent, we have no idea of Ellison's tolerances. Again, we could make the situation far worse rather than better. The lynch mob, as you call them, would rather stay with strategies they've used before, even though Ellison is far from the typical sentinel in crisis. They're too concerned with criticism to match an innovative treatment with an unusual sentinel patient."

Banks had to admit, the possibilities all seemed pretty bleak. "Tell me the truth. Does Sandburg know what he's doing?"

"I'd say that he knows more about how Ellison's operating on a sentinel level than any of my esteemed colleagues do. He's trying to give your officer enough time to break the sensory cascade on his own, without using the standard methods that could be unduly harsh."

"He's done the job so far," Banks observed. "How long before we know?"

Stoddard sipped his coffee, his long fingered hands entwined around the mug. "Without intervention of any kind, I think Ellison's heart would have failed by morning. With the stimulant drugs the squawking chorus was recommending, well, I think you'd already be making funeral arrangements."

He cast a disparaging glance down the corridor. "I think Blair is giving Ellison his best chance of surviving, but it's not a sure thing."

"Nothing in life is certain. Learned that a long, long time ago."

Stoddard smiled gently. "Your career of choice is certainly more fraught with the unpredictable than
staid academia. But ask any student of the human condition: historian or counselor, anthropologist or security officer. Life is full of surprises."

Banks snorted. "I'm not so sure how safe academia is. You survived years as a Provincial Minister dealing with politicians. For that you should have gotten hazard pay. I could barely take a couple of days."

"Your choices will be borne out. You had no precedent to follow." Stoddard gazed down the hallway. "Really, Captain, you couldn't have done better than Blair Sandburg, however you got him. He was the brightest student I ever trained, a brilliant researcher in his own right." Stoddard looked down at the floor. "I blame myself for what's happened to him, but that's another story." He gave a wry smile. "Besides, I find myself quite encouraged by your colleague from the southern continent. Quite an impressive young woman. I appreciate her irreverence."

"Our Connor is definitely irreverent. She has her moments. We sent her on a little errand concerning Sandburg, and she's morphed into a major case involving University, Aristocracy and Government." It was Banks' turn to grin. "She gave me the gist of the material you've turned over to us. Both provocative and incriminating. My service places a high value on rooting out corruption. I assure you, it will be our priority to see justice done."

The click of heels on hard floor caused them both to look up. An elegantly dressed, dark haired woman was striding down the corridor, a fierce look on her face. Banks didn't recognize the prominent golden insignia on her collar. Stoddard clearly did. His long frame unfolded gracefully as he came to his feet. Banks, an apt student of body language, gathered this visitor was not welcome. He also rose to his feet.

"Eli, what a delight to see you again." It was impossible to miss her rigid stance and cold tone. Obviously, she was no more happy to see Stoddard than he was to see her.

Stoddard's striking blue eyes sparked with animosity, but his voice was calm, almost detached. "Captain Banks, may I present Marie Edwards, current Chancellor of Rainier University. Come, Marie. Surely you have better things to do than haunt the halls of sentinel critical care. Or maybe it's a slow day. No alumni to squeeze for an extra credit or two? No faculty to intimidate? Surely you can find a student of modest heritage to bully between luncheon dates for entertainment."

She colored with anger or embarrassment, but maintained her disdainful pose. "Really, Eli. I would have thought the years of leisurely retirement would have softened your tongue."

"I'm afraid your company precludes civility," Stoddard said tartly. "Whatever you intended to accomplish here, it would be wise to reconsider. You have no place here, Marie. Go back to your elegant office and matters which fall under your province."

"Anything concerning Blair Sandburg concerns me, Eli. The public, and certainly a vulnerable sentinel, deserve protection."

The verbal battle was joined. As barbs through back and forth with terrible swiftness, Banks quickly realized the implications. He'd seen and heard enough from Connor to know this woman was more interested in serving special interests than the welfare of James Ellison. On that basis alone, Banks wanted her gone. He interrupted her mid-sentence. "With respect, Chancellor - Minister - your opinions are no doubt valuable and insightful. However, as Senior Security Investigator Ellison's commander and medical designee, I've given my consent to his course of treatment. Any other considerations will have to be resolved at another time."

"Did you really think you could just march in here, Marie, and start making demands?" Stoddard
shook his head. "That's a bit much even for you. Captain Banks is entirely correct. Your influence does not extend beyond the hallowed halls of the institution that you've disgraced."

Edwards' eyes flared with open anger. "You're a bitter old man, Eli. Quite pathetic, actually."

"You're incorrect," Stoddard said crisply, crowding her ever so slightly. "Bitterness is ineffectual and defeated. Your ultimate removal from the University I love is my idée fixe. I find it to be powerfully motivating. Never a dull moment."

Chancellor Edwards' eyes flickered between the two men. Banks had seen warmer consideration from rapists and murderers. She smiled, icy and insincere. "Captain Banks, I'm sure we'll meet again. Eli, you might reconsider the benefits of comfortable retirement."

With a final deadly glare, she retreated down the hall from whence she'd come. Banks was overwhelmed with a sense of foreboding. Whatever that woman's intentions were, she would be persistent. He needed to speak with Taggart and Connor. Major Incident had a great deal of latitude in the allocation of investigative resources. Chancellor Edwards was going to be moved to the top of the list.

Immediately.

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For Blair, the hours that passed were sheer torture. He kept the light low, and the temperature of the tank carefully regulated. Sometimes he poured water across Jim's chest in a slow, gentle stream. He massaged the limp hands and feet. He sang, or recited poetry. When his desperation escalated to the breaking point, he begged. Jim hovered in a netherworld, neither improving nor spiraling into systemic collapse. Blair couldn't determine if his approach was helping.

As it was, when the turning point came, he almost missed it.

Nothing more than the small twitch of the hand, enough to cause the water in the tank to ripple just a bit, a quiet whisper of sound. Then Jim's hand clenched, reaching out. Blair stumbled out of his chair where he'd been maintaining his vigil, and cradled the searching hand in his own. He placed his other palm on Jim's bare chest. The heartbeat was strong and steady. Respiration easy. His hopes soared, and he choked them back, afraid to hope too much.

He raised the light levels, shifting the light as he went. The angry reaction rings were receding. In places the skin looked almost normal.

Jim's eyes flickered open. Blair's breath caught when the cloudy, confused eyes locked on his own, and awareness returned. He smiled, and Jim, ever so faintly, smiled back.

Blair blinking away the coming tears. It might take twenty-four, maybe forty-eight hours, but the danger was over. He stayed there, hovering, until Jim's eyes drifted shut into untroubled sleep. Even then, he remained, wanting to be truly sure of what he was seeing.

When he was certain, he found Stoddard and Banks still nearby, sprawled in a waiting area far too tiny for such tall men. When his smile dissolved into tears of gratitude and relief, neither of the other two men appeared to object.

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Carolyn Plummer, serving seneschal and presumptive Lady-Elect of House Plummer, kept her gaze level and her emotions in check. Her position, though endorsed by the Executive Council of Lords,
was temporary and tenuous. Her father was in custody, the estate in ruins. It would be a political
fight to preserve the remains of the family fortune and status. A viable case could be made for
governmental seizure, erasing the House Plummer forever. Alternatively, the Council could absorb
the assets and appoint a new Lord. They could elevate one of her brothers, or establish a new house
all together. Each Head of House would be analyzing their difficulties with an eye to their own
advantage.

She needed support to solidify her position. Since being affirmed as Lady-elect, she had privately
visited the most important players, tactfully lobbying their support. It was a delicate dance of quid pro
quo, played out along a formula as old as the planet. She could not promise too much or too little.

She'd left this call for last. She had no doubt that the Lord sharing this excellent champagne could
make or break her efforts, but their relationship had always been - complicated. Not necessarily
adversarial, but complicated.

"A toast, Lady Carolyn, to your future."

She raised her glass, and noted the lack of a modifier. Her future success? Her future adversity? As
usual, the man was a puzzle. "My thanks, Lord William." She gestured demurely. "That is, if you
will allow the familiarity."

"Here in my home, of course. You are, after all, my daughter-in-law."

Carolyn traced a delicate fingertip over the intricately cut crystal goblet, displaying the Ellison crest
with its chevron and eagles. "You are kind. I'm afraid your son does not agree."

"As we both know, James can sever his civil associations. His dynastic ties are another matter. In
the eyes of the Families, James is Lord-elect, you are his Lady-elect, and thus entitled to welcome in
this house."

Carolyn dipped her head, again noting the ambiguous nature of his comment. William Ellison was no
fool. Welcome was not synonymous with an endorsement of her petition for permanent leadership.
Her situation with James put him in a position to either embrace or dismiss her. Which he would do
depending on his advantage, without the intrusion of sentiment.

Abruptly, Lord William took the initiative. "Let me address you as a daughter, Carolyn. Your father
has made a series of very foolish decisions. I will do nothing to protect him. Nor will I support your
brothers, but you must prevail in that battle on your own." He eyed her steadily, gauging her reaction
as he sipped his own champagne. "James always said you had ambition and brains. Now you must
use them."

Carolyn sipped thoughtfully. At some point, it might be interesting to respond in kind and share
James' insights into his father's temperament and character, but not just now. "Denying support to my
brothers is not the same as committing your support to me, Lord William."

Lord William raised his glass in salute. "How astute. No, it is not. Even with a daughter, one must be
practical. Show me the path to clear advantage, and I will be at your side."

"Our Houses were united in marriage with that end in mind," Carolyn said softly.

"James did not bend to my will any more readily than he did to yours," Lord William stated in a flat
voice. "Should his position be reversed, it would strengthen your own. In that area as well, you will
need to lobby your own case. My preferences in the matter are no secret."

Carolyn's thoughts were spinning. The Ellison men - handsome and desirable, stubborn and
relentless in pursuit of a desired goal. But they weren't all knowing. There were things they didn't know, secrets she kept close, that might be used to her own advantage. Was now the time? Or should she wait, solidify her position in other ways? Perhaps Lord William Ellison on the sidelines rather than in opposition was enough for now.

Her thoughts were interrupted. Ellison's second son, Steven appeared at the door. "Father, I apologize. There is an emergency that demands your immediate attention." He stepped to her side and offered his arm. "Carolyn, allow me to escort you. Father, your guest will be waiting in your private study."

Carolyn rose, and accompanied Steven. No point in embarrassing herself with an ineffectual protest. As they turned into the grand hall, a dark haired woman she didn't recognize was being escorted into Lord William's study.

She doubted their meeting had been interrupted for a personal liaison. She could attempt to bully Steven, to demand to be told who the visitor was, but she had a multitude of devices to discover what took place here.

She wasn't finished with the House Ellison, not just yet.

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Blair gave Banks a rather sheepish shrug. "Sorry. I'm afraid he's just not up to conversation yet."

"Doesn't matter," Banks said, glancing at the bed and its occupant. "He knew I was here. He's with the land of the living, even if he does need to sleep like a newborn baby. You're taking good care of him. Even the squawk squad says he'll be doing better in a day or two."

Blair's eyes danced at the inside joke. "Really, Captain. You're going to get me in terrible trouble, talking about the Province's most elite sentinel specialists like that."

"Why worry? I understand your stock's gone up significantly. Commandant Winter and his Guide have promised an official finding in your support, even though he's still recovering. Guide Kim has already written the draft, and I've seen it. Highly complementary. Commandant Winter told me he considered it a breakthrough in sentinel treatment."

At the mention of Winter's name, Blair went silent. Banks remembered the odd exchange between Sandburg and Ellison at the estate. He pushed the thought aside. There was no point in borrowing trouble when things were just starting to go so well. "I'll stop by later this afternoon."

There was a sharp rap at the door. Banks turned, irritated at the intrusion. Blair turned his attention toward Ellison, checking for any adverse reaction from the sentinel. Fortunately, he didn't stir.

The heavy door swung open, revealing none other than Chancellor Edwards, accompanied by a man Banks didn't recognize. He was of medium height, short hair, pale eyes, and the insignia of one of the great houses on his lapel. The air of authority was unmistakable. Behind them filed in three men and two women, all wearing the navy and red formal dress uniforms of Accredited Guides. Several of them wore the shoulder flashings of senior status.

"Would you be Captain Banks?" the man inquired, stepping forward.

"I am." Banks raised his chin. No matter who this man was, the Security Service had a rank unto themselves. He was not subservient to this person. "And you are, sir?"

"Lord William Ellison, First of House Ellison." He removed a thin sheaf from inside his coat and
handed it to Banks. "According to the laws and privileges extended to head of family, I formally remove you as designee for my son, James, with gratitude for your service and concern. If you will allow it, House Ellison would appreciate the opportunity to extend appropriate compensation. If your station as Security Services Captain precludes a personal award, a donation to the charity of your choice will be supplied."

Banks suppressed his desire to scream, "Bribe! Arrest this man!" and examined the paperwork. It was all in order, which did nothing to cool his outrage. Jim never had any contact with his aristocratic blood relatives. In fact, his first act coming into Major Incident was to renounce any privilege that might be attached to his ancestry. If Jim was conscious and able to protest, he most certainly would.

"Lord Ellison, I'm sure you realize this is not in keeping with your son's express wishes."

The eyes flicked to Jim, and back, revealing no expression. Certainly no sign of affection or concern. "I do indeed. Lord-elect James may attempt to forget who he is and who he should be in our society, but his family is by no means so inclined. The family will move to preserve the wellbeing of a son of the bloodline, especially one who should inherit leadership. You will note that all the documents are in order. I request you honor them and depart."

Banks was infuriated, but nodded his acquiescence. He knew the law, and there was no point in starting a fight he couldn't win. Jim could countermand this with a single word, but until then, Lord Ellison was in charge. There was nothing he could do. "Lord Ellison, may I introduce Guide Sandburg."

"Enough!" Lord Ellison said forcefully. "I have been fully informed as to the status of this person. This individual is not worthy of my son." He fastened on Blair with a gaze that communicated unbridled contempt. Blair, thin, exhausted, standing alone in a combination of clothes scrounged from the hospital, seemed to recoil under the scorn. Lord Ellison turned his back to him. "Captain, please escort this man from the premises. Chancellor Edwards has graciously offered to take charge of the formal selection protocol for my son's guide."

Offered. No doubt broke the Ellison estate door down to spread more malicious lies and orchestrate this coup while Jim was not capable of protest and Sentinel Commandant Winter was convalescing. "Now wait just a minute," Banks said. The protest might be in vain, but he was honor-bound to make it. "Sandburg saved your son's life. He has every right to be here. Not to mention that this was your son's clearly expressed choice."

"My action is legal." Lord Ellison gave Sandburg a final dismissive look. "His - temporary - service is acknowledged, but he is unsuitable and will not be considered for the selection protocol."

Banks stared out the pair of them. Ellison seemed the typical, arrogant aristocrat. Edwards, however, was something entirely different. She was practically bursting at the seams, eager to gloat. He was still considering his next move when Sandburg spoke.

"I would like to bid farewell to Sentinel Ellison." Blair soft voice cut through the silence. "Might I have a moment?"

"You may not!" Edwards snarled. "You're unfit to be in the same room with a sentinel so far above your tainted stature."

A transformation came over Sandburg. He straightened, and his entire demeanor changed. "I am a Senior Accredited Guide in good standing. You will not deny us the traditional ritual of departure. If you lack the courtesy to be absent, so be it." Taking Jim's right hand, he arranged their grips, finger
to pulse, he recited the phrase honed by time, "In the moment of parting, Sentinel, be well."

Banks saw Ellison's eyes open for just a moment, and he whispered something Banks couldn't quite understand. Blair murmured some reassurance, and touched the side of Jim's face with his free hand. A simple gesture, but it carried a surprising intimacy. With a slight smile, Jim's lids fluttered shut.

With great precision, Sandburg bowed to the Guides assembled along the wall. "Honor this Sentinel in all things, without regard to your own desires," he said, in a clear, steady voice. The crispness of their uniforms contrasted with his own rumpled surgical scrubs and mismatched tunic. He left without so much as a backwards glance.

Banks knew when to make a strategic retreat. "Lord Ellison, your son is an integral part on an ongoing investigation. Inform my office of his location before the day is out. A member of our Service will conduct a daily interview until his return." He stared at Ellison. Even a Lord wouldn't contest over a clearly legal request.

"I shall make it so," Lord Ellison said. "Now depart."

Banks left, and started to run as soon as the door closed. For a short man, Sandburg covered ground pretty quickly. It took Banks two stairwells and three hallways to catch up, and by that time, they were both out in the main public square. He grabbed Sandburg at the elbow and spun him around. "Where do you think you're going? You can't let them do this to you! To Jim!"

Blair's face was blank. "Captain, you don't understand. I asked Commandant Winter for this very thing, a formal selection protocol. I couldn't possibly be considered as a candidate." He patted Bank's arm. "The transition is abrupt, but not unexpected. Don't worry. They can't force him. If one of those five isn't a good match, Commandant Winter will step in. He'll make sure that they find someone as exceptional as Jim is."

"I don't understand," Banks said. "I saw - on the roof. He accepted you."

"A moment," Blair said, his voice measured, as if the words took great effort. "Nothing but a moment. Jim said the words, but he couldn't understand the import. It wouldn't be considered binding." His voice faltered at the end, as if it pained him greatly.

"But Dr. Stoddard has evidence. Commandant Winter supports you. Don't desert Jim like this!" Banks argued. He didn't understand. How could this be happening? How could Sandburg walk away like this?"

"Please, Captain. Eli is well intentioned, but I don't deserve another sentinel. I will never deserve another sentinel. If you really want the best for Jim, you'll let this go." He took a few steps back. "Give my regards to Captain Taggart. It truly has been an honor, working with all of you."

Banks watched in silence as Sandburg's form was lost in the jostling crowds in the main city commons. No way was this going to be the end, not if he had anything to say about it. He stood for a few more moments, and then broke out in a wide, devious grin. With a gleam in his eye that his Major Incident squad would have recognized, he pulled out a cigar and strode off across the square. As Eli Stoddard had said, life is full of surprises.

Sometimes you just needed things a little push in the right direction. And he had an investigation to run.

The End

Not a cliffhanger. Really it's not. Yes, Ventriss is still lurking like the depraved lizard he is, William's
a misguided and bad father, Edwards needs to have the heels broken off her stilettos, Kincaid needs to live out his miserable life as an inmate on a desert island with poisonous snakes and cacti.

That story continues in Guide Seeking.

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