Guide Seeking

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Guide Seeking

by Jael_Lyn

Summary

Blair is running scared, for good reason, but Jim still needs a guide.

Notes

This story was written for the Moonridge 2012 Auction, and continues the story begun in Guide Placement.

Internal dialog was supposed to be in italics, but I keep messing that up. I'll keep trying. The conversion from Word to plain text kept giving me warnings, so if you see something that looks wrong, take pity on me and let me know.

Don't follow. Please, please, don't come after me.

A vast expanse of red brick paving stretched before him. Blair Sandburg had no eye for the beauty that marked the throbbing governmental heart of the Cascade. The intricate geometry of the cedar grove, the soaring Monument to the Citizen with its gushing jets of water and intricate cataracts were as tears. He plunged into the crowd as if it was a roiling storm, blind to anything but the concealment the throng might provide. It took every scrap of resolve he could muster to lengthen the distance between himself and Simon Banks.

The Captain meant well. He seemed a passionate man who cared deeply about his personnel. Blair respected that. In legitimate concern for his officer, Jim Ellison, he might be too persistent for
everyone's good. To the Captain's thinking, the issue was completely transparent. His newly revealed sentinel needed a guide. Blair Sandburg was a guide, and had successfully worked with his officer. Put two and two together and get four.

But it's not simple.

No, life hadn't been simple for a long, long time, the parameters of his survival very narrow and under the control of others. Accepting any role with James Ellison would precipitate consequences he couldn't bear to contemplate. If only Banks would accept his refusal, for a few moments at least, just long enough to let him disappear. Flee and regroup in private. When he was composed, then he could try to extricate himself from a thoroughly impossible predicament.

Time and distance and solitude - that's what he needed. Banks was a leader, a persistent and focused man. Blair doubted his ability to form a coherent argument if pressed. He dodged through the crowd on the commons. As his heels struck a hollow, lonely beat against the paving stones, his resolve wavered. It was so tempting to accept Banks' encouragement, to yield the to irrational desires of his heart.

Stop it! Blair Sandburg, you cannot, will not pair again. The risks haven't changed, the threats still exist. Not for James Ellison will you do this. Not for anyone. Not in this lifetime.

If it was possible to hear the soul shatter, Blair heard - felt - his own splinter as if a delicate crystal goblet had been hurled at a wall. No, it had to be over, for the wellbeing of all. He risked one last backwards glance through the multitude swirling around the busy commons, just enough to make sure Banks wasn't in pursuit. When he saw the Captain's tall form headed the other direction, Blair let out a relieved sigh, followed just as quickly by a painful, strangled sob.

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Simon Bank's drew deeply on his cigar as he walked, his long stride gobbling up great swaths of paved surface. Anger fueled that stride, coupled with frustration. Was it just an hour ago he'd been agreeing with Taggart that they were finally getting things under control? The case against the Patriot Brigade progressing, his Major Incident team finally standing down, Ellison back from the brink? And it had all crumbled away in an instant.

Not that Simon Banks was about to give up. To begin with, Lord William Ellison was not taking permanent control of Senior Security Investigator James Ellison. The law might currently be in Lord William's favor at the moment, but House Ellison wasn't the only entity to know the law. The Security Services of Cascade Province were not without resources. Banks was close enough to his friend to know that Jim wanted nothing to do with his aristocratic family. Lord William was going to discover that having Provincial Security breathing down his neck was no trivial matter.

And Sandburg? His abrupt departure was unacceptable. Banks loathed letting the young man walk out of sight. At the very least, the young man had earned the right to stay with Ellison until both parties agreed to part. Not to mention that any civilian ripped off the street with zero notice who could function so admirably under pressure was not a resource to waste. Banks wasn't going to let Sandburg slip through his fingers, either.

You could have arrested him. At least long enough to sort things out.

A tempting thought, but Banks rejected it, just as he had when he'd confronted Sandburg outside the Sentinel Treatment Center. No, when Major Incident hauled that very talented, enigmatic man back in, Banks wanted it to be for keeps, and to accomplish that he needed more information. A private conversation with Taggart was urgently required, as was transportation back to headquarters. HIs
rank entitled him to requisition piloted transport at any time, but Banks wanted privacy as well as speed. He keyed in the code for a convenience he rarely utilized. Taking note of his present location, he immediately turned toward the northeast and began to watch the skies. As expected, the one-person aeropod appeared almost immediately and dropped gently to street level in front of him.

A good response time was expected in Cascade Center, but this was exceptionally fast. Aeropods were designed for quick response with a limited flight range, and Banks never used one without the mental image of a shiny flying egg. He activated the hand-print identification screen, boarded, and selected hover mode. The paved surface dropped away below him, turning the pedestrians on the square to miniatures. He scanned the crowd, searching for a glimpse of Sandburg.

Even in the swarm below, Sandburg's mismatched outfit would be an easy mark for either his own eyes or the vehicle scanner. And there he was, struggling past the Monument to the Citizen. Banks frowned in concern. The young guide didn't appear steady on his feet, more than would normally be due to exhaustion alone. Was something else wrong? Would the young guide be safe while more lasting plans were put in motion?

Simon cursed his general ignorance of all things Sentinel and Guide, and yearned again to swoop in immediately. With one last look, Banks set the coordinates for Cascade Security Headquarters, automatically relaxing into the suspended seat as the aeropod zipped up to transport level and heeled over, accelerating into the first directional turn.

Ignoring his Security Systems com link, Banks opted for his personal, hard-shielded personal unit. This conversation with Joel needed to be strictly private. He could count on Taggart to recognize the code signature and answer with a similar unit. Extra ears they definitely didn't need - or eyes.

The aeropod was making another hard turn when Joel's face sprang into holoform. His familiar voice echoed within the small vehicle.

Taggart acknowledging. What's happened, Simon?

What isn't? I should have been a dentist or something.

Simon, you getting near anyone's teeth is not a joke. Not a way to start.

We're already behind, Joel. We lost Ellison-

What?! But he was fine - recovering -

Sorry. Sorry. Jim's physically fine - I think. I meant he's currently out of our reach. His father overrode Jim's directive.

His father? Jim told me he renounced years ago. He never mentions his family.

Apparently a smart move on his part. Ever hear of Lord William Ellison?

As in Executive Council of Lords Ellison? The 'We own chunks of Cascade' Ellison?

That would be the one, as in "James is my eldest son" Ellison.

No! Heir of the bloodline? Our Jim? I figured him for a wayward cousin or something.

Our Jim. I gave us a window by playing the "part of an ongoing investigation" card, but that only gives us daily access.
Simon, these people could send Jim anywhere - on planet or off. We'd never even detect a transport filing.

It was all I had. We need to break the Decree, and he acted as Head of House.

Lovely. As if a Decree of House is appropriate with a sentinel, much less a serving Provincial officer.

We need more on Lord William than what's in the Index of Landed Families or the Continental Registry of Aristocracy.

I'm on it. Can we count on Sandburg to communicate with us?

Part two of the disaster. Lord William arrived with that harridan Edwards in tow and a parade line of prospective guides. Booted Sandburg from the room like he was a plague vector.

He acts to preserve the line of ascendency and then snatches the only guide he knows? At what risk to Jim? We should be able to break the Decree on that alone.

It gets worse. Sandburg bolted. Babbled some nonsense about how he couldn't possibly be considered for Jim's permanent guide.

But you said they pledged. He fought for Jim, risked his life for him. He wouldn't leave like that, not willingly.

It's got to be tangled up with that mess Connor uncovered. I want him back, which we can't do unless we can cut through all these half-truths and disinformation. I want to throw a net over that boy, and I want it to hold.

Do you want me to bring Connor in?

God, no. She looked like a homeless waif. That damn leg of hers - I'm going to be neck deep trying to explain why she was on duty. Wait a few hours. We'll all be sharper with rest and an actual plan.

I'll get things rolling, and we can deal with the other outstanding issues when you get here.

The holo faded. Banks checked his travel estimate and swore. His progress was reasonable, but not fast enough to suit him. In a crisp voice, he altered the standard flight protocol. In immediate response, the aeropod left the accelerated travel flight plan, rose to restricted height and acquired a straight-line heading for Headquarters.

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Pushing against the flow of the crowd, Blair darted and dodged the foot traffic to reach the nearest building. The wall of the Hall of the Legislative Council soared in his path. He plastered himself against the nubbly, cream-colored sandstone. His legs had lasted just long enough to get him this far, but he could manage no more.

His departure from Jim Ellison had been too sudden. The unexpected arrival of Ellison's father, with Chancellor Edwards in tow, was something he hadn't foreseen. Water under the bridge now. If only Lord William Ellison had allowed a more traditional, private leave-taking, given him a little time. There were ways to prepare the body and the mind for separation. All guides were taught the basic concepts, though most guides rarely had the need to use them.
Blair knew he would pay for it dearly, but in his heart of hearts, he couldn't judge Lord Ellison harshly, although Jim's father seemed a icy, unforgiving soul. Any parent, be they bad, indifferent or incompetent, could be moved to protect their child. It mattered not that said child was fully grown, a trained security officer and estranged, apparently for years. Blair could well imagine the assessment Edwards had presented to Lord Ellison. Any responsible parent would have reacted in the same way, doing anything possible to remove such a malignant influence. Lord William Ellison had an abundance of resources. Who could fault him for using them?

A gust of wind swirled through the square, seeping easily through the fabric of his borrowed clothing. In his haste, he'd left the Sentinel Treatment Center with nothing but the clothes on his back. His vision clouded and grew dim. Blair braced his legs in front of him and pressed his back into the cool stone surface, clinging desperately to the masonry tracks between the huge sandstone blocks, willing himself to stay upright. The last thing he needed was to attract the attention of the civil authorities, as would certainly happen if he went reeling through the center of Cascade as if intoxicated or ill.

Of course, he was in fact ill, or would be soon. It was a matter of degree, of course. If he could escape quickly, reach home and immerse himself in a familiar environment, he could avoid the worst of what he knew was to come. He slid his bare palms against the stone at his back. He'd forsaken any opportunity for treatment to attend to Jim during the hectic hours when life seemed to hang in the balance. His hands were still raw with scrapes and cuts. He was no sentinel, but pain had a way of focusing the attention, even for normals. He pressed harder, tearing away scabs as he dug unto his skin with any rough edge available on the stone. His vision began to clear, and for a moment, he was hopeful. He could be overreacting, allowing his past to color his present. Think of it logically. You weren't with Ellison that long. The attachment wouldn't have the depth of a traditional pairing.

That moment of optimism, however, was a delusion. A spasm of abdominal cramps nearly doubled him over. The sudden onset, and intensity, gave Blair a warning, making the truth of his situation clear. Obviously, he'd been sloppy about attachment, basking in the glow of Jim's near miraculous recovery. No pairing profile would ever indicate it, but he and Ellison had been surprisingly compatible. He'd allowed the slender tendrils of connection to develop during the crisis. Blair had told himself he was within acceptable boundaries, that the fragile sentinel needed his support, that any connection was brief and completely under control.

And now? He'd miscalculated, rationalized away the danger. On the surface at least, he'd behaved appropriately. Hadn't he requested a formal selection protocol the moment he laid eyes on Sentinel Commandant Winter? Provided transition data for Guide Sonya Kim? If only Jim could have completed his duties without a further crisis. Commandant Winter and his guide would have taken charge. They could have explained things to Jim, and managed his transition. It would have been soul wrenching, but Blair could have departed gently, leaving his inexperienced sentinel in kind, competent hands.

How quickly the situation had changed. Commandant Winter and Ellison had collapsed, felled by Garrett Kincaid and his heinous O.A.V. grenade. Blair had been too exhausted, too frightened and desperate to be concerned with anything other than keeping Ellison alive. In the back of his mind, he'd vaguely planned an exit, reassured himself that he would have sufficient time to extricate himself as Ellison went through selection. Detach with love, as his mother always said. He intended to ease out of Ellison's life and return to his own, completely reconciled to the inevitable.

And that was a lie. A total, complete, utter lie. You wanted it. Wanted him. Even though you know it's impossible.
Blair clenched his hands into fists, fighting against another wave of muscle spasms. Regret solved nothing. He had made his choices, and done so knowingly. He could put one foot in front of the other, get to the public tram station, hang on through the ride home and deal with his difficulties in private. He could do this. After all, this couldn't possibly be as bad as the agony after Alicia.

But why did the distance seem so far, and the steps leading to the transportation area seem so steep?

"Welcome home, Captain Banks. Captain Taggart sends his regards, and requests you join him in the Duty Suite."

"Carry on, Investigator Lenart." Simon Banks snapped off a crisp salute and thanked the stars he shared a command with Taggart. Officially, they functioned as equals with distinct functions in a coordinated hybrid unit. Unofficially, their decades-long friendship had created a symbiosis both men viewed as optimal. Long strides carried him through the interlocking hallways that formed the nerve center of Major Incident.

Taggart was lounging against the com center, waiting for him with a steaming mug of coffee in one hand and a data pod in the other. "Glad you finally got here to keep me company. I sent everyone home that I could spare, and it's kind of lonely. I cleared our siege team off the duty holo completely. Let's hope they're in bed."

"Good call. They're all exhausted. We've asked enough of them." Banks blew across the mug and took a grateful sip. "I needed this. What a mess."

Taggart chuckled. "You and your coffee. As if that witch's brew is a full nutrient restorative."

"Ah, my friend the skeptic. Science underestimates the value of the noble bean. You still made it for me, and your timing is perfect."

"Sorry to disappoint you, Simon, but my timing isn't that good. Admittance Officer Julian tipped me off as soon as you hit the transport dock." Taggart wiggled the data pod in the air between them. "For your viewing pleasure, the investigative summaries from the junior officers, and our own preliminary action reports from the siege at the Plummer estate. Talk about messes."

Banks took it with a nod and a theatrical groan. Joel looked relaxed and almost rested out of battle dress. The informal uniform had always suited him better. Despite the easy posture, Simon detected concern lurking behind his colleague's eyes. He juggled the pod in the palm of his hand. "What's wrong, Joel? Other than the obvious?"

Taggart cast a quick glance around. Security shielding was heavy everywhere in Major Incident's inner sanctum, but there was always the off chance of listening ears. "Our special research projects are underway. We should have coherent reports in a few hours. I contacted Prosecutor Sanchez, since she's already reviewed the Ventriss material."

Simon raised an eyebrow mid-sip. "Connor was ready to strangle her for stonewalling over Ventriss the younger. Was she a little more cooperative?"

"Sanchez is politically careful but an egalitarian at heart," Joel said with a little smile. "Using the Decree system to interfere with a serving security officer, particularly since Jim already renounced privilege, gets her undivided attention. She was already researching precedent before I got halfway through the explanation."

"The Taggart charm scores again." Simon was already tabbing through the assembled reports, and
despite Joel's success, he was annoyed. "Where are her priorities? The corruption of our Rainier University doesn't interest her? Or the perversion of the Sentinel-Guide justice by a landed family?"

Simon's expression grew thunderous at the vagaries of political positioning.

"I'll take what we can get and work on the rest later." Any amusement faded from Joel's expression. "As for Sandburg, that was a bit more complicated. I worked from the assumption that he would head home."

Simon nodded. "Reasonable. To get some decent clothing, if nothing else."

Joel's frown deepened. "Came up blank. No recorded address, not on the grid, not attached to any of his accounts or official documents, and there aren't many of those."

"What?" Simon asked in surprise. "He's a citizen. There must be records."

"We finally unearthed an address for him by triangulating from his civilian transportation warrant, but he lives farther off the grid than most criminals on the lam. It worries me, Simon. I understand your motives. He came through for us. We need him for the Ventriss case, but maybe we shouldn't push reuniting him with Ellison."

Banks looked up sharply. "How so? I thought you liked him."

"I do like him. He's highly competent. He earned my respect with courage in the field. It's just -"

"Joel?"

His colleague shifted uneasily, his eyes crinkled in thoughtful worry. "I don't know. In any other investigation, his living and employment arrangements would be throwing up red flags. Maybe we want Ventriss so badly we're not exercising a healthy level of skepticism. We'd normally go into overdrive wondering what he working so hard to hide."

Simon set down his coffee mug with a thud that resonated through the room. "His situation does seem extraordinarily complicated, but the point is well taken. Let's untangle a few of the threads. Continue to assume he's an asset, but reserve final judgment until we know more."

That middle ground seemed to satisfy Taggart. "Fair enough. Nothing would make me happier than to uncover a truly innocent victim and set things right." Simon was turning his concentration back to the reader when Taggart deliberately touched the dimmer. "Before we get buried in administrative trivia, Daryl's in your office." Taggart raised his hands to fend off the immediate flood of questions. "He pulled close to a triple shift on perimeter closure during the siege. I told him to catch some sleep while he waited."

"But Daryl hardly ever - was there some other problem?" Banks asked, worry tingeing his voice. It was unusual for Daryl to appear at Headquarters outside of assigned duty, despite the fact that he'd been in and out of the place routinely as a teenager. Both father and son were conscious of any appearance of nepotism. Simon Banks was proud of the fact that his son had insisted on qualifying for his position within the Security Service without the customary family notation in his file, opting to rise or fall on his own merits.

"He's not injured or on report or anything like that. I had him give me the high points when he arrived, just to make sure it wasn't something that needed immediate attention. Just a display of caution rather than anything overt," Taggart said, falling into step with his colleague. "I woke him when you arrived, so he could collect himself."

Behind the closed doors of his office, Simon was free to greet his son with a hug. The young man
looked taller than ever in his uniform, even though his appearance was far from crisp. "Good to see you, Daryl."

"Hi, Dad. Heard it was pretty rough on your end. You look tired."

"I am tired, but first things first." Simon held his son at arm's length, watching his eyes. "Joel said you had a concern."

Daryl looked uncomfortable. Simon motioned him to a seat and leaned casually on the corner of his desk, hoping to put his son at ease. "I had a run-in with a member of the Plummer family. I - well, I did my job, but she was pretty annoyed. She connected us, and I didn't want you to catch any fallout without warning."

"She?" Simon asked.

"Lady Carolyn, to be precise, Dad. She was trying to get into the estate by private transport. Actually, she demanded I let her through." He shrugged. "I turned her away, and she wasn't too happy."

Of course. Carolyn Plummer had terminated her career in the technical side of security services at the request of her father, the soon-to-be-disgraced Lord Plummer. Banks spared her the occasional thought, wondering about her as their investigation had progressed. In most cases, previous service would have earned her some deference, or at least an advance warning.

Taggart apparently anticipated his train of thought. "Don't even think it, Simon. If we'd notified her, she'd have blown the investigation as sure as we're standing here."

Banks nodded in agreement. Carolyn had done nothing to endear herself to colleagues of more humble heritage. Knowing her sharp tongue and imperious manner, Daryl probably had every reason for concern. "She had no right to enter the estate, son. As long as you followed procedure, you're safe. Don't fret."

Daryl shook his head. "I was polite. I made notations in the log, and notified my superior. There was something about it - I don't know … Afterwards, I thought about it more, the whole thing worried me."

A soft knock at the door, followed by a familiar face, interrupted them. "Captain Banks, I took the liberty of having sandwiches and fruit sent up."

Both Captains broke into broad grins. "Rhonda, we don't pay you enough. Ever," Banks said.

Their shared personal assistant maneuvered gracefully through the doorway, deftly angling a tray in front of her slim frame. Rhonda Kennedy held a full commission with the Security Service as a Support Specialist. Her contacts and ability to cut through red tape were legend within Major Incident. Even a quick glance told Simon their repast didn't originate from the in-house commissary.

"Daryl, I seem to remember you being fond of tangerines," she said, easing the laden tray onto the conference table. "My treat."

Daryl's face lit up with a smile. "Tangerines? How did you manage whole fruit?"

"Never question the methods of a planetary master, son," Banks said, thoroughly impressed himself. "Specialist Kennedy is in a class by herself." Due to chronic shortage and distribution guidelines,
fruit on most tables was generally limited to extracts or dried, chopped fruit bits. He gratefully handed one of the rosy orbs to Taggart, and took one for himself and Daryl. The smell of citrus fairly burst into the room as he laid the peel back on his own.

"Well, I haven't had one of these in forever," Daryl said, popping a peeled section into his mouth. "My monthly credit draw doesn't stretch for something like this."

After favoring the young man with a brilliant smile, Rhonda slipped out, leaving the three men to their food. Simon felt his energy level swell with each bite, chasing his fatigue and worry into the shadows. The food also distracted Daryl, giving Simon a moment to consider the situation before answering his son. Carolyn Plummer could represent a significant complication to their overall case against Lord Connal Plummer. He was about to question Daryl more closely, when Taggart took the lead for him.

"Daryl, go through the whole incident for us," Joel said. "Don't worry about sifting for a nice, clean report. Just tell us a story, and let the details come out as you remember them." He cast a sideways glance at Simon. "Your impressions may be as important as the actual facts."

Daryl complied, pausing for an occasional bite. Like most rookie officers, his recall style was jerky, not yet honed by years of training and practice. Overall, not bad. "So her attitude seemed to change midstream, son?" Simon asked.

"Daryl, go through the whole incident for us," Joel said. "Don't worry about sifting for a nice, clean report. Just tell us a story, and let the details come out as you remember them." He cast a sideways glance at Simon. "Your impressions may be as important as the actual facts."

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"Well, yeah, I guess so. When she realized the security blackout extended to the whole family, she sort of zipped right out." Daryl absently tore a section of tangerine peel into ever smaller pieces. "Not that she let me off the hook. When someone like that demands your credentials cypher, you've usually put your foot in it."

Taggart leaned back in his chair. "Don't jump to conclusions. Carolyn is aristocracy through and through. Even when she worked here as a supposed equal, she expected deference. You didn't fold when she pressed. For that, she'd throw a fit just on general principles."

Daryl frowned. "I identified myself. I guess I thought it might appease her or something."

Simon and Joel exchanged wordless glances again. "And how did our former colleague respond to that little nugget?" Simon asked.

"Not a word. Looked me up and down like I was a bug, transmitted the ID chip and stalked out like I'd offended the whole province. I thought she'd at least say, 'Hello,' or something." He gave his father a chagrined look. "Did I say too much? Was it inappropriate to bring it up?"

The two older men considered the question. "To mention your father was of no real consequence," Joel said. "In Cascade, it's expected to reveal, and make adjustments, for family connections. Your dad was Carolyn's indirect superior. To make note of the connection was appropriate, and wouldn't have offended her. As for the pending case with her father, all she really found out from you was timing. Daryl, she would have learned that sooner or later, no matter what you did. In fact, she probably suspected something as soon as we restricted communications in the first hours of penetration, and that was why she was headed to the estate in the first place."

"Son, Lady Carolyn is nothing if not ambitious," Simon added. "She's also trained as a scientist and capable of reaching accurate conclusions. You operated well within your assignment guidelines. Carolyn could guess her father's actions finally provoked a major official response. I suspect her lack of greeting and hasty departure was a matter of shifting priorities." He glanced at Joel, sharing an ironic grin. "The devoted daughter may be interested in moving up."
Joel nodded in agreement. "More than likely. Concerns are duly noted, Daryl. You did the right thing by notifying your commander and telling us. Better forewarned."

Daryl scrunched his nose, an expression Simon recognized. His son looked exactly the way he used to when puzzling over a basic algebra problem. Well, he was young, and just learning how to navigate the political and social undercurrents of the province. No point in wasting a perfectly good instructional opportunity. "Carolyn has been her father's Seneschal, Daryl."

"That's why she left, isn't it?" Daryl asked.

"Yes, leaving us civilian class stiffs behind. She can either defend her father, or disavow him, hoping to keep her own hands clean."

"I suspect Carolyn will favor self-interest over filial devotion." Simon noted with satisfaction that his son's eyes went a bit wide. That reaction alone meant the lesson was a success. Best to learn early the difference between what was spouted in civilian education modules and reality.

"Actually, if her father is headed to detention, she may aim for control of the whole family," Joel added. "His weak position would lend itself to a power play on her part. She has elder brothers, but as Seneschal, she had direct access to other Houses. She wouldn't hesitate to exploit that access during a power vacuum."

"Now that sounds exactly like the Carolyn Plummer we know all too well," Simon said acidly. He clapped his son on the shoulder. "I think it will all blow over, son. Carolyn has more important things to worry about than complaining about a junior security officer. Rest easy."

They visited amiably, finishing their food quickly while Simon bio-stamped the required reports with his thumbcipher. Taggart, after stifling a yawn of his own, got up to leave. "Simon, I'll monitor our background research from home. You'll hear if we get new information. Anything new, including topics they couldn't discuss in Daryl's presence.

Daryl rose to give the older man the courtesies due a senior officer, and Simon nodded over his son's shoulder. "We'll keep your concerns in mind, my friend."

"Let's hope they come to nothing." Taggart winked at Daryl, harkening back to the times when he was the youngster's favorite honorary uncle. "Get your dad out of here, Big D, or I'll find him tomorrow sleeping in his desk chair."

"Got it. You always were my best co-conspirator," Daryl called after him.

Joel's departure seemed to take Simon's energy with it. He picked at his final piece of fruit, images of Sandburg's stricken face as he calmly proclaimed himself unfit to be Jim's guide. He trusted Joel Taggart's instincts. Would it really be better to let this one go? His attention must have drifted, because the next thing he knew, Daryl was gently retrieving his plate and mug.

"Dad, you're beat," Daryl said, neatly stacking the remains of their snack. "Why don't we both get out of here?" To emphasize the point, his son already had his transport warrant in hand.

"I'll second that, son of mine," Simon rose, certain he wouldn't feel guilty about accessing his service transport. He believed in setting an example, but was just too tired to fight his way home on a public tram with the rest of the citizenry. He could give Daryl a lift home in the bargain.

Then he froze. The sight of Daryl dangling his transport warrant brought to mind another memory; Sandburg reluctantly handing over his personal items before going in to retrieve Ellison. In all the confusion, the items hadn't been returned. Sandburg had walked off with the clothes on his back and
Beckoning his son to follow, he slipped into Taggart's adjoining office and activated the upper desk compartment. Sure enough, there were Sandburg's personal effects; his com device, identification, even the warrant cards to access the public tram and his bank accounts. Simon quickly sorted through the jumbled stack. At the bottom was Blair's citizenship cipher, attached to a thin, unremarkable metal chain. Sandburg was literally wandering around Cascade without any of the documentation required of a citizen.

Simon's heart sank. Blair Sandburg had brought Ellison back from the brink. Despite legitimate reservations, it was unconscionable to cut him loose without the bare necessities of civilian life. They owed him better than this. He glanced at his son, and back down at the pathetic collection on the desk.

"Daryl, I have a proposition for you."

Daryl smirked. "Why does this sound like every time you conned me into an errand?"

Simon rapped his son playfully alongside the head. "It sounds like it, because that's exactly what I'm going to do."

"What's in it for me?" Daryl said, flashing a mischievous grin reminiscent of his childhood. "You can't buy me off with a pizza or a new vid game these days."

"What an over-inflated ego." Simon affectionately grabbed his tall son in a headlock. "A lift home, for starts. I'd like you to make a stop for me, but I'd like you to do it out of uniform. Then we'll deal."

Daryl shrugged. "Sure. How tough can it be?"

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Jim Ellison's eyelids fluttered, then opened slowly. On the first conscious breath, an acrid odor seemed to burn the inside of his nostrils. He choked, and then recognized it as the scent of the medical center. Awareness of his situation came flooding back. Sandburg had explained it; how even a specialized sentinel treatment center couldn't mitigate all the odors associated with medications and disinfectants. That his body might overreact to a minor irritant, but such diversions could be controlled with conscious thought. Just another one of those new realities he would have to learn to live with.

Odd. It hadn't been that noticeable earlier.

He shifted uneasily. Something was amiss, and it wasn't just the smell of this dimly lit room and the uncomfortable bed. It was almost like he had ants crawling under his skin. Where was Sandburg? He'd been by his side every time he'd wakened…

"James Ellison, I am here. Have no anxiety. With your permission, I would take your hand."

A quiet voice, low and soft. Definitely female. A fuzzy shape appeared at the side of the bed. What was going on? His vision hadn't been screwed up before, not since Sandburg had gotten him out of that weird tank with the water. Who was this - person?

His puzzled silence was apparently viewed as agreement. A hand, cool and dry, twined slender fingers around his wrist. Jim shied away, not really wanting some stranger so close. The fingers followed his movement, wrapping in that odd grip Sandburg had used a couple of times. His skin seemed to peel in on itself, first an irritation, then a hot burn. "Oww!" he cried out, without meaning
to. "That hurts. Get your hands off me!"

The fingers released. Jim cradled his hand against his chest, annoyed that everything itched or hurt or stank, not to mention total strangers lurking around his room. He wanted to leap from the bed, put some distance between himself and this intruder. "Where's Sandburg?" he blurted out. Even to his own ears, the demand didn't sound like his own voice. He might as well be in an echo chamber. What the hell was going on?

Again the voice, low, even, yet somehow, totally disturbing and intrusive. "I am here, James. I am Guide Julia Grant. Skin reactions are quite normal. Be at ease. I can assist you."

Even with his messed up vision, Jim could see her reach for him again. He pulled his arms tight against his chest, locking his hands together, a disgustingly helpless gesture if ever there was one. He really didn't have a lot of room to retreat. The room was spinning like a bad move in zero grav, and you had to know up to stand before you could run.

This time the pressure of her fingers was softened by some kind of fabric. Slippery. Silk maybe. Marginally better, but still irritating. Creepy. Sandburg had touched him, a tolerable combination of weird and reassuring. This just felt - wrong.

He waited a few more moments, and then decided enough was enough. "Please remove your hand. Now." He almost sighed audibly in relief when the woman's grip on his wrist was released. He felt mildly sick, and ruthlessly pushed the feeling aside. There might be some malicious satisfaction in retching on this intruder, but speech was more important. If Sandburg had done a runner on him and he was alone, he wanted straight answers.

"Why are you here? Why is my vision messed up? It was fine before. Where's Sandburg?" The blob next to him was closing in again. "And don't touch me!"

There was a long pause. Even though he couldn't actually see it, Jim felt a shift in the air. Someone else had entered the room. Whoever it was lurked just out of sight. Julia, or whatever her name was, finally spoke again. "Your temporary guide has departed. Do not concern yourself about his whereabouts. I am a member of your transition team."

Transition. Blair had mentioned something about that, not that he'd really been paying attention at the time. He'd also said something about choice. That's right! He was supposed to have a choice, and this was definitely not it.

"Why was I not consulted?" Jim challenged, hoping his voice sounded forceful rather than a weak croak. His voice sounded ragged and uneven, and it was hard to concentrate while the room took unexpected jolts and spins. His last trip through the Sarin Asteroid Cluster hadn't been this bad. Jim swallowed hard, trying to generate some moisture in his mouth. "I want Sandburg to return until I've given my approval for any changes."

He could hear some shuffling. A second fuzzy blob moved into view, on the other side of the bed. The first shape seemed to drift away. "Guide Grant has retired. You were not compatible. You will be given other choices, James Ellison. Excellent choices." Another woman, one with a voice that hit his ears like ground glass. It was all Jim could do not to shudder.

"I don't consent! Get out, all of you! Bring Sandburg! I want - " He felt a burning sensation at the back of his arm, and his own voice seemed to fade into the air. Two seconds later, it was as if a bank of fog rolled over him, choking out light and sound and warmth.

"We shall return, James Ellison, after the medication has taken effect. Rest."
Like someone had turned off a switch, his muscles went slack. He couldn't move, couldn't cry out. His plea died without crossing his lips.

Sandburg? Where the hell are you?

"So Chancellor Edwards has made her move," Stoddard said, adding more tea to Megan Connor's mug. "Appealing to Ellison's father is the perfect ploy. It's a brilliant move on her part."

"Captain Banks thought it important we keep you apprised," Connor said, fighting away a yawn. Maybe Taggart had been correct when he'd insisted she get some rest before pursuing this. She'd gone home as ordered, showered and halfheartedly consumed a bowl of uninteresting soup. Her leg still ached along the still-healing fracture line, and she'd been unable to drift into sleep. Something about the intersection between Sandburg and the Ventriss case had really gotten under her skin.

Taggart had cautioned her against obsessing over the case, complimenting her on the quality of her short investigation. Connecting Sandburg to Ventriss was an investigative coup, but for Connor it wasn't enough. At some point during her vain attempt to sleep, she'd realized the flaw niggling at her was the motivation, not the chronology. She was missing some vital piece. Her brain by then was racing from one conjecture to the next. She'd given up, dressed and made her way back to the Stoddard home. No harm in delivering her message personally.

And here she was, back in this comfortable study with this thoroughly likable elder statesman and his equally charming wife. Ramona Stoddard had immediately produced a plate of chocolate-nut tarts, buttery and sweet. Connor paused, considering whether it was appropriate to continue. "Minister, you know far more about these situations than I do. I did the research on Blair Sandburg, but I don't really understand the dynamics. Why should Chancellor Edwards even be interested in Sandburg at this point? Her concern is Rainier University, and Sandburg hasn't been enrolled there in years. Why would she go to such lengths to interfere?"

Eli Stoddard crossed his arms in front of his chest and stared at the floor. His frustration was palpable. "Marie Edwards has made a career in the service of wealth and privilege rather than her own merit. She maintains her position only because she continues to be useful. Apparently, one of her benefactors still considers Sandburg some sort of a potential threat. She is acting on their behalf." His shoulders drooped ever so slightly, and a sad weariness blunted his expression. "Or maybe it's no more complicated than revenge, a desire to punish. The Ventriss family is unaccustomed to being denied, even over minor details." He shook his head, and looked mournfully at the treat he'd been enjoying. "Payback because Blair ultimately left Alicia. As if saving his own life wasn't sufficient justification for leaving."

Ramona Stoddard gave a sniff of disgust. "Megan, my dear, if one of those clandestine benefactors made a request, Edwards would act upon it immediately. Her reputation as a "Fixer" is directly dependent on fulfilling each and every request. And honestly, she's a vindictive bitch in her own right. You're searching for logic, but it doesn't have to make any more sense than that."

Eli Stoddard smiled gently at his wife. "I'm afraid Ramona has heard me rail about this situation many times." He swirled his tea in gentle circles. "Contacting Ellison's father may seem a stretch to us, but within the closed society of the landed families? He may be a convenient foil, or there may be a connection that makes perfect sense. He really is perfect; powerful, with a clear, defendable interest and a reputation for getting what he wants. Successful without the taint of corruption." He sighed, again seeming to yield to regret and sorrow. "In any case, I should have anticipated this play. Been ready to deflect it."
Connor shook her head. "Minister Stoddard, you couldn't have known that Ellison was the first son of his family. Major Incident didn't really know the extent of his heritage status and we work with him. It's so rare for members of landed families with that sort of status to serve. I don't think even Captain Banks knew the details of his family situation. If there is a fault, it is mine. I should have considered that angle. Even though Ellison renounced, the information about his parentage would be somewhere. I blew it."

"Both of you stop. Placing blame or responsibility is self-serving, and doesn't help one bit. What's done is done." Ramona Stoddard's tone was a bit sharp. Her hazel eyes snapped with anger. "Now you both know, so get on with it. To me, the real issue is that our dear Blair has been misused yet again. It has to stop."

"She's right, you know," Connor said. "It doesn't help my case either. Blair Sandburg could potentially help us put Ventriss away, and sanction Lord Ventriss for his blatant perversion of the Guide - Sentinel Justice."

"So spend your energy devising a better plan," Ramona said tartly. "Eli, can't someone intercede on Blair's behalf, or James Ellison's?" she asked. "Isn't it possible to file a petition with the Sentinel Commandant? Didn't you say he was helpful, and favorably impressed with Blair's performance."

Eli sighed. "Edward Winter is a fine man, but he's not invincible. He endorsed Blair's approach with Ellison, even though he's still recovering and his opinions had to be communicated through Guide Sonya Kim. It might be quite some time before he can resume his duties. Sentinel Services will be in a holding pattern until he does."

"Someone else?" Connor suggested tentatively.

"Perhaps. Guide Sonya Kim has a formidable reputation in her own right." Stoddard took a healthy bite of his chocolate tart. "S.I. Connor, allow me to plumb the depths of the hierarchy at Sentinel and Guide Services." He gestured toward her untouched pastry. "Restore yourself, young woman. Ramona is correct. Now that I think about it, I have a different assignment for you."

&&&&

Blair stumbled into the pedestrian shelter to wait for the outgoing tram. He kept tripping over his own feet, as if the light slip boots he wore had inches-thick soles of lead. He sank onto the bench provided for waiting passengers, joining the crowd of other citizens waiting to leave the city center. He glanced wearily at the chronograph mounted on the opposite wall. Fortunately, he could get almost everywhere in the city from this transit station, and the wait wouldn't be long. A gust of wind whipped through the station, producing a collective shudder from the waiting citizens. No doubt another cold front moving in from the sound.

Blair rubbed his arms vigorously trying to generate some warmth, regretting his lack of a coat or his usual layers. He got a few glances, no doubt due to his mismatched attire. It didn't matter. All that mattered was getting across town and tucked into his apartment before things got totally unmanageable. Another muscle spasm rippled through him. He struggled to draw deep, even breaths, managing the pain without crying out.

He knew how this would go if he couldn't reestablish some control. Dizzy spells, escalating to disorientation. Nausea. He wouldn't be able to keep much of anything down for days. Muscle spasms escalating into crippling pain. Hallucinations. Following his separation with Alicia, he'd had seizures. Surely this time wouldn't be as bad.

The tram pulled into the station. The cars were packed, and the waiting riders surged forward, each
hoping to claim any remaining comfortable seats. It took all his concentration to move easily, taking long, even steps across the paving. No stumbling, nothing to draw attention. Instinctively, he reached for his civilian transport warrant and froze.

Taggart. Captain Taggart had taken his personal items for safekeeping. They were presumably safe, but definitely not here, where he needed them. He had no identification, no means of accessing transportation or personal funds. He was stranded at the moment he most needed to travel. He couldn't contact anyone, couldn't appeal for help.

His sunny window, his sanctuary, might as well be on the moon.

The doors of the tram rose, closing off his most obvious means of escape. Now he was in real trouble. On foot, he could easily be reeling before he covered half the distance. If he legitimately appealed to a street officer or transport monitor for assistance, he could imagine the disaster in horrifying detail. He'd be treated as indigent, without the rights of a citizen, until his identity could be verified. Considering his appearance, he might even be detained. His low profile, off the grid lifestyle would make verification more difficult. A lazy detention officer might even toss him out of the city as a non-citizen, the most unthinkable of horrors.

Contact Taggart? Even if he could get to Provincial Security Headquarters, how would he possibly talk his way in? He had no record of a contract to back up his story. Any Admittance Officer with an ounce of sense would treat him as deranged or malicious, and he'd end up in security holding or deported just as surely. Go back to the Sentinel Medical Center? Not with Edwards lurking nearby, only too glad to exploit any opportunity to harass or harm him. She and the extended Ventriss family were the reason he'd stayed off the grid since Alicia, part of his tenuous bargain with Lord Norman. He survived only because his contact with Ventriss was kept to a minimum, and he stuck scrupulously to their agreement.

He swallowed hard. Two blocks over, he could catch the non-citizen transport. The open-air cars ran without charge, their sole purpose to move individuals with non-citizen work permits out of major cities before the nightfall curfew. Blair shuddered involuntarily, and not just from the muscle spasms that flickered across his body without pattern or predictability. In the city, without identification, his status might be challenged, but at least the truth would eventually come out. The moment you stepped on one of those cars, you were no longer treated as a citizen, no matter what your true status. Would that be worse than official, within-the-city detention? When you left any semblance of Provincial control and protection, gangs ruled the night and survival depended on wits, your group allegiance, and a considerable amount of luck.

At the moment, he didn't feel particularly lucky.

Still, he could connect with the loop transport, which ran day and night, moving the undocumented between grimy, uncertified worksites and residential shelter camps. If he really couldn't make it home, he could hole up in one of the cars and ride continuously until the worst of severance passed. He might be left alone, but it was a huge risk. If his reactions went badly, he'd be vulnerable, open to assault, kidnapping, all manner of exploitation.

He staggered back to the pedestrian shelter to think. As awful as his existence had been, he'd always clung to his status as a citizen, the one meager thing Naomi had been able to endow him with before she'd disappeared from his life. He sat for a moment, fighting his fear and his growing realization that he didn't have long to make a decision.

Maybe he could thread a middle ground. Walk from one non-citizen transport to the next, working his way in small bursts toward his living quarters. Maybe he could find some means of assistance, ask some kindly soul for the credits to purchase a one-way tram chit. If he was on the verge of
collapse, he could duck onto the non-citizen system as a last resort. Playing a little mental game, he figured a thousand steps would get him to the next boarding area, where he could rest and start again.

One. Two. Three. You can do this. Four.

&&&&

Daryl Banks smoothed the front of his tunic. It seemed an awfully long time since he'd worn civilian clothing out on the street. These days, he was either in uniform or relaxing at home in his all-cotton gi, a generous gift from his father when he'd graduated from the academy. He'd never realized what a luxury a natural fiber garment truly was until he'd put the gi on for the first time. Next time his credit draw was increased, he fully intended to purchase a second one.

It was actually more than just the fabric that made his father's gift precious. He had vivid childhood memories from the early times, when his mother and father had still been joined, before the arguments and silences had torn their home apart. How he'd admired his tall, striking father, and yearned for the times when his daddy returned home, donned his gi and played with his growing son. Receiving his own garment was a subtle reminder from father to son that he'd always been loved, and that his father was proud of him.

He understood so much better now how dedication to duty caused his parents' relationship to crumble. He'd been so angry during the years he'd spent with his mother, and his father's visits were brief and awkward. When he'd chosen the Security Services as his own career, it was if his father had magically returned to his life. Daryl was still in awe of his father's achievements, his rise to command, his honesty and intelligence. And to be asked to run an after-hours errand by his father? This was a pleasure, not an imposition.

He gathered up the personal items belonging to - what was his name? Sandburg. Guide Blair Sandburg. His father hadn't explained all of the details, but he was concerned about the man's wellbeing. Some mix-up had occurred, and he was in the city without his identification and civilian com.

Daryl remembered an afternoon when he'd been about twelve, and had carelessly lost his identification, Provincial Dependent's tram pass, and juvenile-level com caller. He'd been terrified, and the sense of panic still haunted him. It hadn't turned out that badly, other than a lasting lesson about responsibility, but he certainly understood what Sandburg would feel like.

Of course, when his father had mentioned Brad Ventriss, Daryl realized the situation was more complicated than his father could fully divulge. That added a certain element of urgency. Daryl knew that Ventriss was one of those cases - one that kept his father, Taggart and the other members of Major Incident up at night. If the team wanted to make contact with Sandburg without waving a red flag that Major Incident was involved, well, all the more reason to help.

He bounded down the seldom-used stairway of his residence and headed for the tram. He could stop by Sandburg's place, check on him, return the items, and then head for the Civil Servant's market, a delightful perk that came with his new rank. Rumor around headquarters was that a shipment of fresh-picked apples had arrived. No doubt they'd disappear promptly, with virtually nothing left to be sent on to the regular civilian markets. After all, what was the point of having a privilege if you didn't use it?

His identification cypher was sufficient to allow him access to a semi-private tram car. He relaxed, happily planning the rest of his day. He'd promised both his father and himself to spare no further energy fretting over Lady Carolyn Plummer. He'd complete his errand, shop, and then enjoy the evening. Use some of his remaining credits and pay the admission fee for one of the new dance
clubs. Maybe contact that new officer in Info/Com Services. She was lovely, and they'd had a pleasant chat over lunch a few days ago.

The journey took longer than he expected, some problem with an obstruction on the tram corridor. Daryl watched with mild amusement as the transport monitors struggled to shift some sort of citizen protest. He'd been deployed to a few such outbursts as a probationary officer, and was thrilled to be off-duty. Let someone else worry about the annoyances of daily life in Cascade for a change. At least he wasn't packed into one of the open-seating, civilian cars like a sardine. He smiled at the reference, recognizing it as an old one his father used whenever he was annoyed with congested, crowded spaces. Daryl had never actually seen a sardine. He had a vague memory of his father describing them as a salty, delectable food item, now rarely seen. Weren't they a fish? Were they one of those species lost when the coral reefs sickened, or part of the general oceanic extinctions in the last century? He really should have paid more attention in his science courses.

The tram finally moved along, and Daryl emerged in an unfamiliar neighborhood. His father was restrained by need to know, and Daryl was unclear why a Senior Accredited Guide would be living off the grid in an area of the city like this. Streets were narrow, lined with buildings untouched since before the Provincial Period. Not on the level of the dregs you'd find on the outside of the Province, but definitely not prime real estate. Daryl reminded himself to be grateful for his new living quarters. In fact, the thought sobered him. Someone like Sandburg, obviously educated and talented, accepting piecework from Guide Placement, would never acquire a residence in one of the better appointed provincially managed areas. The system seemed unjust, but really, what was anyone supposed to do? He'd studied, worked hard, did his job and reaped the rewards. Was that wrong?

Locating Sandburg's building turned out to be a bit of a challenge, even with Taggart's triangulation data. This part of Cascade was too old and decrepit to be included in the locator grid, which was understandable. The decaying neighborhood hardly seemed worth it. No doubt it would eventually be leveled and redeveloped, and then added to the grid. The typical info/com fixtures were missing were missing. He wandered a bit before deciphering the address codes. How did people ever find their way around from wall numbers, most of them small or half-hidden or in ridiculous places? When he finally arrived at his destination, Daryl stood for a bit, evaluating the dilapidated exterior; four stories, crumbling brick, definitely built before the periods of social unrest. Probably lacked most of the amenities. Security would be abysmal.

He was amazed to find an old-fashioned rectangular elevator inside. The doors still worked when he pressed a wall button, but creaked ominously when they opened and closed. Nothing like the zero-grav tube used in virtually every building, including his own home. Daryl was intrigued, but decided to pass on the experience. The thought of being trapped inside with no way out was a profound disincentive.

As he bounded up the stairs, Daryl inwardly enjoyed the realization that a relatively serious errand was turning into such a lark. He jangled the metal key that was included with Sandburg's belongings. A single lesson at the training academy had instructed him on the use and evasion of mechanical locks, but he'd never actually applied the lesson. It was all rather amusing.

Again, a series of numbers identified Sandburg's room. Nothing on the outside of the door indicated occupation, and the hallway seemed dusty and dim. With a trained eye and close examination, Daryl could see a faint trail of foot traffic to and from the door. Sandburg must be extraordinarily circumspect entering and leaving his rooms. Standing before the door, Daryl carefully lined up the key with a rather complicated looking opening. A split second later, Daryl instinctively tensed into the readiness position he'd been taught.

The door had swung open at the first touch, and he wasn't alone.
Blair lost count around five hundred steps. A wave of dizziness swept over him, and his steady but slow plodding was in jeopardy. He stuttered to a stop, swaying on his feet. He needed somewhere - anywhere - to rest. The good news was that his efforts had gotten him at least halfway to the next civilian transport, the bad news that he'd walked into the business district of Cascade. Sleek towering buildings provided no obvious place for him to regroup. High profile firms like these were very security conscious. You couldn't just burst into a lobby and sit in the corner unnoticed.

Desperate to find a temporary refuge, he angled through a ragged gap in the shrubbery lining the pedestrian walk, just hoping for somewhere out of sight to sink to the ground. Instead, he floundered into a small courtyard. A curved metal settee beckoned seductively. As long as he could pull it off, this was the perfect refuge; secluded and quiet.

He sank down, closed his eyes, and concentrated on even breaths. He gripped the metal seat tightly, consciously overruling the impression he was flipping end over end through the air. When his world gradually came to rest, he glanced around apprehensively, trying to figure out where he was. To his left, a sleek glass wall soared into the sky, the upper panels glistening vibrant blue letters outlining the firm's name.

He recognized the name immediately. Daystar of Cascade ran every major solar project for the province, employing thousands. The firm was highly regarded as environmentally conscious and employee sensitive. This lovely garden was no doubt provided for its lucky employees to use for meals and relaxation.

Green space was precious in the city, and this was definitely not a public area. It would be monitored. Attention was the last thing Blair needed. It was a calculated risk to stay here and recover fully. He tried to rise and quickly realized he needed more time before setting off again. Blair watched apprehensively, waiting for some enormous security guard, with attendant complications, to descend, asking awkward questions he wouldn't be able to answer. If anyone appeared, maybe he could dart back into the street and keep walking.

When no one appeared, he relaxed, ever so grateful for a moment of repose. It was his great fortune that no one appeared to share the space. He mentally recalculated his route. The rhythm of his forced march actually had helped his overall situation. The symptoms of severance hadn't accelerated as he'd feared. Blair couldn't kid himself. To get this far, and continue, his concentration had to be total. He was balancing on a knife edge, trying to expend enough energy to keep going without burning himself into exhaustion and bodily chaos.

He'd take a few more moments. His body went slack, and he allowed his chin to tilt back, conscious of the breeze rippling across his face. With his hair blown back, the angle was perfect for the surveillance monitor recorded a flawless vid image of his face.

"This is completely unacceptable. Explain yourself immediately."

It took a lifetime of training for Chancellor Marie Edwards to withstand the ire of the man who loomed over her. Lord Ellison had a well-deserved reputation for demanding perfection, and was quick to replace those who did not perform up to his expectations. Apologizing would only aggravate the situation further. Edwards regretted her lack of rapport with such a powerful member of the elite, an unhappy oversight on her part. The Ellison family had never accessed her discreet services. The most recent generation of the venerable family was sufficiently competent to achieve without intervention from a special friend. No doubt this man, defined by unrelenting ambition,
despotic attitude and lofty expectations, drove them to it.

She rose, smoothed the fabric of her suit and bowed her head respectfully. She reminded herself to project calm confidence, to purge any nervousness from her demeanor. "Lord Ellison, as I explained, the selection process may be challenging for your son. This was anticipated, and is being allowed for. There is no reason for such anxiety."

"Anxiety!" Ellison snarled contemptuously. "I will not tolerate James being drugged into oblivion. You assured me of your competence in this area. If you can't manage a simple selection procedure, I'll find someone who can."

"As I explained earlier, latency presents special obstacles. No matter who supervises, this will be a challenging transition. Your son's previous association with Sandburg, however brief, makes pairing more difficult. The influence of the man is insidious, but we will work hard to overcome any difficulties. Since our first, and now our second guide offering did not suit your son, we will proceed immediately with the next candidate. All the guide candidates are highly educated and screened for their appropriateness."

"Appropriateness," Ellison said derisively. "You and I may have different opinions concerning what is appropriate for my eldest son. You will present the remaining candidates to me within the hour, and I will judge their appropriateness. In fact, I wish to question more than the remaining individuals. Double the number and have them present at the reception area of Ellison Hall for interview."

"As you wish," Edwards said smoothly, inwardly cursing this arrogant man. Elite Guides didn't cast themselves at just anyone. Since she had precipitated Lord Ellison's involvement, no doubt she would have to secure the presence of additional candidates with credits from her own accounts. "Perhaps you could suggest some particular personality qualities, so that I may screen according to your tastes." The congenial tone of her words nearly choked her.

"Superior competence is your responsibility. All other areas of suitability are mine. Don't drag some waif without pedigree in here. My son carries a fine bloodline, and I will not have it sullied. Yes, that is my expectation. Professional excellence, combined with a clear understanding of the status of my son holds. The creature should have manners, respect for authority, and social polish." Ellison's eyes narrowed. "My son James is willful, and I wish to use this opportunity to return him to his proper place within our family. His guide may pair with him, but will ultimately always answer to me. Only to me. Make sure that is clearly understood by those you supply."

Edwards bowed her head again. "I understand, Lord Ellison. The combination you request is rare, but can be found. If you will excuse me, I will proceed as directed."

Ellison turned his back to her, and stalked across the room, helping himself to the selection of liquid refreshment on the sideboard. Without acknowledging her formally, as her rank deserved, he waved a hand in dismissal. "Be on your way. Don't return without the very best." Drink in hand, he sipped and raked her with a severe glance. "In my organization, those individuals who cannot perform are promptly replaced with those who can."

The unspoken threat if she failed clung to her like a malignant cloud as she hastened from the room.

She went directly to her office at the University. Providing the number and type of guides Lord Ellison was demanding would be nearly impossible within the confines of the University. She'd have to go outside, and that would risk her entire operation. Under the cloak of Rainier University coupled with her position, she could operate with relative impunity. She survived, and profited splendidly, by posing no direct challenge to Guide Services.
How could she possibly siphon off more top tier guides without alerting the hierarchy at Guide Services? The agency guarded its role jealously, and would object strenuously. Edwards didn't want to answer any unnecessary questions. Maybe she could raid Guide Placement for some less than stellar candidates. Possible, but she'd have to front the credits from her own accounts for adequate persuasion, and obtain altered professional credentials. Would establishing a relationship with House Ellison really be worth the expense and risk?

Her interoffice com buzzed. Snarling with fury, she activated her wrist control. "Foster, you idiot! I'm not to be disturbed."

"I apologize, Chancellor." Her office door slid back, revealing Meecha Foster, her Academic Support Specialist. "Professor Okalu is here. She's quite insistent about seeing you."

Her assistant hastily disappeared to reveal the willowy frame and mahogany skin of Elizabeth Okalu, Senior Professor in the Guide Accreditation Program. After Eli Stoddard's resignation, she'd assumed the Chairmanship of Guide and Sentinel Programs at Rainier. It was hard to imagine, but Okalu was almost as much trouble as the departed Stoddard.

"Elizabeth, I must insist you make an appointment," Edwards snapped. "I'm quite busy."

"This will only take a moment," Okalu said coolly. "The deadline for Final Accreditation Projects was three days ago. It is my duty to inform you that fourth-year student Bradley Ventriss submitted his project significantly past the deadline. In addition, major portions of the independent research section are either gibberish, or directly plagiarized from our standard second-year case study module." She tilted her head ever so slightly. "We have removed him from the graduation cohort, and recorded a finding of academic dishonesty."

Edward vaulted to her feet. "You can't do -"

"As a matter of fact, Chancellor, we can. I might add that in this case, the faculty vote was unanimous."

"I should have chaired the review committee," Edwards blurted out.

"Perhaps." Okalu gave her an amused smile.

The attitude pushed Edwards past her breaking point. "Explain yourself," she snapped, leaning forward, her hands pressed against the surface of her expensive desk.

"You were otherwise detained, Chancellor." Another slight smile accompanied that statement. "Pressing University business was the official response to three separate notifications, all of which were validated and recorded." She sighed dramatically. "We had no choice but to proceed without your input."

Edwards stormed around the desk. "Professor, you overreach your authority."

Okula ignored the accusation and stood her ground. "On the contrary, Chancellor, in this instance you might have some difficulty explaining what distracted you from the academic duties which are your primary responsibility. I might add there are no grounds for appeal, as the evidence is incontrovertible. Furthermore, Guide Candidate Ventriss has not remained available for project consultation, as is specified in the University Academic Code, despite repeated attempts to contact him. And in case you were wondering, Chancellor, the notification attempts were also extensively documented."

Oh, she was slick, this one. Just like Stoddard. Always polite, always precisely within their rights,
procedures followed to the letter.

With a smooth, elegant stride, Okula moved toward the door, and turned at the last moment. "I made several of the notification attempts myself. Although it's customary to speak with the student first, Lord Norman Ventriss intercepted my link and demanded to be informed, as is his right as Head of House Ventriss." She flashed a thoroughly disingenuous smile. "Oh, dear. Regrettably, he seemed a bit upset. In fact, you might expect him to call on you in the near future."

The door hissed as it closed, providing a suitable counterpoint to the magnitude of this new disaster.

Carolyn Plummer pushed a rebellious lock of hair behind her ear. After two intrusive interviews, an insulting search of her person, and endless delays, she'd finally been admitted to her family's manor home. Keenly aware that her actions were being observed, she toured the more public areas of the first floor, conjuring up a few tears whenever she thought appropriate. Rage was more accurate than shock and tears, but she kept her true feelings hidden, ever mindful of what she really wanted to accomplish.

Her short tenure in Security Sciences gave her the skills to interpret what she saw. She could discern between areas of the house damaged by the police seizure and search, and those nearly wrecked by the presence of the Patriot Brigade occupiers. The Security officers weren't interested in ripping wallpaper, shattering costly china, or destroying priceless artwork. How could her father have dreamt that he could manipulate a collection of unwashed, lowbred thugs for the betterment of House Plummer? What a disaster his pathetic grab for power had wrought.

She stepped delicately over the remains of a crystal decanter into the private family sitting room. Even the ancestral portraits had been defaced! Her father's investiture portrait, leaned drunkenly against a table with the frame broken, the face mockingly altered with crude markings. With an outraged impulse she couldn't stifle, she snatched an antique letter opener - a useless object left over from another time - and slashed the canvas again and again. She would engineer no rescue for the man who had brought such disgrace upon her family. Father or not, she would supplant him and let him rot in detention.

Remembering her role for the benefit of her watchers, she stepped to the window and again allowed tears to brim in her eyes. The gardens would take decades and untold credits to rehabilitate. Carolyn had no real "Back to Nature" impulses, but she appreciated the grounds as a setting to express power. Staring a bit longer, she realized a clump of blackened, twisted, stumps was the remains of the grove of Garry Oak. Her engagement party had been staged beneath those gracious trees. A painful thought, that. James, handsome and her perfect match in breeding and education, looking every inch the heir in his formal regalia. Her gown, with the matching cape, the family crest and symbols hand embroidered in priceless crystals and pearls. The evening had been perfect, their brilliant future spread before them. Carolyn scowled grimly. The estate wasn't the only issue she intended to remedy, now that real authority was within her grasp.

She continued her tour, going through the motions of notating and grieving over the damage. She made notes she'd never look at again, contacted vendors by com for repairs and restoration she didn't care about. Anything to bore her watchers into complacency.

The interior was a clearly a wreck, the staff scattered. In fact, some were still being questioned by Security Services. She imagined a few would be only too happy to share what they knew of her father's activities. That thought nearly brought another seething fit of anger to the surface. The worthless ingrates would testify against the family that provided their livelihood. The disloyalty was shocking, and she would not forget the wrongs done to her family.
After nearly an hour, she judged that her watchers would be sufficiently lulled into complacency. She’d spare no more time for matters of trivial housekeeping. Carolyn darted into her father's interior office, using her enhanced com unit to adjust the room surveillance ever so slightly. She’d spent four wretched years after James deserted her gaining these technical skills, all in the misguided hope that she could win him back to her side. She might as well use what she knew. The effort certainly had never generated a change in heart from her betrothed.

The elaborated double doors were open, and she didn’t even need to enter the room to know a great deal of damage had been done. The Security Services had obviously stripped every possible item from the room, taking it for further forensic analysis. Her father's computer and vid screen were gone, as was expected. Even so, what the Services might not know to look for was of great value.

Running her hand along a shelf, she located the ornate ledger. Someone, probably her father's valet, had mercifully shelved the volume. According to tradition, the volume normally lay open on her father's desk, harkening back to the Pre-Provincial era. Any individual visiting in a formal capacity signed in these pages. She flipped open the cover and leafed through the crackling paper pages to more recent entries. Sure enough, there was Kincaid's scrawl. Had her father no sense of self-preservation? She quickly slipped the volume into her bag. If the remaining Security officers challenged her, well, she could come up with a plausible story and talk her way out.

Her eyes danced around the chaos in the room, searching for the item she really desired. Beneath an overturned Bombe commode, Carolyn found her prize. The ornately carved box was scratched, one corner crushed, but unopened. She clutched it to her chest in relief. The most critical intimate details of House Plummer were on data pods sheltered unobtrusively in this box. More importantly, it was now safely in her hands. Banks and his trained attack dogs had missed the real prize. When her brothers finally arrived, they would search in vain.

With a satisfied smile, her trophy joined the other plunder in the bag. Carolyn had what she needed, and could bring the charade to a close. Briskly, she spun on her heel. The great curving central staircase of Plummer Hall echoed with her footsteps. If the monitors were still observing, they would note her smile. The next time she used the stairs, she would do so as Lady Plummer, First of House Plummer, escorted by her long-absent consort. James would be forced to see the light. Yes. That would suit very nicely.

Simon Banks stepped out of the shower, relishing the steam which billowed out in his wake. His promotion to Captain had included, among other things, private transport on demand, and an upgraded residence. In line with mandatory conservation policies, most citizens had to hoard their water allotment to enjoy a really long, hot shower. At the end of a long deployment, to be excused from the water limitation and soak for twenty or thirty minutes under the spray was worth almost as much as his credit draw.

As much as he yearned for a long, deep sleep, he had a few tasks to complete. In good conscience, he wanted to make sure Daryl completed his errand successfully. The more he thought about it, Daryl might well be the perfect liaison between Major Incident and their errant guide. He was closer to Sandburg in age, and didn't give off the same air of authority which seemed to make Sandburg so jumpy. The arm's length arrangement would address some of Taggart's legitimate concerns, while
still allowing them to probe Sandburg's usefulness in the Ventriss case. As for Ellison and his obvious need for a guide, well, that was best addressed by Jim.

At a minimum, restoring the young guide's personal effects would be viewed as an act of good faith. With any luck, his additional messages, delivered by a non-threatening presence like Daryl, would convince Sandburg to consent to protection from Major Incident.

Simon had no intention of letting Sandburg disappear for good. Based on long experience, he was certain Ellison would feel the same way. Jim Ellison had a reputation for being difficult, but once a personal connection was made and trust established, he was infinitely loyal. He had no explanation for Sandburg's objections and abrupt departure, but maybe Connor's report would provide some insights. There had to be a way to secure his cooperation.

Grabbing his meal from the warmer, he carried the pasta to his study, eating as he went, and activated the vid screen. Giving a series of oral commands, he brought up the correct Provincial Interagency screen. He could have filed his complaint concerning Provincial Security Director Evans at Headquarters. Taggart had pressed him to file the proceeding jointly, but Simon had deflected the offer. As much as he appreciated the moral support, there was no reason to place both of them in political turmoil. Besides, although their lines of mutual command were fluid, Ellison was officially his direct report. Evans' misguided handling of the siege and the aftermath resulted in the greatest injury to Ellison.

Between bites of pasta, Simon dictated the particulars of his complaint. The more supporting vid and com evidence he added, the angrier he got. The fact that Kincaid had been allowed to wander unrestrained over obvious and clearly stated concerns was clear cut. Ellison and Commandant Winter should never have been exposed to the O.A.V. device. They could have easily lost both of them. Evans might have grand political connections, but it would be hard to overcome these objections. He finished his meal and the complaint at about the same moment. He stretched his aching muscles, poured a cup of coffee, and settled down to reread the complaint. An accompanying statement from Jim would be icing on the cake. Lord William would have to grant him access to his S.S.I. tomorrow at the latest. A bit of a dilemma, that. Jim's unavailability could be used as an excuse to delay the administrative review. The longer the complaint was delayed, the longer Evans would have to defend his position.

Simon sipped his coffee, juggling the myriad political entanglements. To criticize a senior Provincial official, particularly one with aristocratic ties, was inherently risky. The burden of proof rested firmly on his shoulders. The rest of Major Incident would probably suffer if he failed to make his case.

Banks looked around his comfortable home. He'd worked hard, sacrificed much, including his marriage and nearly his son, to climb the ladder to leadership. This one challenge to the status quo could bring it all crashing down. He drew in a deep breath, down the last swallow of coffee, and cleared his throat. "Authenticate identity and status, Simon Edward Banks, Cascade Province Security Services Captain, Major Incident Unit." He allowed the identity scanner to do its work. "Record and archive, official complaint concerning the actions of Provincial Security Director David Evans, dates, events and location per attached. Copy Provincial Governor Thorneville, Cascade Security Chief Warren, Security Services Captain Taggart, Cascade Sentinel Commander Winter, S.S.I. James Ellison, Cascade Province Interagency Prosecutor's Office and self. I declare these charges to be with merit and substantiated under the guidelines of Provincial law and Security Services. End transmission."

He checked the time.

What could possibly be keeping Daryl?
Daryl gently pushed the door to Sandburg's place completely open and stepped across the threshold. He recognized the face that swung into view. His father and Joel had been right. The presence of Brad Ventriss in front of him pretty much confirmed that. Daryl glanced around the place. Two other men, probably paid for by Lord Ventriss, hovered in the background, trying to look inconspicuous.

Not that what they'd been up to was a mystery. The place was a mess. Even the lone upholstered piece, a ratty looking chair that Daryl wouldn't even put in a recycle chute, had been slashed open. Great hunks of old-fashioned padding were strewn on the floor. One of the thugs nervously brushed at his hand, trying to remove the white fluffs that indicted him as the vandal. "Who the hell are you, and what are you doing here?" Daryl demanded, his voice loud and harsh. He gazed contemptuously around the room and smirked. "Does Blair know you're looking for something? Maybe you should have asked nicely first."

The underlings looked chagrined, but Ventriss actually managed to be offended. He advanced on Daryl, completely enraged. "How dare you address your betters in that tone? Do you have it? That bitch woman gave me a corrupted copy. I want the whole thing! Hand it over, or you'll regret it!"

Daryl folded his arms, hoping for a slightly bored look. He was conscious of Sandburg's personal items, currently secured under his clothing at the small of his back. No way were these thugs getting their hands on them. More importantly, the military grade stun pod, an item all off-duty officers were required to carry, rested conveniently at hand. "Or you'll do what? Sic your dogs on me? Maybe I have no idea what you're talking about, sport." He finished with an indifferent shrug. "Or maybe I do."

He was keenly aware of everything happening in the room; the little flick of Ventriss' hand, the other two men moving closer. Not the time to show concern. The criminal element didn't respect weakness. Daryl leaned back against the door jamb. Under the cover of movement, he palmed the stun pod. "For the right compensation, maybe I can get what you want, and we can help each other out. Exchange a little information." Daryl grinned wickedly. "Or maybe I can exchange more than information."

Ventriss twitched uneasily. For all his arrogance, his desperation bled through. The young lord-elect wasn't as smooth as his reputation.

Now what has gotten you in such a panic?

Daryl continued his cool gaze. Something would happen in the next few moments that would determine the course of this encounter. Daryl let the silence stretch, sensing that he had gained the upper hand.

Ventriss looked over his shoulder. The other two men shook their heads ever so slightly. Silently, they filed past Daryl. Ventriss moved to follow, the stopped in front of Daryl. "I want my property. You find Sandburg, you get in touch with me. Come to Cascade Towers West when you have it."

"I didn't hear an offer," Daryl drawled. "How about some good faith credits? Increase my motivation, so to speak."

"You want anything from me, you'd better cough something up quick. Either produce my property, Sandburg or both. I'll pay for speed. I already have plenty of others looking. I found this place, didn't I?"

"If I find him first, you'll get nothing." Ventriss looked back at the shambles he was leaving behind. "That little shit is going to be sorry either way. I have plans for him."

Daryl let out a long breath as the trio departed. Considering what had happened earlier with Megan Connor, they might have come after him. Three on one, whatever response he used in his own defense would probably have tipped them off to his training. The last thing Major Incident wanted was for their interest in the Ventriss-Sandburg connection to be known.

He moved slowly to the window, idly righting a chair, picking up scattered papers on his way to the window. Ventriss' transport was already moving out. Daryl noted it was marked with a family crest, and wondered if the elder Ventriss was aware of his son's activities.

Daryl scanned the room. Some vid records would be ideal, but Ventriss had the means to place a monitoring device, with hopes of catching Sandburg when he returned. For the same reason, he would need to wait before contacting his father, and time was of the essence. No doubt they would try to find out who he was. Without a transport vehicle, he could lose them and give no trace of his true identity.

He jammed the door closed as best he could when he left. Sandburg didn't have much to start with, but the guy didn't deserve to have more destroyed or ripped off. Which led him to the next dilemma. His father wanted to find Sandburg, and they'd need to intercept him before he returned to his own home, or ran into one of Brad Ventriss' hunting pack. The break in the case depended on Sandburg's cooperation. They couldn't keep Sandburg safe if they couldn't find him.

Things had just gotten a whole lot more complicated.

&&&&

Blair staggered into the civilian transport station, his third so far. The trek had not been easy. So many times he'd wanted to give up. As close of day neared, more and more people were crowded into the stations. His situation was getting more precarious. Emotions normally needed to be very intense to affect him. Now the sheer mass of life force seemed to beat against his weakened state.

The only seat remaining was in the far corner of the waiting area. He so wanted to sink into a chair. He took a deep breath and started a circuitous route around legs, parcels, and other citizens moving toward the incoming trams. When he finally reached the lone seat, he couldn't resist curling in on himself. After leaving his last refuge, a raging headache had intensified. Random spasms would grab at odd muscle groups, leaving him to vainly attempt to massage away the knots. One paroxysm in his calf had him hopping on the other foot, trying not to fall. Even the bottoms of his feet knotted, curling his toes in an agonizing dance.

After being hot during most of his walk, he was now terribly cold. He wrapped his arms around himself. Chills and fever weren't unexpected, but they were a warning. Another escalation was imminent.

Breathe deep, ride them out. Think warm thoughts.

He imagined a mug of perfectly heated tea. He pictured himself curled in his favorite blanket, the one Naomi had crafted on a hand loom for his thirteenth birthday and his Citizenship Party. He visualized his sunny window on a warm day, bright sun reflecting off the dust motes in the air. Peaceful. Safe.

Blair became aware of a steady tapping at his knee. He looked up into the eyes of a young child, a
"Don't you feel good?" asked a small voice. The child had huge brown eyes and a mop of tight curls. He wore the red uniform of an early primary student.

"No, I guess I don't feel so good," Blair said, touched by the concern. He shook his head slowly. "Are you with someone? You shouldn't talk to someone you don't know, little guy."

The boy nodded enthusiastically. "I know. Inthuctor Kelly taught uth."

Blair had to smile at the endearing lisp. For the moment he forgot his own difficulties, enchanted by such innocence in a complicated world. He shook his head slowly with a sad face. "But did you forget?"

The sparkling eyes faded. "I gueth." The little one cocked his head and frowned. "But you looked sad before. I can tell."

The tilt of the head did it. If was as if Jim Ellison were standing before him, tilting his head, learning to listen with hyper-hearing for the first time. Tears welled in his eyes. Blair wanted to flee, race away from this small child and his own gut-wrenching sense of loss. Instead his body slumped, unmanned by the unconscious gesture of an innocent.

The boy's face crumpled. He placed his chubby hands on each of Blair's knees, and a tear snaked down his own dusky cheek. "Doesth it hurt? Pleathe don't cry."

&&&&

Megan Connor checked the address, straightened her shoulders, and activated the household visitor's chime. Ordinarily, one could hear the tone when standing at the doorstep, but in this case, she heard nothing. Actually, that was to be expected. The home of a prominent sentinel like the Provincial Commandant would be specially modified.

How do I get talked into these things? Eli Stoddard is a fox dressed up to look like a sweet old man.

The door opened. Megan's first thought was, "Tiny." Though slender, she'd always been relatively tall. This woman barely came to her chin.

Megan immediately produced her credentials, and explained her relationship to Major Incident, James Ellison and Minister Eli Stoddard.

"Please come in, S.I. Connor. I am Senior Accredited Guide Sonya Kim, attached to Sentinel Commandant Winter." In the soft light of the foyer, Megan could appreciate her grace and obvious air of authority. Tiny though she may be, Guide Kim would be a force to be reckoned with.

"If I may be so bold, allow me to inquire as to Commandant Winter's health," Connor asked.

Sonya Kim nodded her head deeply, acknowledging the courtesy. "Such an evil weapon. He continues to improve." For a brief moment her composure faltered. "In my service as a guide, I've never come so close to losing my sentinel. The experience was quite - unsettling."

"If I may be so bold, allow me to inquire as to Commandant Winter's health," Connor asked.

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Connor nodded, appreciating the emotion hidden behind the reserved exterior. Her own partner in Austro-Pacific had been taken by a laser weapon in the line of duty. "I, too, have suffered loss in the line of duty. Please forgive my intrusion at such a delicate time."

Sonya Kim gave her a wan smile. "If you've been sent by Minister Stoddard, I'm sure you would not
be here without cause. He is not a man prone to panic."

"He has asked, and I have deflected him. I gather by your presence that the situation is grave. If you are free to do so, tell me the particulars of the situation. I'll arrange whatever cooperation I can, as long as it doesn't jeopardize my sentinel's recovery."

Megan could certainly appreciate her position. "I understand completely. Perhaps we could sit somewhere? This may take a while."

Guide Kim ushered her into the next room and installed them both in comfortable armchairs. In the barest terms possible, Connor outlined the situation as best she could, the dismissal of Blair Sandburg, the interference of Chancellor Edwards, and the overriding presence of Lord William Ellison. The convoluted nature of the interlocking cases made her task a challenge.

Guide Kim's expression darkened into outrage at the news of Sandburg's absence. "Most unwise. Latency is difficult enough for both sentinel and guide, and their mutual success was quite remarkable. To remove a stabilizing temporary guide abruptly before the selection process has proceeded with clear success -." She paused, clearly stifling a longer rant. "Please continue, S.I. Connor. I judge there is more to this story."

Trusting to Kim's discretion, Connor outlined the unorthodox and potentially criminal connection between Lord-Elect Ventriss, the Ventriss family, Chancellor Edwards and Blair Sandburg. The interrelationships were complicated, but Kim seemed to grasp the significance immediately. She seemed genuinely alarmed by Chancellor Edwards' interference with the new sentinel.

"The Guide and Sentinel Services operate independently, but in light of Commandant Winter's position, sometimes we're privy to guide issues. He was very disturbed at the reports which swirled around the Bannister situation. He couldn't launch an inquiry involving our sister service without substantial proof." She stared intently at Connor. "So I'll ask you. Do you truly have proof?"

"Captains Banks and Taggart thought it sufficient to continue. Minister Stoddard is an evidentiary mother lode."

Guide Kim tilted her head back. "With Commandant Winter's permission, I will search our notes. I believe he was made aware of the disciplinary concerns about Alicia Bannister. Under normal circumstances, he would have been directly involved with her retraining and subsequent lapses in conduct. Circumventing his authority through Chancellor Edwards' influence would be a serious concern. He certainly would not want such blatant interference repeated with James Ellison. I believe you could be confident of his complete cooperation."

"Has the Commandant recovered sufficiently to assist actively at this point?" Connor tensed. This was the all-important question, the one Eli Stoddard had sent her to ask.

Kim studied her hands, neatly folded in her lap. "No, he is not, but that won't deter him. Sentinels tend to be motivated by the needs of others rather than their own best interests. Commandant Winter will gladly fling himself into this morass."

"Even if it is a risk?" Connor asked.

"Especially if it's a risk," Sonya Kim replied, almost wistfully. "Considering their mutual experience, he will be keenly aware that what may be difficult for him, is doubly so for James Ellison." She
smiled through her concern. "I learned early in our pairing that if Commandant Winter seeks the impossible, it is a vain hope to dissuade him."

She rose gracefully. To Connor’s eye, energy fairly vibrated off her slim frame. "Please notify the Captains and the Minister that I will apprise the Commandant before the day is out." She extended her hand. "Officer Connor, I think our association will be a productive one."

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Same room. Same smell.

Jim Ellison consciously froze, keeping his breathing slow and shallow. He didn’t want anyone swooping down on him this time. The last time had brought a male guide to his side, with the same results. He just couldn’t tolerate another intrusion.

What do you know? Think.

Well, he actually knew a lot. He’d been trained as a medic, and how to modify treatment for a sentinel, at least in general terms. In covert services, he’d been trained to subvert medical monitors. And hadn’t Sandburg taught him…

Don’t think about Sandburg right now.

They were using drugs. He’d felt something on his arm when they’d knocked him out the first time. Jim reviewed the few sentinel lectures included during his medic training. Lots of direct methods of drug delivery were avoided with sentinels, something about reactions at the administration site. So what was the substitute? Slowly, careful not to change position too dramatically, he reached across his chest and under his other arm. Yes. Under the skin, the electomed patch. He had no sense of the time elapsed, but the insertion couldn’t have occurred that long ago. The incision wouldn’t be tightly healed.

He ran his fingers along the back of his arm, fussing out the edges of the EM-patch. Damn. It was a big sucker. At least these senses were good for something other than wrecking his life. Ruthlessly, he dug with his fingernails along the nearest edge. It hurt, but he tore away skin along the incision, and pinched the edge of the patch with his nails. Jim kept breathing raggedly through his mouth, pulling the patch steadily from under his skin. The exercise felt worse than a full heat stun, which would sear your skin clear off, which was clearly impossible. Damn senses. He gritted his teeth and kept going. The patch finally pulled away and he crushed it into a useless sticky ball.

Task One complete.

He realized he was starting to sweat. This had been easier with Sandburg. He could almost hear the guy coaching him along. Breathe. Concentrate. Listen.

Oh yeah. Listen. Back at the estate, he’d started to hear heartbeats. If he could do it once, he could do it again. With a bit of concentration, he could hear airflow shushing through a nearby vent. No breathing other than his own, and definitely no heartbeats. He was alone this time. Excellent. No one to pounce, at least in the immediate vicinity, although someone was probably watching. He might have a little time if he was smart.

He sent his hands searching again, determining the boundaries of his bed. He vaguely remembered the raging argument when Sandburg had banished the surface scanners from his treatment suite. Actually, he remembered them real well. Like acid boiling on his skin. The argument had taken place outside his room and some distance away, but he still heard a lot of it. His skin told him when
Sandburg got his way, and he'd nearly sobbed in relief. So the monitors were probably still gone. If he was careful, stayed below the general room sensors, he might make it.

He pulled himself to one side and dropped to the floor. Not the most graceful landing, and he groaned on impact. His reflexes were off, no doubt the residue of whatever drug they'd pulsed him with. One thing for sure, he wasn't going to lie around letting strange people treat him like an experiment. These people were like a colony of toothed Vegan leeches.

Allowing for the crappy muscle control and the monitors, he slithered along the floor. He triggered the door sensor, shoved his body through and struggled to his feet, grasping at any handhold he could find. He had to use the wall to stay upright. Well, to stay leaning might be more accurate. Hand over hand he moved down the hallway.

Another trickle of sweat ran down his back. Vision zoomed in and out, which was really disorienting. He concentrated, and just couldn't control it. He'd like to sit down, but his keepers would pounce for sure. Anger was going to keep him on his feet. Considering his condition, Jim realized he'd have to revise his plan of outright escape. That was totally unrealistic. He could, however, reassert his rights and order any other presumptive idiots around. What he needed was a touch pad, keyboard and vid, anything to record a revocation of treatment privilege.

He'd never been in this place, didn't know how it was laid out. The hallway was pretty long. Logic dictated a Sentinel Medical Center wouldn't have too many treatment rooms clustered together. People with exceptional hearing wouldn't favor proximity. Some of these doors had to lead to private offices, duty stations, and they would have record devices. Even a visitors' lounge with a com unit would do.

He studied the entry pad adjacent to the next door he reached. Touch sensitive, probably with identity coding through skin protein. State of the art, ironclad security for the normal citizen populace. His pained frown twitched into a smirk. Wasn't it convenient that breaking and entering was in his skill set?

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Daryl emerged from the Mercantile Center at a dead run. His superiors would have his hide for sloppy technique, but he'd been forced to lose Brad Ventris and his buddies without looking like he was losing them. They had a distinct advantage, using entrances and routes reserved for the aristocrats that were more direct than the ones he was accessing. One flash of his identity cipher, with his security encryption would have shifted the advantage in his favor, but the whole point was to keep Ventris unaware of Major Incident's interest.

He vaulted over a minor tram feeder and veered into a housing unit. This time he did use his cypher to blow right through the entrance security. He immediately slowed to a walk. The place was huge, and catered to the young with low status and low paying vocations. Remembering his evasive course, he changed his posture and gait. Ventris could buy the casual observer in a place like this. Daryl knew from the teasing of his own friends that posture was enough to identify a security officer, but he could blend in if he tried.

He emerged on the far end of the complex, totally alone. He activated his com and requested immediate transport. Normally, he'd head straight for his dad's place, but Taggart was closer. Once Brad Ventris realized their quarry had evaded them, they'd turn all their attention to finding Sandburg, who was still wandering around somewhere, unprotected.

Vulnerable and hunted was not a good combination. Fortunately, the Security Services should be a lot better at hunting than Ventris.
Blair collapsed to his knees in a narrow gap between two buildings. The uneven pavement aggravated the host of bruises he already had. The space seemed to be populated only with refuse containers waiting to be combined into the larger disposal bins. So much for efficient recycling.

His graceless descent had landed his hands in some gooey, disgusting, partially decayed substance. Revolted, he rubbed his palms along the building surface, and then the thin fabric of his trousers. Not that a little slime was worse than his last escapade. Even a frantic departure wouldn't erase the memory of such a horror. That sweet boy's young mother caught one glimpse of her child crying and assumed the worse. She'd flown at him, practically accusing him of being a predator.

Blair crouched back on his heels, pressed against the building, feeling emotionally ill. At the first hint of his mother's distress, the boy, who needed gentle soothing, had become distraught, too young to articulate his own feelings. Completely unable to cope or explain, Blair had fled. No doubt the civil authorities were already alerted and searching for him as a child violator. How would he ever untangle this new mess on top of everything else?

A sensible explanation wasn't that farfetched, not that anyone would wait to hear it from someone like him. Most guides were trained to their roles, but a small percentage were born to it, destined by genetics and temperament. The child was a born guide-to-be, too immature to be identified yet. Blair vividly remembered similar scenes from his own childhood, reacting with unexplained intensity to the emotions of others, not true empathy but a pronounced sensitivity to others, the hallmark of about six percent of all potential guides. Even now he didn't like to remember Naomi's reaction, at least once she'd deduced the cause. No regular school, no friends his own age, always hiding and moving.

In Naomi's world view, she was preserving his freedom. Would his life have been any different if his mother's response hadn't been so extreme? He'd never understood Naomi's total rejection of his talents. Would his mother have been more cautious in her choices if her son had been trained as a child instead of careening into guidehood without a plan? And ultimately into the clutches of Lord Norman Ventriss?

Without warning, a wave of nausea caught him unawares. He promptly deposited a pool of his own bile, contributing to the ugly soup on the pavement. He gagged helplessly as his stomach rebelled again and again, adding to his misery. Still on his knees, he pressed the heels of his hands into his temples. Wandering in his own thoughts had broken his concentration. How he was going to regret the loss of composure!

Severance reaction now had the upper hand. Whatever hope he'd had of making it home was gone. His chances hadn't been that great to begin with. This latest disaster definitely shifted the balance of his calculations. He couldn't face being detained and questioned for a crime involving a child. He'd open his veins first. The civil authorities might comb the Cascade proper, but they wouldn't search the non-citizen transport. Once a non-citizen was headed out of the city, they really didn't care. Wasn't that a general complaint, that low-level criminals escaped to the noncitizen areas with impunity? No, once he hit the transport, any pursuit would be called off.

As he imagined the ugly hours he'd face until the physical complications of severance eased, he had another sickening realization. The tram station had surveillance. The civil authorities wouldn't chase him, but he'd easily be screened out when he tried to reenter Cascade. Without being able to produce his identity cyphers, they'd act first and ask questions later. If he left the city now, his life as a citizen might well be over.

Karma.
Odd that he would resurrect that ancient term now, but it fit. A religious concept, your past actions influence your present. In light of his years with Alicia and since, perhaps appropriate. Those glorious hours, when he’d functioned as a true guide, bringing James Ellison back from the brink, weren’t they sufficient compensation for a flawed life? He been tricked and coerced into accepting Alicia. He’d ultimately failed her, failed as a guide, failed as a son. Maybe this was only cosmic justice.

Whatever the dangers he would face outside the veil of Provincial protection, they were preferable to the humiliation that awaited him. And Jim? What would Jim think when he heard that the person he’d trusted was capable of such perversion? No. He would leave. Get on the non-citizen loop and stay there. If he were meant to survive, he would. If not, he would cling to whatever dignity he could muster and accept his fate.

It made no sense to be subtle. With the little energy and ability he had left, he began to run.

"You have no right! No right whatsoever!"

Carolyn Plummer eyed her eldest brother coolly. Gerald was charming and dimwitted, a younger manifestation of their father, Connal. Of course, he'd arrived with Philip in tow. Whoever was on her security desk would be looking for a job as soon as she dealt with her two siblings. And to allow them in here, of all places, to ambush her in her own quarters.

She removed her outer wrap, aiming for unconcerned nonchalance, dismissing Gerald's outburst. At the same time, she tucked her bag out of sight, with its precious cargo from their wrecked family home, into the depths of the storage recess. The automatic doors closed with a reassuring whoosh as they sealed her treasure away.

"Speaking of rights, Gerald, this is my personal apartment. Would you like me to have you escorted from the premises?"

"You can try," her other uninvited guest, Philip, snarled. "Spare us the innocence. You've already been to the Executive Council, misrepresenting our interests and the obvious succession precedents. Did you think we wouldn't notice?"

Carolyn laughed carelessly. "Of course I thought you'd notice. I also thought that when you descended on me, screeching like children, it wouldn't matter one bit." She tucked her com unit into the household infogrid with exaggerated care, enjoying the moment. She did sympathize with Philip, to a point. So difficult to be a second son. Philip was taller, brighter, and more competent than Gerald, but never the one to garner their father's special attention. He'd always harbored not-so-secret hopes to be chosen over his elder brother when their father passed, in the off-chance that merit would trump birth order.

It didn't matter. Poor complacent fools, they'd never figured her into their pathetic equations. She hadn't been doing the drudge work of Seneschal for the last few years for nothing. They really should have been paying attention.

While Gerald sputtered in outrage, Phillip raised his hand coiled to strike. Aggressively, she stepped forward, shaking a finger under his nose. "Do it," she challenged. "Assault my person. I'd love nothing better than to have you watch my confirmation as Head of House from a detention cell."

She turned her back contemptuously and crossed to the bar. She briefly considered opening champagne, just to watch their outrage, but chose a scotch, neat. Not her favorite, but her father's and
grandfather's libation of choice. The drink of destiny, so to speak. She smiled inwardly as her brothers registered that subtle message. She could run rings around both of them, and they knew it. If her father had died a natural death, tradition might have weighed in their favor. As it was, Connal Plummer's rash behavior, and her own careful planning, had shifted the balance to her advantage.

She sipped her drink. "Let's be honest, brothers. While the two of you have been busy vacationing, cheating on your wives and burning credits like dry leaves, I've been learning House Plummer inside and out."

"Tradition dictates -"

"Tradition be damned, Gerald," Carolyn said crisply. "Consider this. Our dear father openly colluded with Garrett Kincaid. My sources inside Security Services tell me a sonic cannon was installed on the grounds and being prepared for firing."

Philip gasped. At least he understood the implications of violating a planet-wide weapons ban.

Carolyn continued. "He wasn't careful. The most incompetent junior prosecutor will connect the evidence he left lying around with a child's color wand. If I take the reins quickly, I might be able to keep the Province from seizing our lands and assets. If we squabble amongst ourselves, the Families will stand aside. No one will defend us. The Province will move quickly in the absence of opposition."

"We didn't know what father was doing. I can proclaim our innocence as well as you," Gerald said sulkily.

"Really? Come on, Gerald. Now, at the time of crisis, you're prepared to finally step forward? After years of shirking any semblance of leadership or responsibility? Tell me, brother dear, who's the Presiding Officer of the Executive Council this year?"

"That's beside the point -."

"It's Harcourt, you fool. Who's in debt to whom? Where are the Plummer Family secret accounts located and how do we access them? Now that the Security investigation has stripped our estate bare, where are the secret records you could use to mount a defense?" Gerald shifted his weight from one foot to the other, scowling. His silence spoke volumes. Carolyn's heart soared in this moment of triumph. "You know what you desire, and next to nothing else," she continued. "Even if I dumped the official records at your feet, you couldn't do it. I can uncover things that will help us, and hide the things that won't. You're absolutely helpless without me."

"And for this - service - I should give you full control? Relinquish my status as first heir? No thought from you that it's your duty to your father and your Family," Gerald stated flatly.

She struggled to keep the triumph off her face. "Think about it, both of you. Do you want to risk everything for yourselves and your children to the nth generation? How would you like life without a title? Your lovely homes on the auction block? Without the credits that support your lifestyles?"

"You'd suffer the same fate," Philip said sternly.

"Guess what, boys. I'll access the secret accounts, and there's not a thing you can do about it. You'll walk away without a credit to your name. I have a profession, and marital ties you can't claim. I'd rather assume leadership, but I can survive this, no matter how it turns out. Are your wives, your children, your friends going to stand by your side when you're living in fifth class Provincial housing and eating surplus cereal and dried protein extract, with nothing but citizenship to your name?"
The two of them stood in stunned silence.

"You'd do this?" Gerald said with total contempt. "To your own family, to us, to the nieces and nephews that share your blood?"

"The other Families won't buy it," Philip said. "They'll see through it."

"Wake up, brothers," Carolyn said harshly. "Our position is worse than you think. The rest of the Council won't necessarily come to our aid. In their eyes, father has placed the entire aristocrat community at risk. The landed families take care of themselves first, as always. Where do you think we'll be if they turn on us? In terms of relations with the citizenry, it would be a good move. Right now, some of them are calculating their options. Which of our surrounding neighbors would be happy to carve up the estate to add to their own? Who owns investments and businesses that could absorb the ones we control? Our only hope is to make them believe they are safer supporting us than abandoning us to the wolves. We can't do that without the promise of sound leadership. That's why I went to the Council, and if you had a brain, you'd have realized it. You come after me, and we'll all look like spoiled children. They'll move to isolate the contagion."

"We'll agree to give you temporary control," Gerald managed through clenched teeth. "Cede you a generous monetary settlement."

She shook her head, ever so slightly. "But Gerald, I want it all." She took another sip of her drink, watching them over her glass. "If you deny me, I'll let you go down with Father. You don't even know enough about what he's done to protect yourselves."

With a murderous glare, and shouted threats, Gerald slammed his way out of the room. True to form. She'd figured him for bark but not much bite. Philip, however, was a different matter. He helped himself to a glass and a generous portion of scotch. His stare reminded her of a snake waiting to strike.

"Cruel trick of fate that you weren't born first, Philip. Were you figuring Gerald for a convenient figurehead?"

Her brother sniffed dismissively. "Of course. You may have overstepped yourself, Caro. Gerald has friends. He's far more popular than you."

"I can handle Gerald," she said with a shrug.

"Delicate balance, sister mine. As you said, the Families look out for their own interests. They'd rather have Gerald - not too bright, easily manipulated Gerald, than an ambitious, harpy female they can't control. Push too hard, crush him too visibly, and they'll reject you, too."

"It always came down to the two of us, didn't it Phil?"

"Your overconfidence is your weakness." Philip tossed back the rest of his drink. "You've overlooked a few things. Your hereditary consort rejected you, and old man Ellison didn't give you a platinum-plated guarantee of support. You're not going to be elevated with the succession of the House in doubt."

Carolyn's stomach flipped, although she tried to cover. Philip's dark eyes glittered, conscious of the point he'd just scored. Yes, he'd always been the more devious of her two brothers. It wouldn't do to underestimate him.

"You aren't the only one who has sources, little sister. You've courted William, and his response was profoundly neutral. Consider the possibility that I can make things difficult for you, hmm? How
would you like the Executive Council reminded that James, eldest son of House Ellison, not only declined to share your charming embrace, but refused you a child. He wouldn't even consent to father an heir with you through a surrogate. Takes the blush off the rose a bit."

"How dare you!" she raged, fighting back an unwanted flood of tears.

"How dare I? Quite the accusation, coming from you. How does that compare with refusing to defend your own father and undermining the order of succession? You've planned an impressive coup, my dear sister, but James is one of many rocks in your road. Why trust the woman who can't even manage to preserve her own family-arranged match? If you can't solve that little problem, the Families might prefer a compromise."

Carolyn hurled the glass at him, which he neatly ducked. Philip began to laugh. "Just like when you were a girl, resorting to temper when you couldn't conquer all in your path. No wonder James left you. You need me on your side, Carolyn. If you cut me out, I have no reason not to play the spoiler. Think about how you might make it worth my while."

He sauntered to the door. She spat invectives at his retreating back. He paused on the threshold. "I'll tell you something else you don't know, sister. While you been flitting around, courting the gray-haired Lords and playing the politics of power, James may have played the ultimate trump card."

He snickered in a self-satisfied way that dated back to their childhood. "You'll find out eventually, but for now, I think I'll keep that news to myself."

As the door closed behind Philip, Caroline felt unexplainably cold.

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The first room was for laundry storage. Rows upon rows of shelved linen, the stuff reserved for sentinels, wrapped in expensive unbleached paper. Useless. The second was an office. Fumbling along the surface of the desk, Jim found an audio device with a vid screen. His vision was still unreliable, but touch was amazing. He could sense the electronic pulses under the panel, and defeated the security protection in record time. From somewhere in the facility, he could hear an alarm tone. He was in, but he didn't have long.

Holding the palm-sized device before his face, he dictated his statement.

"I, James Joseph Richard Ellison, Senior Security Investigator, Major Incident Unit, Cascade Province, First Son and Heir of House Ellison, revoke treatment rights to any and all persons, save Captain Simon Banks, Major Incident Unit of Cascade Provincial Security. Captain Banks is my sole designee in all elements, medical, financial and legal, in full accordance with my rights as an aristocrat citizen."

Deviation with my wishes represents an illegal interference with an ongoing Security Investigation and forbidden without legal order from Provincial Security."

"I refuse further medical treatment in this facility. I discharge myself and officially declare my intention to leave immediately."

"I hereby record my identity and status." He felt for the retinal scanner, held the amorphous gray mass before his face. The audio chimed its successful recognition scan. He immediately pressed both thumbs to the screen.

"Copy of this declaration, send please." As feet pounded ever closer, he rattled off the com addresses for Banks, Taggart, his own legal advocate and his brother. On a final impulse, he included Chief
Warren, the local Security Supervisor. As the door slid open, he flipped the screen. "Play and display statement. Max volume and brightness."

The sound of his own voice blasted out as people poured into the room. Jim recoiled but kept the device steady. He couldn't see the wall display, but it was there. The incoming troop of people skidded to a stop. Jim awkwardly retreated behind the desk.

"We're here to help you, James Ellison." A woman's voice, the one with the voice like razors. The one with the drugs. Jim grabbed the nearest chair and positioned it between himself and the voice. He couldn't see very well, but he could hear her sidling her feet across the surface of the floor, inching closer to him. She wasn't going to get near him again. "Get out," he said firmly. "Every last one of you. Only a single Order and Discipline Monitor may remain to protect my rights. I want the room sealed."

She was moving closer. "James, your sentinel status requires treatment. We will -" 

Jim rose his voice to a shout. "Officer, as Lord-elect of a recognized Family, I demand you honor my directives. Clear this room at once."

He could detect slow shuffling toward the door and out. A gray, person-sized mass crossed his field of vision. "I'm sorry, Chancellor Edwards, you'll have to leave. The order is legitimate, and he outranks all of us in ten different directions." Jim heard her protest, and the man's rebuke. The door closed, and quiet descended. One heart beat left. Good.

"Ellison, right?"

Jim nodded.

"You want some street clothes, buddy? You have a exceptional body, but if you didn't know, you're a bit-overexposed."

Jim looked down. Oh, great. He hadn't really been paying attention to anything other than his objective - escape.

"That would be nice." He fumbled for the chair and sat down, if for no other reason than to cover his embarrassment. His companion gave a series of crisp, decisive orders. A few minutes later, the door opened and closed again.

"Okay, buddy, the clothes are in front of you. Someone's coming for you, so I'll just step out while you - uh - get decent." Jim detected a muffled snicker. "I always heard you Security guys could make an entrance, but this will be a legend, at least around here. Brightened up my day, that's for sure."

Jim nodded his thanks. Under the circumstances, there really wasn't much he could say.

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Daryl leaned on the controls and made the turn at max speed. The flyer nearly rolled past vertical, but the handling was really impressive. For a guy older than his dad, Taggart had pretty impressive personal transport. And here he'd always associated Joel with sensible, family transportation.

Joel snapped off the transmitter as he finished his message to Major Incident. "Damn, boy. Does your father know you pilot this way?"

"You said 'all due haste'. Just following orders, Sir." Daryl hazarded a grin. His normally
authoritative, confident father had been a basket case when his only child got a personal transport license. Things hadn't changed all that much.

"Well, if you smash my baby, I'll take retribution. Consider yourself warned."

Daryl took the next corner with a little less verve. "Dad on his way?"

Joel snickered. "Not yet. Ellison apparently returned to form, and started his trademark freelancing. Something about naked in the halls and breaking into secured offices. Simon's gone to retrieve him before anything really serious happens. The Sentinel Treatment Center staff is either irate or laughing their heads off."

"What about Sandburg?" Daryl asked. Taggart had reacted immediately to his report and the fact that Brad Ventriss had been in Sandburg's residence. Major Incident in action could move mountains, but the longer Sandburg was on his own, the greater his danger. The Ventriss hunting packs were out, and time was still slipping away.

"Filters are already working, full city deployment and clearance two priority. The infotech people are probably screaming that we're jamming up their system. Should be in place with positioning by the time we get in. He's got to be somewhere."

Daryl whistled softly. "That's seriously stepping on someone's toes. How did you manage that level of clearance?"

"We're classing this as part of the Plummer/Kincaid investigation, and that's at the top of everyone's heap. It's not a stretch. Sandburg's a valuable witness to back up Ellison's testimony."

They were already in the priority airspace, but still much faster than the prevailing speed. Daryl swooped over two sport models and watched them shimmy in his wake. "Uncle Joel, my dad groused, but is it really like this most of the time?"

Joel braced himself against the control console as they made another spinning dive, gaining more speed. "Pretty much."

Daryl couldn't spare the time to look, but from his voice, it sounded like Joel was grinning.

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The slap resounded through the room. Brad Ventriss stood motionless, his head swiveled to the side and down from the force of the blow, a droplet of blood gathering at the corner of his mouth.

"Don't lie to me! The most senior member of your faculty informed me personally!"

"Father, I'm sure this is a misunderstanding."

"Oh, there's a misunderstanding, all right. You misunderstood that parading around like a cheap bully doesn't fix anything. We pay Edwards to take care of this sort of thing, and instead you resort to pathetic intimidation tactics and sloppy execution. Copied from a learning mod? By the ancestors, we probably donated the funds to the University for the fool who authored the damn thing. You're a disgrace as a son."

Norman Ventriss paced across the study, his footfalls muffled by the thick hand-woven rug worth more credits than most civilian apartments. Brad looked away in bitter silence, remembering other dressing-downs at his father's hand, some expected and probably deserved. This one, though? He'd thought Sandburg was arrogant, but thoroughly cowed. He'd never challenged him, not really. The
credits he demanded were annoying, but basically throwaway. Had Sandburg tampered with the
original project, or had that filthy bitch altered it? His upper lip twitched in anger. It must have been
the woman, not that it mattered. He'd kill them both.

Another slap jerked him back to reality. "Pay attention, boy! What were the arrangements? Who
supplied the work?"

"Sandburg. He didn't keep the prearranged exchange, and a woman showed up at my apartment and
offered to deliver for him. It was the normal data pod." He swallowed, knowing his next statement
would infuriate his father. "The project was already late. I took it and submitted it."

His father cast a glance skyward. "And you didn't have the good sense to screen it? The break in the
usual routine wasn't enough to put you on your guard?"

"Sandburg never -"

Another slap. "I raised a fool. Your last academic requirement and you didn't check it. You should
have come to me the moment there was an irregularity." His father gave him a look that Bradley
knew all too well, the one that found him wanting in all respects, usually followed by a warning that
his place as the next Head of House was not assured. There were cousins, however distant, with
more promise. "I hold Blair Sandburg in the palm of my hand, and you never say a word. One
reminder from me of dear Naomi's situation and he would have produced ten projects."

"Father, I've had Sandburg dancing to my tune for years without a hitch. I'm perfectly capable of ..."

"And clearly, you are not." And just that quickly, the rage dissipated. Brad lowered his gaze rather
than meet his father's stare. Lord Norman's icy calm pronounced the verdict yet again - not strong
enough, not clever enough, not responsible enough.

Never, ever good enough.

The silence was enough to crush him. "Father, I apologize." Brad wiped at his chin, before the
trickle of blood from his lip could plummet to defile the room or its furnishings.

"You are confined to the estate. You will not return to the Towers. Go to your rooms. Did you
supply some material for Sandburg to work from? Was that your usual procedure?"

"Yes." Brad struggled to keep any hint of resentment out of his voice. "This was just the final edit."
Well, not exactly. Sandburg had done the entire thing and forwarded a copy of the sources for form's
sake. No need to make a bad situation worse by confessing to that.

"I'll send one of your oafs to retrieve the earlier material. You did keep a copy of that, didn't you?
Even you wouldn't be that stupid."

Brad managed to nod.

"I'll think of something. We're not going to jeopardize the pairing. The furies know I paid enough for
that arrangement. He's a fine, highly placed sentinel, and you're no prize. He won't take you without
an untainted degree. Now, get out of my sight. Go to your room, like the incompetent child you are."

"Father, please -"

"Silence. You will do nothing without direct instruction from me." Lord Norman Ventriss froze, his
scowl reflecting his level of concentration. "First of all, we'll get Sandburg under wraps. Lay the
blame at his feet. Call it sabotage. Gresham will think of something." He stabbed at the com unit,
summoning his Seneschal.

Lord Norman had sought outside the family for his second in command. Seneschal Gresham Knowleton appeared immediately. His hulking frame bespoke long years of service in military assault units, but he was a man of many subtle talents. Brad colored with embarrassment as Knowleton's pale gray eyes raked across the room, taking in the reddened cheek and the dribble of blood that no doubt smeared his chin. "Yes, Lord Ventriss?" he said, the tone respectful and bland.

His father summarized the situation in brisk, angry tones. Brad shifted angrily, fully aware that his presence had all the importance of spent energy deck. Knowleton nodded, assessing the situation in his calm, efficient manner. "Obviously, Blair Sandburg is in the city somewhere. We'll find him." He looked significantly at Lord Norman. "Once your son obtains his accreditation, Sandburg's usefulness is much reduced. As we stage his culpability, we might consider..."

"My thoughts exactly. Burn him." Lord Norman's eyes flicked to his son and back. "Perhaps you can tidy up some other issues concerning my son in the process."

Seneschal Knowleton was nothing if not efficient. His orders were crisp as he set a search in motion, calling in markers from the local Order and Discipline monitors currently on the House Ventriss payroll, deploying members of the household guard in pairs of two. "Do we have any knowledge of Sandburg's last whereabouts, Lord?"

Lord and Seneschal lasered in on the disgraced son. Brad rattled off the address he'd discovered. He started to recite how clever he'd been obtaining the information, only to be silenced with two sets of contemptuous eyes. Damn them. Damn them both, dismissing him in this manner.

The teams went out in short order. The discussion shifted to the university. "I'll arrange for a new writer to complete a suitable substitute. We'll utilize the people we have on retainer in Europe," Knowleton said. "Once we have Sandburg in our physical custody, we can concoct a plausible story, and forward it to Rainier. Shall I contact the professor directly?" His voice trailed off as Seneschal and Lord left the room, absorbed in their plans.

Brad Ventriss remained, nearly vibrating with suppressed, indignant rage. Once again, he was left to consider yet again his failings as a son and Lord-elect. He'd show them. He'd show them all what he was capable of.

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Satisfied that Sentinel Commandant Winter would actively support their efforts if needed, strengthening the case seemed the next priority. Connor trooped to the Stoddard home. Yes, she was technically disobeying orders to rest at home, but there was so much to do. So what if she was a little tired? Maybe she'd break down and try that vile coffee Captain Banks was always concocting.

Well, maybe the coffee was too much. She could just think lively thoughts instead.

She was seated with both Stoddards, sorting through the hodgepodge of evidence Eli had gathered. She might be overstepping her authority, but even at a first glance she could tell the case would be exponentially stronger. Eli Stoddard was a brilliant man with phenomenal recall. Megan could ask a question or a date, and he could immediately suggest a record or communication that was pertinent. He could quote notes on a conversation down to the correct phrasing.

He just couldn't always find it, and evidentiary organization seemed beyond him.

His wife, Ramona, on the other hand, had an almost magical ability to locate the desired item. Her
style was quite different from her husband's. She would allow him to flounder for a moment, then
casually flip through a few piles and produce the sought after scrap. While her husband sputtered,
she cheerfully informed Connor that dear Eli, brilliant though he was, never had understood basic
filing. When the good minister lodged a protest, she'd hand him a cookie and tell him to quit being so
vain. Between them, Connor couldn't stop laughing. Her only defense for a total lack of
professionalism was the progress they were making.

When her com unit sounded with a priority code, she answered it without hesitation. Her eyes went
wide, and even the two Stoddards could hear the booming baritone of none other than Simon Banks.
Ellison had broken out of the treatment center, and Sandburg was being pursued by Ventriss and his
entourage.

Connor had an intimate view of their attentions. Priorities shifted dramatically. Sandburg needed
immediate protection, but first they had to find him. She looked helplessly at the evidence covering
the perfectly lovely dining table. "Don't worry about it, dear," Ramona Stoddard said, waving the
other two on their way. "I won't hide anything. Eli, dear, do take a coat."

Simon Banks stormed through the halls of the Sentinel Treatment center. He homed in on his
wayward investigator by searching out the largest gaggle of distraught personnel. Leave it to Ellison
to draw a crowd. Most of them scattered as he barged into the nondescript office the fugitive was
holed up in.

"What's this? Furniture storage?" Simon stopped in his tracks and frowned, confronted by a
precarious mounded mishmash of chairs, worktables and other furniture. A lone figure popped up
from behind. "Jim! What's with the - fort?"

"Very funny, sir." Jim was working his way around the outside of the makeshift barrier, using his
hands to navigate around the uneven boundary. "My vision is pretty messed up. I didn't trust that
shrew with her drugs to not come after me. This was the best I could do as a deterrent."

"You look awful," Simon blurted out. Not the most constructive comment, but accurate. His officer
was dressed in too-short medical scrubs, a sleeveless tunic that was too long, and a ratty blanket
wrapped around his shoulders. "What did I overhear coming in? That you were - exposed?"

"Minor operational difficulty, sir. Fashion wasn't my first concern. Dictating a statement took
priority."

Ellison managed to complete his journey around the barricade. He reached out with his hand in
Banks' general direction, a silent plea for assistance. Simon grasped the hand and steered him free of
the remaining obstacles.

"I swear, if this place files a complaint, you have to complete all the documentation," Banks said in
mock outrage. "Can't I leave you anywhere?"

Ellison huffed a response to the familiar tease. "Yeah, yeah. Where's Sandburg?" Ellison asked.
There was no mistaking the anxiety in the tone.

"We're not exactly sure, but we're looking." For the first time, Banks realized Ellison was padding
around in bare feet. Then he remembered. Any items contaminated by the O.A.V. had been
discarded. Cold was preferable to poisoned. "I'll explain on the way. Let's get you out of here while
we can."
"What do you mean, while we can?" Ellison demanded.

Banks grabbed him firmly by the elbow, hustling him out of the office and down the hallway. "Sandburg's gone because your father played the House Ellison card and got him tossed."

"What?" Ellison bellowed, interrupting the explanation. His feet tangled and he nearly fell, which did nothing to blunt his tirade. "My father? He has no right!"

"Actually, he does, at least when you're not capable of speaking for yourself."

Ellison sputtered out a string of creative profanities. Not for the first time, Banks wondered just what had come between father and son. "Unless you want to challenge him in judicial hearing, we're better off staying out of his way."

Banks helped his charge into the transport. Jim was still seething, muttering that he still couldn't see and his skin hurt. "I'm taking you home, first," Banks said. "You need clothes. Can you get into your place without the entry card?"

Jim gave him a scathing look. Okay, for a security officer, the question was mildly insulting. Of course he could get in. Banks programmed the transport, set the autopilot and turned his entire attention across the vehicle. "Here's the short version. Sandburg is a damn good guide, but the guy's got a complicated history. He was officially paired with a sentinel connected to the Ventriss family."

The blood drained abruptly from Ellison's face, leaving his face pale against the dark treatment center tunic. "He's paired? Then what was he doing -"

"Hiring out from Guide Placement? The pairing didn't last. The sentinel was deranged, and physically assaulted him in the end. Nearly killed him, from what we can tell." Jim's face was completely blank, but Simon noticed his hands tightened around the seat rail, his knuckles nearly white. "Connor stumbled onto the connection. The Chancellor from Rainier is on the take, and runs interference for -"

"People like me," Jim finished, his tone dangerous and dark. "Like my family. People who deserve only the best by birthright." His tone descended to a viscous snarl. "And she would have gone to my father, and he jumped at the opportunity. Any excuse would do, for him. Sandburg?"

Banks replayed the scene mentally, the brief moment when Blair had transformed into a far more self-assured form, refusing to leave like a whipped puppy. "Within the parameters of the situation, he stood his ground. It wasn't an equal confrontation, Jim. In the end, he left the Treatment Center and vanished. It was a mess. You know the law. My hands were tied."

Jim made no reply, but Banks recognized the posture. This was Jim Ellison at his most volatile.

The transport swung into its landing approach. Ellison's building loomed below them, sporting a rather impressive roof garden, a large bank of solar convertors, and a gleaming water storage tank. To Banks' further surprise, the vehicle accessed an exterior transport dock on the third floor rather than the traditional street level departure zone. Interesting.

One night after closing a tough case, over a late night drink or three, Jim had mentioned the building housing his residence had come to him through his deceased mother, and that he'd updated with his own funds, including a superior service award from his final military mission. Those records were sealed, but seeing the modifications in person, Banks was intrigued. The cost of such substantial renovations equated to some sort of extraordinary exploit. Another one of those things that Jim never spoke of.
Ellison bounded out as a departure span extended smoothly from the building exterior, and promptly went to his knees. He struggled to his feet, leaning heavily on his commander. "Is this a sentinel thing?" Banks asked.

"I guess so," Ellison said grimly. "Balance maybe. All of a sudden, I couldn't feel my feet." Banks made sure he was steady before releasing him. "I had a better handle on it with Sandburg. He tried to warn me. The holo sensor is over there." Jim managed to balance on his own long enough to complete the scan. They passed through a rectangular entry, lined with outdoor equipment and outerwear storage.

Simon eased him into the living area and settled his wobbly investigator in a chair. Jim seemed relieved to slump into a comfortable upholstered surface. No sooner had his bare arms touched the fabric than he snatched his arms to his chest as if stung. "Damn," he muttered. "Clothes are upstairs. Maybe something with sleeves?"

Banks took the stairs two at a time. Built-in drawers slid open at the lightest touch. Hadn't Sandburg said something about natural fibers when they were collecting stuff for him? He leaned over the balcony rail. "Jim, you have any cotton stuff? Or silk?"

Jim flinched, and Simon chided himself to keep his voice low. Jim looked up, as if searching for the location of the voice. The direction of his gaze seemed a little off, so vision must still be a problem. "The middle drawers have workout clothes. Some of those are probably cotton." Jim promptly started to strip off his donated clothing. Simon shrugged and looked out the opposite wall, composed entirely of glass windows with a spectacular view of the water. After walking around the Treatment Center in the buff, what was a little nudity in your own home?

After a little more rummaging, he located some likely garments and footwear. Not exactly uniform standards, but workable. He handed it over to Jim, standing close in case his officer needed assistance while he dressed. Correction, while he tried to dress. The first offering was whipped off after just a moment on his shoulders. Simon made several trips back upstairs to wardrobe storage, searching for a combination Jim could tolerate. Jim looked frustrated, angry and discouraged, all at once. While Ellison was struggling into a pullover tunic, he asked, "Why didn't you go get him? Sandburg, I mean. Tracking a civilian should be child's play for us."

Simon picked up the narrative where he'd left off. "We had a little miscommunication, and he walked off without his personal effects. He doesn't have his civ com or transport warrant."

Jim looked up from pulling on some soft, pull-on boots that hugged automatically to his muscular calves. Interesting, and quite expensive. Jim was full of surprises. "So? Any Transport monitor would pass him through. He's home, or somewhere close."

"He doesn't have his credentials cypher, either. We kept them when we sent him in after you. Locating his residence was a bit more complicated than you might expect."

Jim's vision must have resolved, because his eyes could have carved a hole through Simon's chest. Maybe anxiety dispelled the sensory confusion, but Banks could have done with a little less scrutiny. "So he risks his life, saves my worthless hide, and we - hell, Simon, he can't even prove he's a citizen! He could be picked up as a non-citizen vagrant and expelled."

"I'm afraid it's worse. I sent Daryl to his residence, and Ventriss was there with two of his thugs. We're pretty sure Ventriss is pursuing some twisted vendetta, and we all know what he's capable, up to and including murder. Threats were made. We're in a race against time."

With a hint of his normal grace, Jim was up and heading for the transport. Simon trailed in his wake,
well aware that riding herd on his officer was going to be a challenge.

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Blair huddled on an unpadded metal bench, in the farthest corner he could manage. People of all description were packed tightly around him. Somewhere in his studies, he'd seen a picture of cattle cars, transporting live animals to market, back in the days before the chaos, when meat still was considered a staple. The similarity to this stark, open-air, loop ring car was chilling. Even the metal wheels running on obsolete metal tracks were the same.

The vehicle lurched away from the station, jarring over each imperfection in the track. Blair caught a fleeting glimpse of the reentry area as they passed. Full body scanners and individual interview stations. Heavy reinforcing on the doors, and guards at the ready, with an array of impressive weaponry. A notice, printed the length of the building, warned of a harsh response to any attempted undocumented entry, and immediate detention for those with criminal conduct warrants.

He curled into a ball on the bench, and shoved his back into the corner. He wrapped his arms around his legs, and buried his head behind his knees. No, he was never getting back into Cascade that way. Maybe there was some written petition he could file, some way he could request copies of his citizenship cypher.

The car lurched and rattled along. It was hard to keep from being jostled into other passengers. He felt sick, and swallowed hard. He didn't want to think about vomiting again, with no facilities to take refuge in. His skin felt hot and too tight for his body. After Alicia, he'd suffered through endless fevered delirium, haunted by images of her violence. He would be in serious trouble if he lost his wits in here.

Belatedly, he realized how thirsty he was. He hadn't taken notice. The loop ring was a nether world, neither in nor out of the city, a transition zone for the non-citizen population. Did the stations have water, or food? His shoulders slumped further when he remembered. Outside the city boundary, away from the Province's minimal safety net, even water came at a price. He thought about the time at the Plummer estate, standing around in the soggy muck. Even in those dire circumstances, he hadn't worried about water. What he wouldn't give to even lick rainwater off his skin.

The car jounced sharply, and Blair bounced off the passenger closest to him. He mumbled an apology, and tried to make himself smaller. With his head lowered, he didn't see the signals that flashed from a watcher standing by the door, engaging in silent communication with another beyond his visual field.

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Adjutant Fallon Pines adjusted his uniform carefully, preparing himself for what would certainly be a thoroughly unpleasant report. He prepared to knock on the ornate wooden door, but his fist hung in midair, wishing he could avoid this completely.

Remember why you are grateful for this position.

He dropped his arm with a weary sigh. Yes, he was grateful, even though he despised Provincial Security Director David Evans, the man he now served. A Provincial appointment was more than he had a right to expect. Plenty of men in his situation were eking out a living in miserable conditions, without any sort of regular employment.

Stalling, he refolded the end of his tunic sleeve inward, fastening it carefully. He was ill-fated on some levels; the military injury that had severed his arm, the minuscule reality that he, among the
multitude of injured veterans, could not be restored with the usual grafts, implants or biomechanical
device. Yet he was unimaginably lucky that a Provincial Director would view the addition of a
wounded veteran as a political asset and employ him for window dressing. If only his post-injury
savior could be someone other than David Evans, a self-serving individual if one ever existed.

Pines clenched the record pod in his lone hand. Before he could deliver a message, he had to read it.
Perhaps Evans had finally stepped in it. He'd been present when his boss had made the decision to
involve himself in the Plummer siege, watched the political calculations in real time. As if Evans had
the smallest clue. A decent advisor would have warned him off, but Evans listened to his politicos,
not his tactical people. That the whole situation had gone from bad to worse hadn't surprised him.

Pines clenched the innocuous pod, which included the formal complaint from Captain Banks. He'd
spent years in the military and never seen such a blistering critique of a superior officer. His own
sympathies rested with the complainant, even though he'd never met the man. Garrett Kincaid should
have been in an old-fashioned cage, not roaming the Plummer estate like a misunderstood celebrity.

As if that weren't enough, he was also going to spoil his employer's carefully laid plans to deflect the
complaint before it made any headway.

I hope they skewer him. Job or not. I'd pay credit to see it happen.

Enough foot dragging. He knocked gently on the ornate office door and waited for the tone which
signaled that he should enter. The Director was obviously preparing for their anticipated visit to the
Sentinel Treatment Center, very publicly calling on S.S.I. Ellison and Sentinel Commandant Winter.
Winter was icing on the cake. Ellison was the focus, demonstrating the care and concern Evans had
for those who served Cascade Province.

The holo-reflector, normally concealed behind paneling, displayed every detail of Evans appearance
as he posed and turned before it. A stylist was attending to minor details of hair and uniform. He cut
quite a dashing figure. If only he had the mind and values to match.

"Excuse me, Director." Pines placed the record pod carefully next to the reader on the desk. "The
Provincial Governor's Office has officially notified us that a formal complaint had been filed
concerning the Plummer Siege."

"Banks?"

"Yes, Director." And he did a damn good job of hanging you out to dry, you worthless bastard.

Evans ripped his hand away from his attendant. The solution the man was applying to the nails of the
great man fell, sloshing across the polished floor. Evans swore colorfully, berating the attendant,
Banks and the world in general.

Pines smoothed his features into total neutrality. Evans was as likely to lash out at him as to draw
breath. The hapless attendant was scuttling along, trying to clean up the mess and apologize at the
same time. With a careless wave, Evans stilled his recital. "Oh, get out," adding a nudge with his toe
to get the man moving. "Banks won't make it stick," he announced to the room, but mostly his own
image. "The man overreaches. I'll crush him."

He turned his attention back to his adjutant. "Fallon, is the transport ready? Now that Banks has
made a move, best to get on with it. We shall call on the sentinels. Nothing like a good vid moment
to take the steam out of a nit-picking whiner."

"I believe we'll have to cancel our trip, Director."
"Don't be ridiculous. If the hospital staff is being uncooperative, see to it, man! It's your job."

Pines reigned in his temper and his private satisfaction simultaneously. "I'm regret that Commandant Winter has been transferred to his home to finish his recovery. Guide Kim was adamant that any delay was unacceptable. She also refused a call to his home at this time."

Evans dropped bonelessly into his favorite upholstered chair with a frown. "Well, can't fight a guide of Sonya Kim's stature." He leaned his head back against the costly fabric, thinking. "Fine. Send our official concerns to the Commandant, perhaps with an appropriate gift. We'll call on Ellison and consider it a day's work. A good vid with him is more pertinent to the complaint anyway."

"I'm afraid that is also not possible, Director. S.S.I. Ellison has apparently revoked his existing medical consent and left the treatment center." Pines raised an eyebrow. "His exit was described to me as quite spectacular."

"Well, locate him. The man's ultimately under my direction. We'll see him, no matter where he's hared off to." Evans did a double take. "Exactly where has he gone?"

"I believe he was last seen in the company of Captain Banks, Minister. Both are currently unavailable." Pines gave a formal bow, his gaze, and his smile, safely trained on the floor. It gave him great pleasure to close the door very gently on his superior's frustrated tirade.

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"What do you mean, my son is no longer in your care?" Lord William Ellison bounded to his feet, literally shouting at the wall-sized vidcom screen.

"Your son has revoked his care status." On the screen, Chancellor Edwards smoothed a lock of hair back into place.

"And how did that happen?" Lord William paced in front of the screen, his voice lower, but his tone clearly irate. "You assured me he would be paired by now."

"He was safely medicated after both attempts at selection. Lord Ellison, remember you insisted on interviewing each and every candidate. We were preparing the third Guide candidate when we were notified his status had changed. I assure you, he was being carefully monitored."

"My son is a Security Officer! He knows how to evade such devices. Why didn't you have someone in the room?"

Chancellor Edwards looked away. "Lord Ellison, human observation isn't recommended for sentinels. Sentinels under stress become very apprehensive about strangers. It interferes with the selection, which was the primary goal."

Ellison glared at the woman, cursing her incompetence. "Well, that lovely idea is in ashes. Where is he now?"

"I did my best to dissuade him, but I believe he left with Captain Banks. How he left his room without detection and contacted his superior I can't speak to."

"Well, let me assure you of something, Chancellor. You won't be 'speaking' to your fee, either!" Lord William paused, organizing his thoughts. "Chancellor, you will present the remaining guides in the reception area of the Sentinel Center. I've paid for their time. My people will pick them up within the hour, and I will secure them here at the estate. When James is available, I want them at hand. Expect a formal complaint to be registered regarding your performance within the same time period."
He abruptly terminated the communication.

"Steven!" he shouted.

His youngest son materialized. "Yes, Father."

"Your brother has fled the Treatment Center. I need another sentinel expert. Find me one."

Steven bowed his head in acknowledgement. "I will contact Guide Services directly. Should they come here?"

"Yes, and make sure they remain. I'm leaving. Have the transport and pilot report to the front of the estate."

Steven quirked an eyebrow. "Shall I give the pilot a destination?"

"Yes. No." Steven grinned at his father's rare indecision, and waited. "Tell him - tell him the Provincial Security Center, specifically Major Incident. Contact Governor Thorneville and any Minister you can reach. Tell him I want immediate access to this Captain Banks. And have Andrews bring my formal outerwear to the drawing room."

Steven relayed the request to his father's valet. Before starting on his father's directions, he spoke softly to himself. "Clash of the Titans. Jimmy, wherever you are, I hope you're ready for this."

&&&&

Carolyn Plummer stumbled into her private courtyard, racked by one heaving sob after another. Wind from a fast moving front moving off the sound whipped through the leaves of the ornamental maple, jangling her collection of chimes in a harsh, discordant dirge. The image of her brother, Philip, and his mocking smile filled her thoughts.

You'll find out eventually, but for now, I think I'll keep that news to myself.

Overwhelmed with rage and hurt, she gripped the bass chime, a masterwork wrought in the cloistered workshops of Vega, tore it from its mounting and beat it against the polished black granite block in the center of her garden. Her own screamed wails joined the groan of the metal resonating against rock, denting and folding the sublime creation into a twisted wreck.

Her final blow cracked the granite, sloughing off a ragged chunk. Flawed. Deformed for eternity. Destroyed. She sank to her knees, clutching her temples.

James a sentinel? How could it be? The man she'd chosen, pursued, won and lost? Not now, when she was poised to force him back to her side. She'd not thought it possible that he could wound her again, not after the fateful night when he'd rejected their match, her rightful demand for a child and walked out of her life.

All the years she'd struggled to win him back, debasing herself despite the fact he was in the wrong. When James defied Lord William, denied his own status and joined the military in off-world service, she'd vowed to prove her worth, to earn him back. Spent years getting an education to qualify her for work far below her natural station, working up through the ranks as if she had no family.

When James had returned, a decorated officer, wounded and ill, she'd stayed at his side during treatment. Months of aching boredom, playing the role of the devoted mate, only to have him scorn her again as a pathetic fraud the moment he was conscious. Even then she didn't give up. She'd followed him to the Security Services, working right alongside him with those - peasants - in Major
Incident, doing work more worthy of a household drudge. And still he'd dismissed her.

So she'd changed tactics. Vowing to rise, she'd labored as Seneschal, learning, perfecting, all with an eye to grasping full control. James wasn't a complete fool. Not even he would ignore the benefits of a match which joined not one, but two, Heads of House. She was willing to tolerate separate lives and discreet liaisons on his part, if only he would pledge to play his public role and give her a child. An heir to both Houses.

She settled back on her heels, dragging in one searing lungful of air after another. A sentinel. A man that could, and would, read every twitch, every change in heart rate. One beyond deception, impossible for her to control. Her dreams lost to her forever.

He'll need a guide.

That thought appeared and she stilled. Of course. Control the guide, control the sentinel. Find the right craven creature, and all things were still possible.

She struggled to her feet, rain spattering around her. She was smarter than all of them, smarter than Gerald or Philip, Lord William, even James. She still had the crushed ornamental box from the family home, full of the tools she could use to gain all the money and influence she'd ever need. What better use for those funds than to buy the right guide?

She could still draw James back to her side. She'd find a way. She'd beat them all.

&&&&

"Jim, how are you doing?"

Ellison looked up from the passenger seat with a baleful glare.

"Right. Not so hot."

Jim pulled at his mismatched clothing, obviously uncomfortable. He kept flexing his hands, as if they were stiff and swollen. "Tell me this again this theory about Sandburg. Are you sure Connor isn't chasing kangaroos on the wrong continent again?"

Banks snorted. Connor and Ellison were inevitably mutually critical of the other's investigative technique. "Not this time. The evidence for a connection between Ventriss and Sandburg is solid."

Jim shook his head, even though it must have hurt, and he winced. "Why? It doesn't make sense. Ventriss can buy virtually anything. Why chase after Sandburg? And what would that clan need with a guide, anyway?"

Banks maneuvered the transport around a sweeping curve, backing off on the speed when Ellison's shoulder stiffened. "My take is that Ventriss has some sort of hold on him, and still sees value in using it. We have so little information on Sandburg's life, I can't speculate on the origin. The motivation? They used it to coerce a talented guide to take a sentinel no one in their right mind would touch."

"And when she flamed out? Blair's good. He should have been reintegrated. Why didn't they let him go?"

Banks shook his head. "But he wasn't reintegrated, and for some reason, Sandburg actively embraces that status. His credit accounts are barely above survival level. Daryl says his residence would be condemned, at least if anyone bothered to inspect that part of Cascade. Ventriss and family have kept
Sandburg under their collective thumb, and he's accepted it."

"We're back to why."

"That we are," Simon agreed. The Security Headquarters loomed into view, and Banks keyed in the code for a Stage Three landing, allowing them to use the dock just outside Major Incident.

Jim noticed. "I'm not a protected witness or an invalid, Captain."

Banks powered down, coasting into their approach. "And I'm not treating you as one, but when you set foot inside, you're going to be the cause celebre. You really up to that? Shall I go around to the main entrance?"

"Who cares about me?" Jim asked, clearly skeptical.

"Well, let me think," Banks said, turning the transport over to the autodock. "Your colleagues. Any Provincial Relations Specialist in the building. House Ellison, Plummer, and every journalist in Cascade. And that's just for starters."

Jim rolled his eyes at the prospect. His avoidance of publicity was legend.

"I filed a formal complaint of negligence and incompetence against Security Director Evans for co-opting the mission, mangling the deployment, and letting a sociopath like Garrett Kincaid walk around like he'd been charged with failure to recycle. Think he'll be falling all over himself to demonstrate how concerned he is for the gallant new sentinel?"

Jim blanched. "On second thought, I might consider protected witness status. Rehabilitative isolation is sounding pretty good. Maybe I could limp or something."

"I thought so," Banks said with a wry smile. "That's the spirit."

&&&&

Steven Ellison dismissed his customary House Ellison transport with pilot and opted for his private flyer. In the distance, he could hear his father berating the staff. Not that cloak, the other. The silver crest, not the gold. William Ellison was a demanding superior, and a master of staging. He would keep at it until everything was perfect. Lord Ellison would create an image to be reckoned with before his next encounter with Captain Banks.

Climbing into the flyer, he coded for the maximum height and speed allowed by his pilot rating. No doubt Jimmy could do it faster, but Steven knew he was a better than average pilot. Even better, flying alone would forestall any immediate report to his father. Just as well. While William was occupied trying to regain control over his wayward eldest son, Steven fully intended to pursue an agenda all his own.

His personal com sounded. The tone indicated Carolyn Plummer. Steven had no intention of answering. Carolyn always had plans within plans. If William Ellison had any sense, he would have realized long ago that Jimmy would never accept her, not after she'd displayed her true colors. Besides, the Lady Carolyn assumed everyone around her was stupid, mere pawns to be used and exploited. Steven found it easier to be unavailable.

Despite his father's directions, Steven coasted into the Sentinel Services Center, handed his flyer over to an attendant, and strode into reception - all before William had even departed the Ellison estate.

The transmission from his brother earlier in the day had been a shock. Steven avoided being at odds
with his father unless it was truly important, and he was certain about this one. Lord William was
dead wrong to use this strategy as a lever against his eldest son. Steven was willing to take the risk
and come down on the side of the brother he hadn't seen in years, because it was the right thing to
do.

Jimmy didn't need more guides flung at him. He needed someone who understood what he was
going through; an advocate, not an adversary or an overseer. Steven knew virtually nothing about
sentinels, but there was no time like the present. If Jimmy would allow it, Steven intended to support
his brother. For perhaps the first time, William would find both of his sons in unified opposition.

He couldn't blame his brother for their years of estrangement. Steven had never had the chance, nor
created one, when he could explain that although he, as second son, wasn't moved to defy his father
and ancestral Lord, neither did he agree with him. Steven had long since set aside the petty jealousies
of childhood, and yearned for the brother he had lost.

The main reception area of Sentinel Services was hushed, probably with good reason. More than two
thirds of the people in the vicinity could probably hear a whisper from across the room or through a
wall. Steven presented himself to a man about his own age, wearing the gray and red formal uniform
of a sentinel. Steven automatically provided his identification cypher with the seal of House Ellison
displayed. He was just beginning his explanation when he heard the name "Ellison" spoken
somewhere behind him.

The older man shook his head. "We're not at liberty to discuss this. It would be best if you retired."
The two men began to move away.

Steven seized the older man's elbow. "Let's try this again," Steven said. "I'm Steven Ellison. My
father, Lord William, is in error, and has trusted the wrong advisors. Jimmy's guide, this Sandburg,
should never have been removed. Tell me what my brother truly needs, and you will have an ally in
me in all things."

Watch their eyes. Their eyes will tell you everything.

Steven Ellison waited. They weren't convinced, not just yet. He released the tight grip he had on the
man's elbow, leaving his open hand in contact. "My father sees an opportunity to dominate the son
who dared to defy him. He'll exploit the situation to further that end, both to extend the House and
bring James back into the fold. I want my brother safe, and free to pursue the life he chooses." He
paused, and added. "I am yours to instruct and employ."

The two men exchanged glances. The elder extended his hand. "Provincial Minister Eli Stoddard,
retired of course. This is Sentinel Vice-Commandant Lee." He reversed their positions and took
Steven by the arm. "Why don't you join us for a more private conversation. Allow me to start with
the basics."

The Plummer Assault team reassembled in the small conference room between the Captains' offices,
with Daryl Banks an honorary guest. After greeting their wayward colleague, Taggart brought the
group up to speed on the current threat and their progress thus far. "Our first instincts were correct.
Sandburg went to the nearest tram. Vid please."
The far wall of the conference room bloomed into an image of Blair Sandburg in profile, apparently leaving the Cascade Central Station."

Jim leaned forward in his seat. "Enhance, please. Focus on the face."

"What do you see, Jim?" Henri Brown asked.

"I don't know exactly." Jim continued to stare intently. "Captain, was he sick or something when you last saw him?"

Banks frowned, thinking back to his final attempt to persuade Sandburg. "Not that I know of. Tired I'm sure. He was upset, but not ill."

Jim shrugged. "Maybe I'm grasping at straws. Sorry to interrupt, Captain Taggart."

Taggart took the gesture as a sign to continue. More images flickered to life. "He apparently continued on foot, which I suppose makes sense. I had his identity cypher and the rest of his possessions. The sweep sensors were coming up blank. The Info/Com Services people were going nuts."

"In that getup?" Rafe said. "What happened? Did we lose every sensor in Cascade?"

"In my opinion, we're seeing the enigma that is Blair Sandburg." Taggart glanced at Banks, and got a slight nod in return. The team deserved to know their reservations. "He knows how to avoid the sensors. The only individuals that nurture that skill are elite criminals and espionage specialists, and Blair is neither. I can't explain it."

"Begging the Captain's pardon, I can," Connor said. "Eli Stoddard feels he's afraid of the Ventriss family. Sandburg's only resource is to control his availability. He hides. Don't forget he's had years to practice, and he's exceptionally intelligent. That's Rainier's professional assessment, not mine. Until Daryl found Brad Ventriss in his apartment today, the strategy apparently worked."

"I hope it's that simple." Taggart keyed the next view. "The next image we have was forwarded as an inquiry from Daystar. They were concerned that an undocumented individual was present on their grounds." A detailed, full-faced image of Sandburg, eyes closed, head tilted back, appeared on the screen. "According to Daystar security, he stayed about twenty minutes, making no move to approach the interior."

"He looks awful," Brown said. "This isn't the guy we sent into the Plummer estate. What the hell is wrong with him?"

Taggart advanced the image in compressed time, until Jim barked, "Freeze it! Take it back a few minutes and run on tenth speed."

The others watched as Jim studied the advancing images. "There. It's almost like he's seizing. Look at his hands. His color's wrong. I really think he's ill."

"Bloody hell."

Every eye swiveled back to Connor. "I read his medical files after the attack by the first sentinel. I think we're seeing the beginnings of a severance reaction."

"Severance? Is that possible?" Banks said, articulating the question all of them were thinking. "I thought that was a problem only if the pairing was long established."
Taggart drummed his fingers along the table surface. "That's what I've always heard, that severance wasn't a given for sentinels and guides."

"It might be," Jim said softly, a distracted look on his face. "I've felt like shit since he disappeared. Maybe that's why."

Connor caught her lower lip between her teeth. "Stoddard referred to Sandburg once as a genetic guide. It's rare, but some people are apparently born to it. They're more sensitive, or some such thing. It's considered very desirable in a guide, like being gifted with innate artistic or athletic talent."

"Well, forgive the obvious, but we need to ask someone," Rafe said. "None of us has a clue."

Daryl was already moving. "I'll get a medic up here. Be right back."

"I have two more sightings," Taggart continued. "Sandburg fits the description from a transport monitor report, Tram Station Seventeen. They called in a potential child violator who fled and vanished into thin air. I'm afraid it fits Sandburg's description."

"Bullshit!" Jim snarled, his hands balling into fists. "No way in hell."

"I agree," Connor said. "It's totally out of character."

Taggart held up both hands, placating the angry outburst. "I checked with the filing officer. I think there was a misunderstanding, followed by an overreaction. Blair couldn't, or wouldn't, explain himself. His only alternative was to run. Another puzzle. And this is the last one," Taggart said. "Info/Com confirms about an hour ago, Blair Sandburg boarded the non-citizen loop train and left Provincial control. If we want him, we'll have to figure out a way to work outside of our jurisdiction."

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His thirst was unbearable. Wrapped in his own misery, he barely realized that rain had started to pelt down, soaking the occupants of the open-air car. The temperature had dropped precipitously. Shivering in the chill wind, Blair tipped his head back and opened his mouth to the drops.

Water. Blessed, cool, water. He cupped his hands, trying to funnel more liquid into his mouth. It wasn't enough. It would never be enough.

Blair forced himself to look around him. Some of his fellow passengers had disappeared under coats or waterproof sheets. He was one of the few with no outerwear to shelter under. He sucked water from the soaked fabric of his sleeve. When that wasn't enough, he chased raindrops with parched lips, grateful for every bead of moisture he could gather.

The loop train moved at a paltry speed compared to the civilian tram, and it was beginning to slow. A stop must be close. Blair peered through the increasing rain to the passing scenery, trying to orient himself. He should be able to see the immediate vicinity along the tracks, but his vision was out of focus. A mass of gray, sodden tents whipped by, then a series of grim building blocks, apparently some sort of assembly factory or reclamation center. A few minutes later, an open-air feeding site, no doubt operated by a charitable group, came into view, crowded with noticeably thin children and adults. The car jerked to a stop.

Stay or go?

Maybe he could speak to someone at the feeding center. Wouldn't they be compassionate people by nature? Try to explain his situation, get some help. At least get some water or food. Blair discarded the idea as quickly as it formed. How many pitiful, unlikely stories did such people hear in a day?
What could he say that made any sense, or would be remotely believable? Besides, by now there was probably an alert out for him as a child violator.

He stretched his legs as some of his fellow moved toward the exit, shoving a soaked hank of hair out of his eyes to watch as they filed out. They were a dispirited lot, no signs of joy at returning home, or relief that the bone-rattling journey was over, at least for them. The remaining passengers spread out, which made sense. Few non-citizens would bother getting on at this time of day, when the city portals were officially closed to those wishing to visit Cascade. The remaining passengers would have the bleak car to themselves.

His muscles ached, tired and sore from the constant cramping. He'd probably downed enough rainwater to keep thirst at bay. Besides shivering in the chill evening, his skin felt hot under the soaked fabric. He leaned his temple against the rough sides of the car and allowed his eyes to drift shut. He knew how this would go. The fever would build, and the headache would intensify with it. After Alicia, he recalled looking at his image in a holo-reflector, thinking, "Who is this crazed person?" No, this was not the time to wander around in strange territory. He just didn't have the strength.

Across the car, two men nodded to each other. While Blair sat, wrapped in his own cocoon of suffering, they moved in concert, taking positions on either side. More experienced residents of the Cascade Boundary were always on guard, and they noticed. One by one, they moved, easing themselves closer to the exit. Some actually left the car, bolting out even as the train was already moving.

Blair never looked up.

&&&&

Simon Banks surveyed the chaos that was normally his best group of Investigators. As a group they were opinionated, gifted and quirky. The mood was usually one of intense anticipation, with lots of teasing interlaced with respect. He could usually turn this group loose and expect consensus rather quickly.

Not today.

Strategies and opinions were flying fast and furious, along with a few insults about general intelligence. The mood had degenerated to surly and suspicious. Taggart wanted more information on Blair Sandburg before making any additional moves to contact him. Connor was lobbying for bringing Ventriss in under a detention order, using his unprovoked attack on an undercover Security Investigator as a pretext. Rafe and Brown favored issuing an AWP - Apprehend Without Prejudice - order, and perhaps reaching out to snitches they had in the Boundary. Ellison was seated off to the side, an outstanding example of a human thundercloud. Banks didn't know if his biting comments resulted from impatience with Sandburg's disappearance, his father's presumptive actions, or the medic that was currently hovering over him, shaking his head over the readings he was getting.

Brown and Connor's exchange was escalating into shouts when he stepped in. "Enough. Enough." A flurry of complaints were silenced with an upraised hand. Banks was about to open his mouth when the medic took advantage.

"Captain, I'm issuing a Medical Caution for S.S.I. Ellison, effective immediately." The sandy-haired medic stood, coiling his monitoring equipment to leave. "Support Specialist Kennedy should have my official finding momentarily."

Ellison was on his feet just as fast, although Banks noticed he swayed slightly, as if keeping his
balance was an effort. "Medical Caution, my ass! There's nothing wrong with me!" He promptly cringed, apparently from the volume of his own voice. The medic shrugged, as if his point had been clearly made. The others in the room went silent, expecting a full-fledged showdown. Ellison was notorious for staying on the job when other officers would have withdrawn to the medical suite.

What a group. Banks briefly considered the merits of locking every last one of them in the conference area and going for coffee.

"Calm down, Jim," Banks said, shifting his pointed glare from Ellison to the medic. "What are we looking at here?"

"Vitals indicate substantial systemic distress. He's an untrained, emerging sentinel, in case no one else has noticed. Right now he's smothering his sensory input."

"Exactly my point," Ellison said acidly.

The medic was undeterred. "It's not going to last. Until we get a guide in here, he needs pharmaceutical treatment, isolation and rest."

"You seriously think I'm going to let some fool drug me into oblivion again?" Ellison bellowed, this time clapping his hands over his own ears. "Not in this life," he muttered through clenched teeth.

This time the medic completely ignored his outraged patient. "Captain, he has force of will, not control. Ignore me, and odds are within the next twenty-four hours he'll blunder into some circumstance he can't handle, and go into sensory shock. He can go down at your feet and be dead before you know it."

Images of Jim and Commandant Winter both crumbling into agony after the O.A.V. attack flooded Simon's memory. No one should die that way. "He's right, Jim. I don't want to be writing your Killed Under Service report. As of now, you're on full restricted duty."

He silenced Jim's immediate protest by slamming his fist onto the desk. "Sit down, or I'll throw you in restraints." Ellison dropped into a chair, looking about as cooperative as Daryl at his teenage worst. He pointed deliberately at the medic. "Get someone in-house to give us a hand with the sentinel stuff, but we're not going to rerun that crap Jim went through before. We want advice, not micromanagement. You have thirty minutes, tops."

The medic left, looking pleased but not quite triumphant.

"Joel, your points are valid. Why don't you take Connor, liaise with Stoddard, and pick the Ventriss - Sandburg connection apart. Satisfy your reservations. We're not going to walk into this blind." He looked at his son. "Before you go, have Daryl attached to Major Incident for short term duty. Daryl, I want you to go back to Sandburg's apartment. Set what you can set to rights, and see if you can observe anything that will help us."

Joel nodded in agreement. Connor responded with a brisk, "Yes, Captain." Daryl went a bit wide-eyed and then responded with a wide grin. "Sure. Be glad to." He seemed to realize his response wasn't entirely appropriate in response to a senior officer. He quickly snapped off a belated salute.

"Rafe, pull some personnel, find Brad Ventriss and put him under surveillance. Contact Technical Services and put father and son under full com/vid monitoring. Brown, use Taggart's vid information and prepare a composite holo on Sandburg. Then notify our snitch network and get some eyes in the Boundary at work. Put every Border and Transport Monitor on full alert, highest level. Issue Detain and Notify orders, and make sure they know we want him treated gently. Override the earlier Child
Violator Bulletin. You're to coordinate any intelligence that comes in."

"Yes, Sir," they answered in tandem.

"Everyone, have Rhonda set up a full points com loop, off grid. No one drops off, people, and no one looks over our shoulder. Totally within this room. Everyone knows what everyone else is doing. This thing is so interlocking we can't afford isolation."

The team went into instant motion, only to be interrupted by Rhonda. "Excuse me, Captain. Lord William Ellison is here. He's demanding to see you and Jim."

A scowling Jim shook his head. After meeting the man, Simon couldn't blame him.

"Sorry, gentlemen. Avoidance isn't an option." Rhonda gestured helplessly. "I can't stall him. He has a formal assistance request from Governor Thorneville in hand."

"I need a cigar," fumed Simon. "Jim, go to my office. If we can't avoid it, we're going to do this in our territory, under our control. I'll slow him down. There's protocol I can insist on."

Rhonda and Jim watched their superior's retreating back, and the rest of their colleagues filed out of the room. Rhonda shook her head. "Based on reputation alone, I should put Emergency Response on standby. Walk me back to Simon's office, will you Jim?"

She held out her hand expectantly, every inch the damsel in need of an escort. Her eyes said something else. You feel like shit, but no one else will know. Lean on me.

Jim did, in fact, feel like shit. He offered his elbow, grateful to have someone watching his back, and standing at his side.

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Blair gave up any pretense, swaying in rhythm to the rolling, jolting car. He was consumed with stifling his nausea, and simply didn't have the energy to worry about external appearance. The whole thing became a horrible tangle; the constant jarring, the damp cold, the smell of unwashed humanity, the misery of his own body and soul.

Another body pressed against his own. With a groan, he shifted in the opposite direction, shrinking in on himself. Being touched by another was almost more than he could bear.

Another body. Hands. A cloth, stinking with grease, crammed into his mouth.

He tried to cry out, to pull away, when a hood dropped over his head. Thrashing wildly, he couldn't avoid the vicious pressure at the base of his brain that brought a stab of intense pain, and then total blackness.

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Megan Connor keyed in the lock code she'd placed on Interrogation Suite Five. When the door panels retreated, the chaos that was her research was revealed.

Taggart gave a low whistle. "I think I'll go back to defusing bombs. This looks a lot scarier."

Connor went in first, activating vids and recessed wall panels displaying her notes and interlocking diagrams. "This is everything, including the stuff from Stoddard. Go ahead and say it. It's a mess." She turned slowly, surveying the wreckage. "I probably should just get some entry techs and codify
the whole thing. Turn the computers loose."

"I don't think so," Taggart said slowly. "Analytic analysis is generally lousy for human interactions, and this whole mess is born out of relationships. Walk me through it." He sat down and propped his feet on a plastocarton, watching Connor intently.

"I don't know where to start."

"You haven't met him, but you support him where I'm advising caution. Tell me why."

Connor chose a chair for herself. "Captain Taggart, are you making fun of me?" she said reproachfully.

"Not at all," Taggart said with a smile. "All this happened in a rush. None of us have had time to think. Now we have the time to be more critical, to ask questions. Something must have grabbed your attention."

"He's been treated unjustly, probably by someone we should have had under conviction a year ago. Isn't that enough?"

"Megan Connor, we hear and see injustice every day. That's just the surface. What is it, really?"

Connor smiled. She'd always liked Taggart, his easy mannerisms and soft-spoken style. "Captain, you're as bad as any psy-eval. I guess Sandburg's story. He's so unusual. No formal education until testing into Rainier. No grooming for success, and we both know how essential that is in this society. Until he was hooked up with that first sentinel, his performance was stellar. Rave reviews from Rainier. A citizen, but he has no family -"

"What do you mean, no family?" Taggart asked. He dropped his feet to the floor, attention focused.

"It's right here," Megan said. It took her a moment of frantic searching to locate the entry. "See? Right here. No formal birth certificate, just a copy of the Provincial Master Record with the birth date and citizen notation. His mother is listed as Naomi Sandburg, with no record of male parent. No notation about lineage whatsoever." She looked up at Taggart, who was peering over her shoulder. "He never went to Provincial Schools."

"No visits at Health Optimization? No Youth Social Development?" Taggart clicked a few keys. "There's really nothing?"

"No," Connor said, shaking her head. "Not even a genetic profile." She stared a Taggart, looking slightly stunned. "Maybe this is it."

"What?"

"The missing piece. I always felt like I was missing something."

"I've studied bombers, Megan. Sometimes to understand the man, you have to understand the child." He straightened to his full height. "So where was he from birth until entering Rainier?" Taggart asked.

"I don't know," Connor said. "I honestly don't. I was focused on the post-Rainier stuff, when he was obviously tangled up with House Ventriss."

"Check the possibility he enrolled under another name." Taggart mused, his dark eyes flickering over the information they already had. "What if he wasn't in Cascade Province at all?"
"Unlikely, Sir. Ordinary citizens aren't all that mobile between provinces."

Taggart quirked an eyebrow and gave her a slow grin. "Maybe we shouldn't assume 'ordinary'. Check the provincial departure records, starting from his birth."

Megan nodded. "And you, Sir?"

"The other area you didn't have time to investigate, and apparently, our only other lead. His mother, Naomi."

&&&&

Jim took another sip from the small plastotube Rhonda had pressed into his hand, swallowing hard to get past the taste. Standard issue emergency nutrition, he'd been downing these for years in the military and then in Security Services, survived occasionally on them, in fact. When did his preferred choice, berry with chocolate, become a mix of acid and pond scum? Even processed algal paste didn't taste this bad.

Or maybe now it did.

Being a sentinel was worse than - well, he couldn't think of anything worse. Things like decapitation actually sounded pretty promising by comparison. Death he could deal with. This netherworld where everything was a confusing surprise horrified him. There were moments with Sandburg that things had seemed remotely bearable, like he could live with this crazy new reality. Even during the hell in the sentinel center, when every breath seared his lungs, any sound hammered in his head, and his body seemed to be collapsing from the inside out, Sandburg's voice had been a still, calm center in the chaos, a promise of survival.

Guide. Sentinel. The words just didn't mean anything to him. Did guide mean controller or jailer or friend? Sandburg had explained that he would have choices for guides. Selection, he'd called it, but the term was meaningless. Didn't make any sense then and it didn't make sense now. Since he didn't get to choose about being a sentinel at all, selecting a person to tag along rated no more than an afterthought. Those guides lurking in his room when Sandburg vanished … the air had turned to needles, sound a yawning, devouring monster. In retrospect, he realized the Sandburg had been like hand in a glove, not a choice but an almost effortless state of being.

A drawer-full of citations and medals locked away in his home proclaimed that James Ellison was a brave man, but this sentinel reality was a bone-chilling fear like no other.

And now his father, the one nut he could never crack, the mountain he could never climb. Steven had learned to live with the towering personality that was Lord William. His brother wasn't taller, or stronger, or smarter, but somehow he could preserve a sense of self that Jim found impossible. The only thing he'd ever managed with his father was to defy him and then flee. He'd renounced his position of privilege, left the plans of others as lifeless, cold ash and embraced another life on his own terms. Some people thought that was brave, too. It wasn't. Unlike his brother, Jim knew he only found a semblance of peace in conceding the field. Maybe it was justice that becoming a sentinel would leave him with nowhere to run.

He choked down the last mouthful and set the plastotube aside. A little sustenance hadn't hurt. He didn't feel quite so shaky. Despite his denials, the medic hadn't been all that far off. In fact, he could have added a few things to the list. He couldn't draw a deep breath. His heart was pounding in his chest. Every move scraped the carefully chosen clothing across his skin like a rasp. Not as bad as when he and Sandburg had been crawling around the Plummer estate, but definitely headed in that direction.
He heard Simon's bass rumble approaching, and his father's voice half an octave higher. He pulled himself to his feet, standing at attention even though every joint ached in protest. He wasn't going to conduct the first encounter with his father in fifteen years huddled in a chair.

The door opened and Simon stood aside, allowing their not-so-honored guest to enter. Jim dipped his head in the traditional attitude of respect. "Lord Ellison." With no conscious effort, Jim realized his vision had somehow expanded, magnifying the clenching of his father's hands into fists, visible to him even underneath the formal outer garments worn only by a Head of House. Leave it to dear old dad to make a statement without uttering a sound.

"So my son greets me as a stranger."

"I'm on duty, and greet you with the respect due your position," Jim said sharply. Damn. On the defensive already. How does he do it?

"On duty? Really?" his father said, eyeing him critically from head to toe. Jim tried not to squirm as his mismatched, desperation wardrobe came under scrutiny. "A bit casual for a uniform, James. A new style for the Services these days?" He glanced at Simon. "These are matters of family, James. Do we really need a chaperone to speak?"

Jim snorted. "This coming from the man who enlisted the governor to force his way in. In light of your previous tactics, I consider it highly prudent." Jim nodded to Simon pointedly, who responded by wordlessly stepping to the head of the small conference table, obviously waiting for father and son to join him.

"Oh, this is ridiculous," Lord William said, taking a chair. "James, sit down before you fall down."

"As you wish," Jim said formally.

Seated between them, Banks shook his head. "I feel like the firing pin in the middle of a concussion grenade. Your family meals must have been as restful as dining with spitting cobras."

The two Ellison's glared at each other in hostile silence. The comparison was more accurate than Banks could possible know.

Jim appreciated his Captain's effort. In any other encounter, his comment would have been the signal to lighten the mood. Simon couldn't know that Lord William indulged in "lighter moods" only in carefully calculated situations, with a clear eye towards a beneficial end result. "We're managing several active cases. Let's finish this quickly."

Using a very deliberate motion, Lord William placed his palms flat on the table between them. "You nearly died, James. Your future health is in doubt. I have a responsibility to you as my son, to the bloodline."

"I relieved you of that responsibility years ago." In response to his father's frown and obvious glance in Simon's direction, Jim continued. "Captain Banks is my commander, and my trusted friend. None of this is a secret from him." Well, actually it was, but his father didn't need to know that.

"Then let us speak frankly. You need a guide, James. Would you expect any father to stand aside, even if they had nothing to offer? And I can offer quite a lot. Don't let your anger overrule common sense."

"Most parents don't extend help with one hand and a cage with the other."

"The status you could enjoy, and deserve, is no cage." William shifted his hands on the table, his ring
with the House Ellison seal glinting in the light as if to emphasize his point. "It is your right, earned by generations of Ellison's who have served and excelled."

"It's a cage when you try to entrap me in a life I don't want," Jim shouted, heaving himself out of the chair. Anger wasn't enough to alter his physical situation. He wavered, grasping the padded chair back to keep upright. Any color drained out of his face, but his anger burst out undiminished. "Don't lie to anyone in this room! You overruled my known directives when I couldn't speak for myself. You had visions of dragging me back. I'm not the Heir of House, Lord William. I never will be!"

Lord William was on his feet, the battle joined when the door banged open, revealing Henri Brown. "Captain! We need you - both of you!"

The conference suite was seething with activity. Four vid captures, displayed at slightly crooked angles that indicated haste, adorned the walls.

"What have we got?" Simon demanded.

"Snitch hit," Rafe said. " Barely got the word out and these came back. Captain, we've called in some other expertise."

Simon pushed Jim into a chair. "Don't move. I mean it." He went to the door. "Rhonda!"

No one even reacted to Simon's trademark bellow, although Jim clapped his hands over his ears. Rhonda appeared, unruffled as usual.

"Get that damned sentinel whatever expert in here. Then go sit on Lord Ellison. I don't want him loose in my unit."

"I get to detain an aristocrat?" she said mischievously. "What fun."

"Gently, Rhonda. Gently."

"I'll be nice. Captain Santelli is already here."

"Santelli?" Jim said, staring in surprise, his ears still ringing and strangely unable to move. After hours with his skin responding to every prickle, now his whole body felt numb, like he'd been anesthetized. Gabriella Santelli, tall and willowy, a physically unlikely choice to run the Depravity Prevention Unit, stepped briskly across the room. She was already staring at the wall display. Jim couldn't figure it out. They were looking for Sandburg. Why did they need Santelli?

Brown was already pointing out details on the vid captures. "We're sure this is our guy. No face, but the clothing is distinctive and matches with earlier catches. The rest, well, that's why you're here."

"You were right," Santelli said. "Nice work, S.I. Brown. That's definitely Lynch Gentry." She looked at Simon. "Banks, your people don't mess around. Where were these taken? How long ago?"

"A stop on the Loop Train, a place called -" Brown hesitated to check his notes. "Boundary Area Seven. Mostly metal reclamation facilities and low level plasto remanufacture. Not a nice place. Lots of scavengers. Some makeshift living shelters. Border monitors report lots of criminal activity routes through the area."

Jim couldn't string two thoughts together. One moment he was shouting at his father, the next minute he was in here where nothing made complete sense. Lynch Gentry? The name sounded familiar, but
he couldn't quite follow the animated conversation continuing between, Banks, Brown, and Santelli. Then it clicked. Gentry was a human trafficker. By the ancestors. Jim couldn't move, couldn't think, contemplating the implications of that horror.

"S.S.I. Ellison?" Jim felt a hand on his arm. He looked up to see a pair of startling green eyes swimming in an indistinct face. "I'm Guide Thomas Cameron, attached to Sentinel Diwa. I'm supposed to give you a hand. You don't look so good, my friend."

Jim could feel a vibration on his arm and realized it was some kind of monitor. "Wh - what?"

"Your blood pressure is dropping like a rock. I'm pretty sure it's a stress reaction."

Was Cameron speaking very softly, or was his hearing screwed up again? "I'm okay," Jim protested. Besides, he had other things to think about.

"You're not okay. How do you feel? Talk to me."

Jim thought for a moment. "Like I'm buried in cotton or something."

"Trouble concentrating? Sensations dull?"

All Jim could do was nod. Whatever this was, it wasn't good. He felt like he was floating away.

Cameron was tapping on the back of his hand with something. "Sentinel, your body's tired. Your senses have sent so many messages they're burning out, for lack of a better description. Sentinel? Jim?"

Jim rocked back and forth, trying to focus. The other conversations in the room were fading into the distance. Somebody was holding his hand. It felt - okay.

Blair? No, not Blair. Like Blair.

Then he was blinking his eyes, Banks' face hovering was hovering in front of him. "What's wrong with him?"

"You're kidding, right? I heard you Major Incident guys were a bit crazy, but this is beyond the pale. You can't pull this crap on a late emerging sentinel."

Jim realized that angry voice was Cameron, the visiting guide. He also realized he was no longer in the conference room with the rest of the unit. He was back in Simon's office. The hand wrapped firmly around his wrist was Cameron's, too.

"Sort of," said Cameron, who'd apparently switched to making circle patterns around his knuckles. "I got your attention. You followed my breathing pretty well. Who taught you that?"

"Sandburg. Blair. My guide." Jim took a deep breath. Things were coming back into focus. Was that his father, standing by the doorway with Rhonda?

Cameron looked at Banks, then back at Jim. "With a temp? Then you got once-in-a-century lucky, friend. That kind of thing just doesn't happen. Where is he, man? He should be here."

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Daryl stood in the middle of Blair Sandburg's beleaguered apartment. It truly was a shambles. His
dad was sending him on a wild goose chase, but he actually didn't mind. "Attached to Major Incident" was a phrase he'd never expected to hear, even if it was just temporary.

He sat down in the mostly destroyed upholstered chair. Connor had given him a brief summary of the man's life. He wasn't really much older. Blair would have sat in this same chair, his only sanctuary in all the world. If he had something to hide, something he needed to keep secret, something precious, where would he put it? Daryl was certain if he eventually found something, he would be able to see it from this chair.

He could almost hear his father's voice, explaining that patience was the most important characteristic of an investigator. Patience. Without moving, he studied every inch of the apartment from his vantage point.

If Sandburg cared about his secrets, he would want to know they were safe. Monitor the hiding place, know it was undisturbed, without actually touching it and checking. Not the kitchen. Too much coming and going. Not the tiny, dark alcove where the thin sleeping pad, now shredded, had once rested.

He investigated each spot that come to his attention, most forays without result. He unearthed a pouch with credit cyphers, no doubt for emergencies, fastened to the back of a solar shade. A creaking floorboard revealed a cache of actual books, some with images as well as text, obviously valuable to the owner. While searching the food storage unit he found the remains of some paper sheets, damaged with water from the Ventriss search and now an unreadable goo.

After each success or failure, he returned to the chair to study the room again.

Clouds from a fast moving storm kept changing the light streaming through the window. The back wall was old-fashioned brick, the grout damaged from abuse and age. All chips and gouges and missing edges, almost leaving furrows in the wall surface. Daryl forgot himself, watching the patterns of light and shadow produced by the scudding clouds. Light and shadow. Light and shadow. Light and shadow.

Shadow. There was a pattern to the shadows.

Daryl went to the wall, his mind racing. He tried to reconstruct the original arrangement of the room. If the big packing case had actually been back here, against the wall. Yeah. He stripped down to his bare feet, balancing just so…

Wide, wooded beams crossed the open ceiling, riddled with imperfections and probably rot. Using the toe holds and a little run, he could catch the side, and just pull himself up. Maybe he was being silly. Sandburg was shorter, probably not as strong. He tried it anyway. There, perched on the top of the beam, was a neatly folded packet.

He snatched it awkwardly with one hand and dropped back to the floor. The exterior was a large sheet of drawing plasto, set diagonally to the contents and folded in triangles to meet in the middle. A drop of some sort of gel sealed and fastened the four points. Daryl carefully worked the edges free. Inside was a series of four drawings, sketched by hand in what looked like real pencil on wood-base paper, or maybe black ink, which would make them quite rare. Daryl turned them over and examined carefully. Most art was computer generated. These were hand-drawn with skill that Daryl envied.

The first showed young woman with long hair, perched in the crook of a tree bigger than anything Daryl had ever seen.

The second, the same woman, gazing at a baby lying in her arms.
Another, this time in a slightly different style. Maybe a different artist. The woman posed with a young boy. The child had a mop of long curly hair.

The woman, older, sporting short, cropped hair, and the boy, now a young man. Same mop of hair. Daryl squinted. He was fairly sure the tunic had the crest of Rainier University. Both were seated on the ground, leaning against an ornate stone and metal gate. Both were grinning widely, elbows resting on drawn-up knees. In cursive script, the words "Naomi - last time" had been added in tiny, hand written letters.

Daryl stared hard at the gate in the drawing. Like every Provincial employee, his training included a study of the landed families who had hammered their current global government, with complicated structure of interlocking regions and provinces, out of chaos. The gate was decorated with a crest, showing a dolphin, a running horse and a flaming vessel.

He knew that one. House Ventriss.

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His hands were tied to some kind of cold metal pole, so cold his fingers seemed to burn. Footsteps echoed around him, like he was in a space that was large and mostly empty. His head ached fiercely.

Wonderful. You couldn't even last a day.

"So you've joined us." A light flare, and Blair could do nothing other than shield his eyes by turning away as far as he could. "Tell me your name."

"Let me go," Blair whispered. Any other response was cut short by a shudder that wracked his whole body.

"Oh, not just yet," the voice purred. "Not until I determine your market value. You interest me."

Blair pulled up his knees and dropped his head, hiding from reality. Value? This person had to already know he carried nothing. "I don't have anything. I'm sick. Just leave me alone."

Blair's head was roughly hauled up by the hair. "You're not a user. We already checked. The blood scan doesn't show disease, either. Not that it matters other than to determine your sale value, and which buyer I'm going to send you too." The hand holding his hair pressed his skull back until it struck something hard. "You'd clean up well. I could sell you for sex. I could slit your throat and market your pieces for organ culture. So tell me something before I lose patience."

"Tell you what?" Blair managed to mumble. "I don't know anything. I don't have anything."

"You're not from Boundary. I can tell that. You must have an education. Do you have a skill?"

Another shake that smacked his head back. "Give me your name!"

"Wait a minute," said another voice, older and female. "Lynch, take a look. No, pull back his hair again. There, the tattoo. Behind his ear."

"This?" the first voice asked.

"Of course that," said the voice, followed by her face, which looked more aged than her voice. "The interlocking hand symbol. That's Rainier's mark. He's a guide."
Blair groaned, frantically thrashing against the hand that held him, panic overwhelming any other thought. Bad enough to be in the hands of a human trafficker, with all the ugly outcomes that entailed, but to be sold as a guide? To a sentinel who couldn't get a guide through the normal channels? He knew exactly what kind of sentinel would be in his future. A sadist, or a sexual predator. Another Alicia.

No, please, no. Anything but that.

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"Lady Carolyn, you compensate me handsomely. I ultimately earn that compensation by telling you the truth, not what you want to hear."

Carolyn Plummer tapped an impatient finger on the surface of her desk. She valued Andrew Nessit, who handled discreet inquiries on her behalf. However, even excellent staff needed to be chided occasionally. "We have information sources within Security Services, do we not?" Carolyn asked, already knowing the answer. She herself had cultivated some of them during her brief tenure in Security Sciences.

"Of course, Lady Carolyn. Major Incident is not a unit we have penetrated, and Captain Banks runs a tight ship. Unless you'd like to attempt a direct bribe with a member of the inner circle, I have nothing to offer."

"That would be pointless. Banks handpicks all of them, down to the lowliest support staff. How thoroughly annoying," she answered. "Pour yourself a drink, Andrew and be seated. What can you be certain of at this point?"

Carolyn swirled her chardonnay while her investigator selected a whiskey neat, and took the chair across from her. "James Ellison is most definitely a sentinel. Lord William appealed for emergency dispensation as Head of House and was legally declared the designee. Captain Banks and the temporary guide were dismissed. I got that information directly from hospital staff who witnessed the changeover."

"So James is without a guide?" Carolyn asked.

"Chancellor Edwards attempted to direct a formal guide selection. I don't know if Lord William called her or the other way around."

"Edwards. Yes, I remember the woman. Not a pleasant sort, although I recall that most of Gerald's education was gained through her auspices. Just one of many reasons her eldest brother was not her equal. She helped herself to one of her chef's delightful morsels, and gestured for Andrew to continue.

"Just so, Lady Carolyn. James Ellison did not respond to the proffered guides and left the Sentinel Treatment Center in quite spectacular fashion."

Carolyn considered that statement for a moment. "So he went running back to Banks, and still doesn't have a guide. Any idea why?"

"I consulted with the sentinels under our employ. Guide acquisition for latents is predictably difficult. I'm fairly sure James Ellison is holed up in Major Incident. The current activity in the unit seems to be concentrated on finding the temporary, one Blair Sandburg."

"And why is he so special?" Carolyn asked. "James doesn't normally respond to new acquaintances. Besides, Major Incident should be able to find him in a heartbeat. What's the problem?"
"Complicated, Lady Carolyn. I've done some discreet inquiries. At some point he was involved with the Ventriss family and Lady Alicia."

"Ah, yes, the crazy Cousin Alicia. Well, that den of jackals would complicate any situation. Why can't we dangle a better guide in front of James' nose?"

"Between Chancellor Edwards and Lord William, every quality guide has been scooped up."

"Of course," Carolyn said tartly. "Lord William is nothing if not thorough. He'd corral guides from one continent to the next if it was to his advantage."

"If your intention is to influence James Ellison through his guide, it would seem that Sandburg is your best alternative. I believe he had disappeared into the Boundary."

"I see," Carolyn said, sipping her wine thoughtfully. "The Boundary is not the concern of Major Incident. Perhaps we have an advantage."

"The Ventriss family is already searching for Sandburg. However, there are no loyalties in the Boundary. A competitive bid, so to speak, might bring him under your control."

"And with him, James," Carolyn said, stating the obvious. "How much?"

Always circumspect, Andrew passed a data pod. She activated the reader and scanned it immediately. As expected, his budget was detailed, with an astonishingly high credit total. She sighed and rubbed fretfully at her forehead. She could blame the headache on the wine, but it was probably the stress. Even with access to the secret House Plummer accounts, her financial situation was tricky. She needed every available credit to keep her brothers at bay. Was this worth the expenditure?

The wholehearted support of Lord William would almost assure her bid to control the house. The older man's support was guaranteed if James returned to her side. Would James refuse her again if the guide he desired was under her control? Probably not. Certainly not.

"Andrew, withdraw the full amount. Find him and bring him into the fold."

"At once. Thank you for the refreshment, Lady -."

She held up her hand, and Andrew respectfully stopped speaking. "I believe the correct form of address will no longer be Lady Carolyn. You may address me as Lady Plummer."

"With pleasure, Lady Plummer," Andrew said with a formal bow. "Allow me to congratulate you on your imminent ascension. May your tenure as Head of House be exceptional."

Her heart soared as he excused himself from the room. Andrew Nessit was the best. He would buy, steal or kidnap Sandburg. Once that happened, everything else, including James, would be within her grasp.

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"Excuse me, Minister Evans. Governor Thorneville is on his way up."

Adjutant Fallon Pines limited his reaction to a long blink when his boss vaulted out of his chair, nearly spilling his wine. "The Governor is here? Why didn't you notify me sooner?"

So you could slither off and try to avoid this? "Regrettably, the Governor did not contact our office
"Bloody hell!" David Evans danced away from the elaborate spread. Governor Thorneville was highly critical of Provincial Officers who indulged in excess, and Security Minister Evans both practiced and thoroughly enjoyed excess. The entree, an elaborate seafood casserole, was equivalent to a month of Fallon's own salary. What a shame he might have difficulty clearing, what with his single arm and all.

Evans was hastily buttoning his formal tunic when the suite doors slid open. Governor Thorneville was unaccompanied except for his Adjutant, who remained at attention by the door. Fallon was certain the unceremonious entrance was meant to make a point, and would be private for a reason.

"Governor, to what do we owe the pleasure?" Evans said. He had one sleeve partially rolled up in a vain attempt to look hard at work, but hadn't quite gotten to the other cuff. The filled wine glass still on the luncheon table probably wouldn't support the half-hearted illusion. Fallon bowed his head to the Governor and his aide, then quietly retreated a few steps, standing at polite attention.

Governor Thorneville helped himself to the most comfortable seat and left Evans standing. "You've quite put your foot in it, David. I've been reviewing the complaint filed by Captain Banks."

Evans straightened, raising his chin defiantly. "I assure you, Governor, my actions during the entire affair were above reproach. Captain Banks is a normally competent officer, but allowed his ambitions to run away with him. I have no greater concern than the safety of our Security personnel. In fact, I scheduled a visit with S.S.I. Ellison this morning. I want to be certain no resources are lacking in his recovery."

"Heard all about that," Governor Thorneville said calmly, and seemed decidedly amused. "A shame your timing was off, David. Those calls only count when they're done in a timely manner, and the caller actually cares. Ellison scooted out of there before you could go through your little performance."

"Performance? Of course not!"

"Stuff it, David," Thorneville growled. "I've overlooked your other instances of grandstanding, but this tears it. Your vanity cost lives."

"Governor -"

Thornville waved his hand impatiently. "Oh, spare me. Banks is more than a competent officer. He salvaged a victory out of the mess you created. Look, David, you weren't my choice to begin with. Taking you was a political expediency. I have to hand it to you, I couldn't have been handed a better justification to dismiss you. Whatever were you thinking, letting that peacock Kincaid strut around like the aggrieved party? And to treat Plummer, who was up to his neck in conspiracy, like an innocent!"

Evans swayed on his feet in shock. "Governor, perhaps it's premature to make these determinations. The perspective of time might bring more clarity."

"Oh, don't worry, David," Thorneville said with a small smile. "I'm going to be perfectly clear. As I said, I'm not a happy man, and I'm not in the mood to spend time in hearings and such. Unofficially, I'm firing you. Anyone who can't recognize a sonic cannon as an act of treason doesn't get another chance in my administration, and I'm angry enough not to accept a timely resignation. Officially, you're being reassigned."
"Reassigned?"

"Reassigned, at your own request," the Governor said firmly. He held out his hand to the Adjutant, who supplied a data chip. "You're going to lighten your workload to care for a sudden health condition, although in a noble gesture, you wish to continue to serve the Province. The Office of Reclamation and Recycling will have the pleasure of your many skills. Take it or I'll convene an immediate hearing and let the evidence Banks submitted publicly shred you."

"Provincial R and R? The Garbage Unit?" Evans stammered, palming the chip. He was clearly horrified. "You're sending me to manage the Province's discards?"

"I find the choice rather poetic. Your transport is waiting outside."

Evans stood slack jawed. "You mean, now? This instant?"

The Governor flicked his fingers toward the door. "Now, as in this very second. I'm an unhappy man, David. You might want to take that lovely bottle of wine along with you. I just cut the R. and R. personal expense stipend by eighty nine percent. No more largess for you. Take the deal while you can get it."

Evans practically fled the room. Fallon Pines could have jumped for joy. The demotion couldn't have been more deserved. Then reality exerted itself, and he mentally calculated how long he could pay his housing fee with the credits currently in his account. He jolted back to the present when he realized the Governor was speaking to him.

"Fallon Pines, correct?"

"Yes, Governor." He barely remembered to bow in acknowledgement.

"My own adjutant tells me he served with you in the military." Fallon managed a nod. "Your addition to his staff was one action Evans took that I approved of. As of now, you're formally attached to my own staff. Throw that weaselly toad's belongings in a plastocarton and report to my office before the end of the day."

Fallon made no effort to hide is delight.

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Lord William Ellison recoiled from the scene playing out before him. His son, his firstborn, carried in nearly unconscious, his face pale and brow dotted with sweat. Captain Banks, forcefully keeping him from James' side, unassailable in his own domain. How could they force him to stand aside and watch while some unknown in a Security Services uniform attended to James? He begged to be allowed to fetch the best care his status and credits could command, only to be firmly rebuffed by Banks.

He knew his hands were trembling when his son's eyes opened and the clouds began to clear. The next exchange, between James and the young uniformed guide kneeling by his side, was almost more than he could bear.

"Who taught you that?"


"With a temp? Then you got once-in-a-century lucky. That kind of thing just doesn't happen. Where is he, man? He should be here."
The question hung in the air, unanswered. He felt compelled to speak. "Captain Banks, you're a man who understands the need to take charge. Please, bring this travesty to an end. Send an observer if you must, but let me take my son to choose a guide."

The reaction was immediate. James began sputter in anger, flailing against the restraining presence of the guide.

"Jim. Take it easy." The uniformed guide, still on his knees, snarled over his shoulder. "Captain, whoever that peacock is, get him out of here."

Before William had a chance to react, Captain Banks had propelled him out the door.

William jerked his arm away. "How dare you! The governor -"

"Governor Thorneville will be picking you up in pieces if your presence endangers my officer any further. Don't you get it? Jim's in trouble because of you!"

The man was a towering presence, but William was confident he could reestablish the upper hand. "My son -"

Banks continued to crowd him. "Your son was barely back from the dead when you waltzed in and tossed out the guy who was his lifeline. The Governor knows Jim's value to the Province. He's been repeatedly decorated by the Governor's own hands. Think he's going to ignore that so you can play your aristocrat games?"

"The man was unsuitable!" William stuttered, shocked that a man not his equal would interrupt so rudely.

"Why? Because Sandburg's not listed in the Bloodline Index? As if being an aristocrat ever guaranteed competence."

William recoiled, astounded that someone in a command position would be so intemperate. "Your judgment in this matter is flawed, Captain."

"Right. Did that harpy Edwards tell you that the man you dismissed as 'unsuitable' went into raging weapons fire unarmed to retrieve your son? That he didn't even have a contract in hand before he put his life on the line? No? Or did she share that the Sentinel Commandant for Cascade evaluated his performance with a new sentinel as extraordinary? Did she mention that Blair had already requested Jim have a full selection?"

"You're wrong," William, his voice reflecting denial more than certainty. "He's unreliable. He harmed his own sentinel."

"Edwards did some convenient editing. He had a sentinel, an aristocrat I might add, and she damn near beat him to death." Banks seemed to reign in his temper. "You've been played, Lord Ellison. This is all about someone else's agenda, not your son's wellbeing. You played right into her hands."

"Both of you shut up!"

William noticed that Banks seemed as shocked as he. The guide was a full head shorter than the Captain, of far lower rank, and didn't seem the least bit repentant. "Right now, you're both Jim's worst nightmare. He's a sentinel. Get it? He can hear every word. You think he needs to be listening to this crap?"

Banks looked embarrassed, if anything. "Sorry, Guide Cameron. This whole sentinel thing is pretty
"If your learning curve doesn't get a lot steeper, this 'sentinel thing' won't have a chance to get old." Any smugness William felt vanished when this junior officer turned his ire on him. "And you! You're his father! Between the two of you, you're going to kill him."

William bristled. "Young man, I have guides, excellent guides, waiting for James. That is if I can get him -"

"You really are thickheaded," Cameron hissed, his voice low and intense. "Late emerging sentinels have a hell of a time connecting with a guide, any guide. It doesn't follow a script. Some have to practice for months to get the simplest breath control. Ellison followed me like a pro, and we'd be carting him off to emergency care if he hadn't. You really think that was an accident? Do you have any idea how stupid it is to toss a sure thing for a vague maybe? If the two of them relate, everything else is secondary. You're ignoring a damn miracle."

William stared at Banks, who stared back at him with an equally baffled expression.

"Glad you don't have anything to say," Cameron said. "I gave him a half dose of a damping drug to give him a break. My sentinel is on his way. Since you people can't be trusted to act rationally, we're taking Ellison back to his own place. Help him get some equilibrium." He pointed at both of them emphatically. "You two just stay out of the way."

He stalked back toward Banks' office. Before entering, Cameron issued his parting shot. "Quit fighting each other. Find Sandburg, and give Ellison a chance. Then you two can spar over the details. Don't be here when I bring him out."

Banks scowled and put his hands on his hips. "I can't remember the last time I got tossed from my own office."

William adjusted his cloak. "I'd be furious, but I suspect I deserved that. He's quite effective. I should hire the man just to berate my staff for me."

"I think strategic retreat is in order." Banks motioned him to follow. "Lord Ellison, I'm pretty steamed with you at present, but in deference to your rank, the fact that you are Jim's father, and because you're here with the Governor's support, perhaps you would like a formal briefing."

"I wasn't aware the Security Services were so generous," William snapped sarcastically.

"It occurred to me that some truth might clarify the situation." Banks cast a glance back towards his still-closed office door. "It also occurred to me that some of our interests might be aligned."

"I accept. A good leader doesn't decline accurate information," William said. After a pause, he added, "Even if it annoys him."

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"I still say we sell him as a party boy. No entanglements and credits on deposit. It's quick and it's clean."

"Trane, for a son of mine, you truly lack imagination." Willa Gentry shook her head in mock despair. "We'll wait until Lynch comes back with the word from the street."

"Fine! We wait, then. We'll decide together, as usual."
Her younger son limped from the room. As always, Willa closed her gray eyes with regret. Such was the nature of the Boundary. The thin ribbon of the loop track separated two completely different existences. Within, the Province of Cascade dispensed the basics of existence to its citizens according to their status. Even the lowest citizens had access to some sort of medical treatment, education, employment, and were protected by due process of law.

Not so for her two sons. The father of her boys had died young in a labor riot. No safety net for the vulnerable and weak in the Boundary. She'd sustained her young sons by buying and selling the forbidden, clawing out an empire among the factories and camps shunned by the citizens. When Trane's left side had been crushed by an ore cart, she'd carried him to the Border Monitors and begged to be admitted. They'd handed her an aid kit and turned her away. Her Trane, with his mangled body, would live her failure every day of his life.

"Could I have some water?"

Willa looked at the huddled figure. Was his presence, and potential profit, worth the discord in her family? "So you're awake."

"Unfortunately."

"Such an attitude," Willa said. Their prize was chained by one wrist to a pipe. As she tipped the cup to his lips, she noticed his eyes. Such a vivid blue. "My husband had blue eyes," she murmured without really meaning to voice her thoughts.

"Thanks for the drink."

Willa squatted down after he drained the cup. "Why were you in the Boundary? And why are you sick?"

Their captive leaned his head back, wincing as if every move hurt. "Sometimes, when you leave a sentinel, things don't go so well."

She brushed a lock of hair away from his eyes. "Will it get worse?"

"Probably." He sniffed in muted amusement. "Afraid it will lower my value?"

"Maybe." She cut off a hunk of bread and split it, placing a hunk in his mouth. After a moment, he began to chew. "You're a strange one. Most on the sale block beg."

He swallowed, as if it were a struggle to force the morsel down. "Maybe they have more to go back to than I do."

"This is business, but I'm a mother. I don't like to see boys in pain. Is there anything that would help?"

He shook his head. "I don't run this place?"

Willa gestured to the building. "An abandoned factory. After the riots, they yanked the machinery and moved everything to a more willing labor pool. My husband died here."

"I'm sorry. It must have been difficult for you."

"You have no idea," Willa said grimly, tearing at the bread, which was a cut above their usual fare. This batch had been stolen before the Province had a chance to shift it from transport to the shelves in the main Citizen's Market. "At the time, it was a roof and a place out of the rain. We had to eat. I
couldn't leave my boys alone to work in the reclamation processors. I started selling castoffs the recyclers missed."

Those blue eyes watched her gravely. "And gradually you moved to more profitable items. You seem like a kind person, but you're a slaver."

She shrugged. "It's business. I'm alive, my boys are alive. People here depend on us to keep mouths fed. I won't apologize for choosing to live rather than starve."

"What's your name?"

Her thin lips curled into a half smile. "Willa. Willa Gentry. My boys are Trane and Lynch."

"Well met, Mistress Willa." The blue eyes shadowed, haunted by some past memory. "I understand all about choices that aren't really a choice."

The disembodied voice of Thomas Cameron drifted down from Jim's bedroom. "Todd, check that soup in the warmer unit, will you?"

Sentinel Todd Diwa rolled his eyes in exaggerated patience. Todd had olive skin, dark brown eyes, hair cropped close to the skin, and a wicked sense of humor. "This is why a guide with a mission can't be left without supervision." He trailed off to Jim's food prep area.

Jim relaxed into the pillows propped behind his head. These two seemed like ordinary guys stopping by for a quick meal and conversation. Somehow he'd expected them to be different. He accepted the soup, grateful for something more substantial that Rhonda's nutrition paste. "You guys don't have to stay."

"The Todd and Tom show need to be here for a bit," Cameron said, abruptly leaning over the railing, only to vanish again. "You have a great place, by the way."

Both sentinels tipped their heads, listening to Cameron rustling around upstairs. "What is he doing up there?" Jim asked.

"What a transitional team would usually be doing for you, or would be doing if they'd had the chance. Congrats, man. You've totally blown a hole in the emerging sentinel protocol."

Jim looked suspiciously at the plastobins piled in his seating area. "Was it like this for you?"

Todd Diwa shook his head and smiled. "Well, I grew up a sentinel. My family did all the same stuff, just not all at once." He caught Jim staring at the cartons. "Quit trying to find the credit receipt. You're supposed to be resting, not using your vision to spy. If you're not good, I'll put a blindfold on you."

"I need to pay for this stuff," Jim protested. "I don't take charity."

"Stilled pissed about your old man waving his credits around? Stubborn is a common sentinel characteristic, but let it rest. I told you, Sentinel Captain Chambers authorized Thomas for whatever he needed from the Sentinel Disability Account. Security Services look after their own, and yes, you qualify."

Jim sighed and took another swallow of soup. "It doesn't seem right. I've always taken care of myself." More thumping came from upstairs. "Should I be worried?"
"Nah. It's a guide thing. Secretly they love the moments when they're entirely in charge. About the Sentinel Disability - it's all-purpose. No big deal at all. Crazy things come up. Elizabeth in Security Sciences all of sudden developed an allergy to all her clothing last spring except for this one specific genostrain of cotton. Disability sprang for an emergency wardrobe. Remember that big chemical spill in the Boundary? When the fumes drifted over north Cascade?" Jim nodded. "Half the sentinels needed state of the art air purifiers for weeks. Be glad we don't have to pay for all that shit and quit grousing."

"I hate this. I really do." He reached for a bottle of water and froze, hovering over the four different brands spread on the low table that was usually empty and polished to a shine. "Shit. I forgot which one was okay."

"That one," Todd said, gathering the rejects and dumping them in a plastobin. His expression turned very serious. "Do you understand what's happening to you?"

"You mean why I feel like crap and my home is in chaos?" Jim said acidly. "What do I need to understand? This sentinel shit taking over my life."

"I really meant the physical and emotional," Todd said. He looked up towards Jim's sleeping area. "Thomas Cameron, quit messing around and get your ass down here."

Thomas bounded down the stairs. Sentinel and Guide exchanged glances and took seats perched on the table in front of the sofa, looking eye to eye with Jim. "You understand that the guide supports you?" Thomas asked.

"Yeah. I guess I get that part." Jim rubbed fretfully at his cheekbone, which ached horribly for no apparent reason. "Although why someone would want the job is beyond me. All Sandburg got out of the deal was a lot of grief."

"No guide feels that way," Thomas said crisply. He rummaged through a bag on the floor between them, producing a fabric-coated pad. He folded it twice and handed it to Jim. "Your face seems to hurt because your sinuses are clogged. The air purifiers we brought have to run a little longer." He held out the carefully folded white blob. "This is a temperature-controlled moisture pad. Hold it to your face and the ache should be history. Lay it right there and press," and he demonstrated, swiping his index fingers across his face in wide arcs.

Jim placed the pad across his nose and cheeks, his eyes peeking out above the upper edge. The warmth actually did feel pretty good.

Thomas smiled encouragingly. "Okay, back to guides. Guide and Sentinel relations run the gamut. Some are like passing in the night, all business and no real connection. Sentinels with just a couple of senses can get by like that. Five sense sentinels can manage short term, for an emergency, say, but most of them need a guide they can really connect with. That's why we have Selection. You just can't toss people together and expect it to work long term."

Jim shifted uncomfortably. These two seemed honest, safe. If he couldn't ask his questions now, who else was there? "The guides they dragged in after Sandburg, they just felt completely wrong. Like ants under my skin."

Thomas was shaking his head. "I can't believe they did that to you. What a nightmare. It's not your fault."

Todd put a reassuring hand on Jim's knee. "Jim, my first guide out of training was very superficial. We worked well, but everything was at arm's length. Until I was twenty-eight, I had only taste and..."
touch, stuff that's generally easy to control. I didn't need someone who can anticipate every need." He looked at Thomas, who quirked a little smile at his partner. "Then one morning I wake up and bang, I have all five. Let's just say it was a big surprise."

"Then you know just how I feel," Jim said softly.

"To a lesser degree, I know exactly how you feel. My first guide just couldn't cope. I was all over the map, spiking all the time, totally out of control. We mutually agreed to separate. I had short-term selection pairings with six different guides before I met Thomas. When he walked in the room, it was like magnetism had been introduced to the universe." As if by some unspoken signal, Thomas took his sentinel's hand and joined them in that strange fingers-on-the-pulse arrangement, a mirror of something Sandburg had done.

Jim's heart twisted. "What exactly are you trying to tell me?"

"Formal Selection usually involves these complicated formulas, trying to match personality types and abilities. Sometimes it works according to the script. But for Thomas and me, there was absolutely nothing to indicate we'd click. No matter who tries to interfere, you're the one who will know."

Cameron picked up the narrative. "Go figure why the two of us worked out. I was just out of my training, and most of it was slanted toward technical stuff, like research and quality control. Rainier sent me to the Selection purely for the experience. Instead I walked out with a sentinel. Now he's my work partner and my best friend, my family."

Jim shifted onto his side so he could see both me better. "Is that what happened with Sandburg?"

Guide and sentinel looked at each other. "We think so. It makes sense based on the results, although I can promise you, he probably tried to keep it from happening," Todd said. "Separating from a partner you're really close to can be wrenching. The mind tells the body what to do. Flu-like symptoms are pretty typical, and it can be much worse. You two weren't together long, but it was very intense. I don't know why, but you got the one in a million and then had it ripped apart. He's probably worse off than you."

Jim thought about his own physical ills and nodded slowly. "You know, that explanation makes sense to me. Sandburg looked like hell in those vid captures."

"Let me tell you, Jim, he probably is in hell. The sentinel might have control issues and have senses go all wonky, but it's so much worse for a guide in true severance," Thomas said. "Like tearing through a tangle instead of unsnarling it."

"That doesn't mean there isn't another guide who can work with you," Todd said. "If your buddies in Major Incident can track him down, you can take it slow. You might end up pairing, you might not, but he could at least give you support through transition. Keep an open mind and trust your instincts."

Thomas fussed over a few more things. He rooted through all of Jim's drawers and laid out a selection of clothing most suitable, and added a few items from the mysterious boxes. He smeared dermal cream all over Jim's arms and torso, and sealed a particularly bad spot with a medicated wrap. He showed Jim how to use a mister, and how to control the level of scent. When he insisted on leaving a glass of water on the bedside table, Todd rolled his eyes and dragged his guide toward the door.

"Okay, okay. I think we're done," Thomas said, putting on his coat under the stern gaze of his sentinel. "You've got basic food items, and your sleeping area is sentinel prepped. The Transition
"Team can do the rest." Thomas pointed to the capsule he'd pressed into Jim's hand. "You're pretty stable right now. That's the other half dose of the damper meds. Finish your soup, take your dose, and go to bed. Our com contacts are on the top of your call list. Use them if you need to, no matter the time. If we don't hear from you, we'll come get you tomorrow morning."

Jim listened to their transport detach from his dock with a metallic shudder. He downed the rest of the soup in one gulp and hesitantly made his way up the stairs where his bed awaited.

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Lynch Gentry drifted down the street, nearly deserted at this time of night. Smoke drifted in sooty tendrils, mixed with drizzling rain. With no organized utilities, residents of the Boundary often resorted to impromptu fires for cooking and warmth, at least when they could find something to burn. Sometimes the air was tainted with chemicals, adding to the acrid stew. This was his domain; the muddy tracks, the makeshift family shelters, the giant processing plants looming in the distance. He knew every regular, rousted every newcomer. Such was the existence for those without the privilege of citizenship. A bleak and difficult world, but he'd known no other.

He made these walks several times a day, without fail. The greatest danger to their success was losing touch with the community, to be unprepared for some unexpected competitor or enforcement raid. As always, eyes were watching and ears were listening on his behalf, as they had for his mother before she turned most of the business decisions over to him. He would need all of them, and his own instincts besides.

Sandburg was a potential prize with dangerous entanglements.

The danger signs were all there. Provincial Border Monitors all along the loop track were on alert. He'd already aborted two smuggling runs rather than risk seizure. The tame monitors on his payroll promptly provided holos of Sandburg that were being circulated. A lot of questions were being asked. Some were known snitches for different Provincial entities, but an alarming number had no known affiliation. The whole area was tense and volatile.

He'd just met with his normal contact from House Ventriss. Lynch did a brisk business with the man. Lord Norman directed a lively import/export business he preferred to conduct out of the official limelight. Lynch rather liked Lord Ventriss. Oh, he was a ruthless bastard, but if you were vigilant, at least he was predictable in tactics and level of greed. They wanted Sandburg to appear at some hearing, and would pay a premium price to have him delivered immediately and without a mark on him.

The son, Brad Ventriss, worried Lynch a lot more. Father and son were apparently at odds, and working independently. His messages were through customary channels, but weren't towards arranging one of Brad's usual licentious pleasures. He was willing to take Sandburg in any condition at all. A good customer, that one, with a seemingly endless supply of credits, but his interest in this particular package made Lynch uneasy.

If that wasn't enough, there was an additional bidder. After serious checking, Lynch discovered the inquiries were coming from House Plummer. Doubly dangerous. The moment news of Lord Connal's detention had reached Lynch's ears, he'd killed every contact, working back up the chain as far as he could go. He'd arranged the smuggling of sonic cannon parts into Cascade and didn't want Security Services looking his direction. The current inquiries were being made on behalf of the daughter, for immediate delivery of Sandburg unharmed. The man representing Lady Carolyn seemed very determined. The opening offer was half again what either Ventriss had put on the table.

Actually, what could be more perfect? Why not set up a bidding war? They had three parties outside
the Boundary, all interested, all with credits, and all unaware of each other. The idea would appeal to his mother. A consortium of Landed Families had owned the mill where his father had met his demise so many years ago. Her hatred of all their ilk was implacable. She'd agree on that basis alone. The potential profit would keep Trane deflected from selling the man locally to the sex vendors. Gentry toyed with his one big hesitation. Dealing with the landed families was unpredictable. They were as likely to join forces and turn against him.

Actually, he had an easy out. If things got hot, they could always give Sandburg to the Province. It wouldn't hurt to establish a little good will with the authorities, and it would give him plausible deniability with the aristocrats. If all else failed, they could arrange for this Sandburg to disappear quietly and permanently.

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Lord William absently poked at the fire, crackling away in the hearth. That a live wood fire broke at least half a dozen environmental regulations in Cascade was of no concern. They could try to serve him with a violation. On this night, when so much was in the balance, he was in no mood to consider petty regulations.

The hearth had been blazing when Steven had come and gone. Steven, the dependable son, his right hand, had listened to his rage about the fiasco at Major Incident without comment. When William had prodded him for support, Steven had calmly replied that perhaps Banks and company were closer to the truth than his own father. That perhaps it was James who was owed an apology.

Oh, how he had seethed with righteous indignation! Words like "disloyal" and "betrayal" filled the air. Through it all, Steven had stood his ground with unnatural calm. When his tirade finally bled into exhaustion, he'd finally dismissed him. Steven had waited for an awkward silence to grow, and then complied with a simple nod. Just before leaving the room, he'd paused for one final comment. "I'll leave you to your thoughts, Father. You've taught me well, and I do, in fact, listen quite closely, despite your current opinion. As I believe you've stated many times, only a fool insists the entire world agree with him."

That was the final straw, the final disaster added to a catastrophic day.

So the fire ebbed as he struggled to organize his thoughts, to somehow salvage a plan for the future. He'd studied the written journals of his ancestors, how they'd seen the gathering storm clouds time and again, through the wars, the environmental collapses, the civil unrest, and prepared House Ellison to survive them all.

And now, when the frailties of age were approaching, the clouds were forming again. The shortages, the boiling resentments of the non-citizens toward the provinces, to name a few, the dissatisfaction among citizens. The pressure was building, and somewhere the framework that held planetary order together would give way. He'd argued with his fellow Lords. The excesses, the licentiousness of some of their own, had left them vulnerable. The populace had sacrificed total egalitarian democracy for order, but the ideal still underpinned their collective standards of morality. If not managed carefully, that desire of the masses would spring forth afresh, threatening the Houses themselves.

His fellow Lords feared the seething, angry mob, an upwelling from the boundary. They were wrong. The next threat would come from within the Provinces, not from the outside. That man Banks was a perfect example. A citizen, educated, skillful, yet underneath, the man clearly harbored a simmering sense of injustice. If pushed too far, such a man and others like him would step forward into the breach, demanding change that couldn't be controlled.

In a less demanding future, he would have been proud to hand over to Steven, but for all his fine
qualities, Steven was not the right choice. His youngest had taken to the office of Seneschal like a duck to water, but he was cautious, an incrementalist. The coming days would need a man of principle and steel, one who could be ruthless and move decisive if the circumstances required it. The future would require boldness. To his great sorrow, the son with those qualities refused his natural role.

James. Always back to James. What he wouldn't give to have his son return! He possessed such obvious qualities of leadership and physical dynamism. He'd matured into everything William could have ever hoped for, yet his anger was undimmed. Even under great stress, James still defied his father.

I'm not the Heir of House, Lord William. I never will be!"

William lowered his head, overwhelmed with despair. If he lost James now, there would be no hope for a future reconciliation. This was his last, best chance, if he could only find a way.

He heard a soft knock, despite the fact that he'd left strict orders to not be disturbed. "Excuse me, Lord Ellison. You have a visitor. She is quite insistent."

"I told you -." William let the rebuke drop mid-sentence. "She?"

"Lady Carolyn, Lord Ellison. I explained your directions were quite specific, but she is creating a scene -"

"Oh, get out of my way, you officious fool!" A slightly rumpled Carolyn Plummer pushed her way past. "Lord William, I simply must speak with you." She glared at the evening doorman. "Send him away. This is a family matter, and urgent."

William sighed inwardly and motioned her forward. "Thank you, Deeds, that will be all. Return to your duties." The door closed softly. As Carolyn removed her coat, he pressed the security sensor on his desk. Let her believe she could penetrate his sanctuary with impunity. Within moments his security team would be discreetly observing, poised to intervene if required.

Carolyn Plummer had potential value, but only on his terms. He had no intention of allowing her such liberties. "Young woman, you impose. This outburst is beneath you, and hardly befits one aspiring to lead House Plummer."

"I don't have time for this," Carolyn snarled angrily. "You don't either."

"How dare you enter my home -."

She closed the gap between them. For a brief moment, he mentally calculated the distance to the stun pod in the ornate box on his desk. Another resided behind the beautiful Ming vase on the display shelves. "Do you want James back or not?"

William froze. "What does James have to do with this intrusion?"

Carolyn reached toward him and then thought better of it. Her body practically vibrated with tension. "I can get his guide, this Sandburg, the one you tossed out the door. Seriously, Lord William, a grave error. Did you not consider the man could be a bargaining chip James could not refuse?"

William mimed attention, enough for her to continue. Carolyn began to pace. Her irrational demeanor alarmed William. He'd heard the whispered rumors, some from his own sons. Could James have been right all those years ago?
Carolyn was still speaking, her intensity bordering on manic. "Simon Banks is closer to James than anyone. This sentinel disaster threatens his greatest asset. Major Incident is searching for Sandburg high and low for a reason, so Banks can get James back on the job as soon as possible. Don't you see? They think that worm of a guide has the best chance of pairing." She held his eyes, making certain he was following her argument. Yes, he followed it. Didn't agree, necessarily, but he followed the logic.

"Simon and his merry band aren't going to find him. I nearly have Sandburg in my grasp," she gloated, her voice shrill. Her tone dropped to conspiratorial levels. "He's being held in the Boundary, available to the highest of a few select bidders. Jim wants Sandburg back, and he'll bargain to get him. When I can control Sandburg, we can both get what we want." Her eyes flickered, ever so much hotter than the coals in his fire. The edge of madness, William realized.

Did she seriously think James could be cowed so easily? Did she have so little respect for the man who was to father her children and produce an heir for both their Houses? Had she no thought for James' inherent dignity, that he deserved a guide with breeding and status of his own? That he would never, ever be blackmailed down a path not of his own choosing?

"Answer me! I don't have much time!" Carolyn demanded.

William remained silent. He'd always considered Carolyn as more of a pawn than a competitor, relatively attractive and useful, one to play the role she had been born to, that of a hostess and a mother. Carolyn was intelligent. She would certainly be a leader within the home, which was a huge responsibility, a partner, and advisor, but not the real decision maker. He'd never understood James' objections, or his final rejection of the carefully arranged match after such a short time. So this is what his son saw, this woman whose desire was to dominate at all costs? This is the reason he refused you and brought down all my plans?

"Why did you come here?" William demanded harshly, deliberately ambiguous, putting Carolyn immediately on the defensive.

She seemed taken aback. "I've got to get him. There's another motivated party, and the bidding has outstripped my current resources. One more round and I'll have him. If you help me, you can include your own demands. Insist James leave the Security Services and come back to House Ellison permanently. Just help me seal the deal before the opportunity is lost."

And then it all fell into place. She was desperate with ambition. Belatedly, he realized her desire to cement her position with James was to complete a necessary image, to curry the favor of the Lords in her bid to be Head of House. It was leadership of House Plummer, and House Ellison by extension, that Carolyn really craved. James was just a means to an end.

No, their interests were not aligned. Parallel, perhaps. He too realized that the guide might be a means to influence James. Influence, not dominate. Seeing James today proved that without a doubt. What if Steven was right about his brother? Sandburg, rescued and given as a gift, would be the form of apology James might acknowledge. It would require a delicate hand, and Carolyn Plummer need not be part of the endgame.

The ambitious exploiter would become the exploited. The symmetry of the idea pleased him.

"An interesting proposal, Carolyn. How many credits do you require?"

She named a substantial, but doable, amount. For that amount, he would usurp the entire process. He simply needed to complete the sale at the same time he cut Carolyn out completely. How amusing. That would seal House Plummer's fate at the same time, another occurrence he could manipulate to
the benefit of his own House.

"I see several flaws, which together we can correct." William poured two glasses of very fine brandy. "Sit, my dear. Review the details so we can move swiftly."

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Jim jolted awake. He'd never quite lost the military technique of awareness during sleep. In his civilian life, it was mostly a pain in the ass. Someone had just accessed his aerial dock. His hearing spiraled, making every clink sound like a hammer and tongs.

Damn, with this sentinel crap, he'd probably never sleep a full night again. He checked the time. Not Simon, surely, and his captain would never be so foolish to appear without contacting him first. He slipped out of bed and pulled on a pair of workout pants from the stack of clothing Thomas Cameron had set aside for use. He hastily descended into the main living area, his footpads on the stair nearly silent. He was already arming his discharge pistol when the clatter outside his landing area nearly made him laugh out loud. Whoever this nighttime intruder was, they certainly weren't professional.

He jammed the pistol into his waistband. A discharge firearm was probably overreacting. One good shout would likely be enough to spook this idiot off. He activated the exterior door, drenching the intruder in a narrow beam of intense light. The lone figure immediately raised empty hands.

"Don't shoot, Jimmy. It's me."

Jim had to squint, making a mental note to readjust the approach beam on the dock. "Steven? What the hell!"

"Are you going to let me in? You have no idea the trouble I had getting here without tipping off House Ellison Security."

A wave of anger swept over Jim. First his father, now Steven? "What are you, the second wave? Absolutely not. Go back to oppressing the masses or whatever else it is you do with your time these days."

"Jimmy, please."

"Jimmy doesn't exist anymore!" Jim snarled. "You need to leave, Steven, and leave now. If you're not gone within a minute then I'll start shooting. No one on the planet would blame me."

Jim heard an audible sigh. Steven lowered his hands but didn't retreat. "Fire away if you have to. Not my first choice, but I won't leave without talking to you. It's important to you personally."

Jim surveyed his brother. He genuinely seemed sincere, and he was empty handed. Other than a ceremonial House Ellison blade, Steven had never handled a weapon in his life. Jim chided himself. His brother's presence was annoying, presumptuous and pointless, but harmless. Steven was House Ellison through and through, but you didn't shoot an unarmed man for that, even if you were furious with your entire bloodline.

"You have one minute," Jim said gruffly. "After that, I won't be responsible."

"Then I'll take the minute," Steven said, sinking onto the wide bench lining Jim's dock entry suite. "Remember when we were kids, and used to prowl through the servant's passages? I spent the last hour listening to Carolyn Plummer arrange to buy Blair Sandburg from some human trafficker in the Boundary."
"What?!" bellowed Jim. "Ouch! Damn senses." His ears roared, and he started to fall.

Steven was suddenly at his elbow. "Shit, Jimmy. Sorry to spring it on you like that, but you only gave me a minute," Steven said ruefully. He steered Jim to the bench and helped him to sit.

"What does Carolyn have to do with anything?" Jim asked. "What is she trying to cook up this time?"

"Well said. By my honor as an Ellison, you were right to leave her, Jimmy." Steven shook his head. "In fact, I think you didn't paint her behavior with a full brush. Carolyn is making a bid to take over House Plummer."

"Hah," Jim said. "Her brothers will kill her. If not Gerald, then Philip will step in."

"She was Seneschal. She knows things the brothers don't. She's lobbied the Heads of Houses individually, but father wouldn't commit. She's convinced he'll support her if she has you at her side."

"And Sandburg's the bargaining chip? That worthless, selfish bitch."

"I couldn't agree more. I'm pretty sure Father has seen the light, and he's playing her, although I didn't stop to confirm that. He was mustering the fixers before Carolyn got out the door. Truthfully, Jimmy, I told him he needed to beg your forgiveness."

Jim stared at his brother in total disbelief. "When the hot iron core of the planet freezes. And who did you say you were?"

"The brother who's missed you for years, and because I'm a sneaky bastard, what Carolyn knows, I know." Steven held up a data pod between thumb and index finger. "I say we go get him while we can."

Willia Gentry activated the scanner and opened the lock. She couldn't stand one more minute of watching him writhe on the floor, jerking so hard against his bound wrist that it bled.

"Come on, on your feet." She steered him toward a jumble of empty plastocases used for their smuggling operation. She flipped a pair of them shut to form a rude bench. "Here, stretch your muscles out for a minute."

He managed to sit. Willa wiped his face with a damp cloth, shuddering in sympathy as he repeated hunched in on himself, wracked with more muscle seizures. "This can't go on," she whispered. "There must be something I can do."

The last spasm passed. Blair braced himself up on locked arms. "What does it matter? I doubt my buyer will care. I'm sure the fee doesn't vary with condition of the product."

"No one should suffer like this," Willa said softly. His plight echoed her husband's last agonies, vomiting and seizing from the gas used to quell the riots. She'd never left his side, staying until the last breath left his body. Colm Gentry had been the love of her life, and part of her had died with him.

This one had never begged, never complained. He'd been grateful for every kindness, stoic under every difficulty, wrapped in some unnamed private pain. He had that same look in the eye she'd seen in Colm the night he'd gone to lead the protest that ended his life, the look that said if death waited, it
would be accepted bravely.

That was Colm, driven by a sense of justice right to the end. He wouldn't have faulted her for fighting to bring up their sons, but would he approve of this? Did they really need to sink to this level? Was this survival, or greed, the vice they'd deplored in their oppressors?

Willa knew in her heart.

Trane and Lynch would be furious, but Colm, wherever he was, would approve.

"Steven, this is ridiculous."

His brother didn't look up from the flyer controls. "Jimmy, just shut up and make sure I have the coordinates entered correctly."

Why didn't I leave him in restraints back at the loft?

Jim knew the answer to that question. He couldn't call Simon. Security Services' mandate was absolutely restricted to Provincial areas. They couldn't venture into Boundary areas without an explicit, judicially reviewed warrant. The only way Simon, Joel or any other members of Major Incident could assist him would involve being on the wrong side of the law. He couldn't do that to his friends.

He couldn't go alone, not while he was so messed up with his senses. But Steven? He wasn't directing the minions or managing a business, or a multitude of other tasks Steven was supremely trained for. After all these years of classifying his brother as the opposition, here was his brother beside him, breaking his oath as Seneschal, defying Lord William, and flying off into the forbidden. This wasn't a Steven he even recognized.

Steven whapped his upper arm with the back of his hand. "Jimmy, did you check? I'd hate to be flying us into Columbian or out into the Pacific."

Jim belatedly confirmed the headings. "You're fine. You sure you can bring us in the way we discussed?"

"Yes." Steven snickered. "Didn't you know? I'm a closet commando. I train on the combat ranges when I'm not oppressing the untitled citizens of Cascade."

"Sorry about the oppressor comment," Jim said. Steven had been admirably calm during Jim's thoroughly hostile welcome. "I'm sure your piloting skills are just fine as well."

"We can discuss the finer points of House management some other time. You might be surprised." Steven made a slight adjustment to the flight plan. "Ever try your eyes at night? Maybe you can find us a nice spot to hover in, and we won't have to use the night scope. We'd be less obvious."

"I can try," Jim said, wishing he felt the least bit confident. He tried to imagine Sandburg sitting next to him, orienting his focus. What was the example he had used? Like a control bar in a flitter.

To his amazement, the landscape beneath them seemed to open up. The gleam from the flight console seemed inordinately bright, and he held up a hand to block that direction. "Wow. It works. Pull us into a hover, Steven."

Steven did so. He really was a pretty decent pilot. "Now what?"

Steven popped the forward screens and got out. "Blazes, Jim. How did you do this?"

Jim clambered out. He had, in fact, brought them to rest in a narrow canyon, transport pallets on one side and a factory wall on the other. "I'm not exactly sure," he whispered. "Maybe these senses are good for something other than screwing up my life."

Steven leaned close and whispered, "Well, if you can pull a few more miracles out of your pocket, I'm all for it." Jim had garbed him in traditional night mission gear, right up to the woven face shield. His eyes gleamed in reflected light.

It was hard, but Jim decided it was time to get over his reservations. "Steven, this is going to sound completely weird, but I want you to hold my hand. I think it's supposed to increase my focus or something."

"Well, okay," said Steven, sounding slightly amused. "You have something in mind?"

"I'm going to try to raise my hearing. Maybe I can listen in."

"Okay, I'm game. Just don't forget why I'm doing it and smack me or something."

Steven's hand did seem strangely reassuring. Jim concentrated on the control bar image. "Voices. I hear voices."

Steven gripped his hand a little tighter.

"Nest something," Jim whispered.

"Nessit? Andrew Nessit works for Carolyn. Keep trying, Jim."

"Shit!" Jim dropped Steven's hand, and clapped them over his own ears. Steven just managed to catch his brother before he crashed to the ground. "They started shouting!"

Steven leaned him against the closest wall. Before he could ask, Jim blurted it out.

"They're ready for the exchange, but Blair's disappeared. Someone named Trane burst into the middle of negotiations and said he was gone. Escaped or something, just within the last few minutes."

&&&&

Trailing Willa Gentry was like trying to follow smoke. Blair was sure he'd never be able to keep up. Willa was older, she'd lived a hard life, and in this environment she was an expert. Abruptly she pushed him down, squeezing him back into a particularly dark crevice.

"They know you're gone," she whispered. "The search is up. Our crossing place isn't far. We need to hurry."

Blair was breathing hard, leaning heavily on his knees. "Point me in the right direction. You don't need to get caught doing this."

"Blair, they're my sons. They might be angry, but they won't hurt me." She pulled him to his feet and ducked under his arm. "Move your feet. Lean on me."

Blair could hear shouts behind them. The searchers were closing in. Willa was goading him into a
shuffling run. She was right. He could see the light towers that paralleled the rail line. What was she thinking? That they would just stroll across? The border into Cascade couldn't possibly be that porous. There would be wire, walls, capture traps, drone disablers.

It was impossible.

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This has to be the scariest, craziest thing I've ever done in my life.

Steven was at the controls. They were hovering, Jim practically hanging out of the open panel, supposedly listening and searching. At Steven's insistence, they'd anchored Jim to the flyer with emergency line. The infrared screen on the control console showed figures below them were darting from place to place, obviously searching.

So far, no one had seen them. It was no one's first instinct to look up. Steven didn't want to think about the regulations Jim must have broken to cover the base of a civilian flyer with reflective panels he'd raided from Major Incident. Their use was restricted to the Security Services, and Jim wasn't here in any official capacity. On the plus side, if they did make an aerial run across the border into Cascade, presumably the Provincial Monitors wouldn't blast them out of the skies.

"There!"

Suddenly Jim leaned over the controls, activating a mobile view panel, another item borrowed in their raid through the supply suites of Security Services. Two figures, still separated from the pursuit, were moving in the direction of the Loop Tracks. The light towers were already throwing long, exaggerated shadows behind them. Steven automatically angled the flitter.

"Drop us between their position and the towers," Jim said. He had already activated his discharge pistol, and was unfastening the makeshift safety lines.

It was tight flying. Steven banked the flitter sharply. "Cover your eyes, Jimmy. The towers -"

Light towers as far as the eye could see blazed to full life, triggered by their incoming presence. Jim managed to duck his head just in time. The two figures, one obviously a woman, were clearly spotlighted in the glare, their shadows making wild patterns as they ran awkwardly over open ground.

Steven was dropping the flyer at an alarming rate, but not fast enough for Jim. At least fifteen feet off the ground, he popped the forward screen wide open, balanced momentarily on the landing runners and dropped. Steven followed the moment the flyer was firmly on the ground. The pursuit had to be converging. The lights were as good as saying, "We are here."

He made it around the front of the flitter in time to see Jim loping across the broken ground. "Sandburg! Blair! It's me!"

Jim was so focused on the fleeing pair he was leaving himself dangerously exposed. Two men broke from the shadows, bearing down on his brother.

Steven didn't have a moment to think. Even though it was illegal, Jim had loaded him up with Security grade stunners. Steven sprinted, intent on intercepting the pursuit. The first stunner activated, shimmering in the air and bringing the two men down in their tracks.

Steven landed hard on his ass. Jimmy had warned him about lousy technique with the high-powered devices, and he'd done it anyway. The woman was rushing his direction. "Don't," he yelled. "We're
trying to keep him safe!"

"Steven, get up! Up!"

That was Jimmy. He had one hand wrapped around Sandburg's wrist, dragging him along. He was using the other hand to fire the discharge pistol, set on low, keeping the closing pursuit at bay.

Steven scrambled on all fours through the soggy ground, coming up between Jim and Sandburg. Steven stood up, hoisting Sandburg in a shoulder carry. He grunted under the weight, but started running. "Take the flyer!"

Jim fired two more charges from the pistol, then followed Steven in a mad dash to their transportation. As Jim looped to the far side of the flitter, Steven unceremoniously dumped his burden headfirst onto the passenger side and climbed right in after. The forward screens hadn't even closed and they were already rocketing into the air.

"Go, go, go!" Steven shouted. "I'll take care of him."

"Security Code two five zero. Repeat two five zero." That was Jimmy's voice. The flitter was gaining speed, hurtling toward the no-man's land beyond the loop track. "Security Services emergency. Code two five zero."

Steven helped Sandburg turn right side up in a mutual tangle of arms and legs. With a sickening realization, it dawned on him what his brother was doing. The code must be the call to deactivate the aerial force shield that prevented border penetrations above ground.

Their speed increased, but the shields still sparkled ominously. Sandburg's eyes were wide. Obviously, he'd come to the same conclusion Steven had.

The crash was going to be spectacular.

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Specialist Julian was certain he had the most boring job in the Province. He'd taken the placement as a Border Monitor as a sort of internship while his application to Law and Justice processed. At the time, it seemed like a great ideal. He hadn't anticipated staring at monitors in the dead of night trying to figure out if the blip on some screen was a malfunction, a wayward owl, or a smuggler.

He checked the time. Two and a half hours until his shift ended at six. He yawned, cracking his jaw. This was the worst time to try to stay awake. His eyelids drooped, not really dozing, skirting the line between wakefulness and sleep.

A blaze of light nearly knocked him out of his chair. The border towers, with their enormous sensor and illumination beams, rarely sprang to life. All along the Boundary? Shit.

Something aerial. Julian frantically keyed the identification sensors. Was this a major incursion before - this was some kind of aerial transport, which never, ever happened. No identification? Visually the shape was blurry, almost a shadow. Shielding?

Hands shaking, Julian activated alarms up the chain of command. This was way above his pay grade. He looked up in time to see his screen show a large blob, screaming toward his position at top speed. Alert sirens were deafening.

This was a damn invasion!
The device was small, designed to be unobtrusive and highly specific. When activated, it responded with bone-shattering noise and sound, earning the nickname, "The K", for klaxon. The concept had been born in the painful past, when humankind rediscovered that the line between civil order and self-destructive chaos was preciously thin. In the whole of Cascade, fewer than fifty people shared the burden of such a device, those deemed essential to the defense of Province during natural disaster or attack, internal or external.

During Simon Banks' tenure as Captain of Major Incident, "The K" had sounded exactly twice, the first time in the aftermath of an earthquake that produced a tsunami. Cascade, tucked into Puget Sound, suffered only a glancing hit. Daryl had been young, and had suffered nightmares for months. The second incident had been five years ago, when a food riot had threatened to expand across Cascade. If Kincaid and Lord Plummer had managed to activate their sonic cannon, it no doubt would have sounded a third time.

Simon considered "the K" both a privilege and a burden, one of those things that you prepared for but still arrived unexpectedly. At exactly 3:57 AM, the same two-part message flashed in ominous crimson within personal dwellings across the city.

"Cascade Border Breach. Insurrection Alert."

Simon Banks nearly fell flat untangling from the bed linens to get to his uniform. His mind was already racing through possible causes for an Insurrection Alert. Civil unrest in the Boundary? Could the Patriot Brigade have organized a counter-insurgency from outside the Province? No, it didn't make sense. Governor Thorneville was personally handling his case. Kincaid was buried in max level detention. Besides, most of the Brigade members were in detention along with their leader.

His weapons repository, normally bio-coded to his handprint, sprang open, automatically activated by the Klaxon. While he selected his personal sidearms, he mentally ticked off the details of prearranged deployment if this went to full alert. About a third of Major Incident personnel, the explosives specialists reporting to Taggart, would be reporting to border posts or primary Provincial centers to ply their specialty. Another third, mostly lower rank Senior Investigators, would reinforce the Border and Transportation Monitors, and liaising between Security Services and the Civilian Law and Justice Forces. The remainder, including the elite core who had run the Plummer assault, would converge on Major Incident proper.

His transport was already waiting. The trip would be brief. Banks activated his com unit and concentrated on the briefing that would already be in process.

Steven Ellison knew he was a competent man. He managed an untold amount of credits for House Ellison. Arranged political alliances. Served with distinction and pride. Yet here he was, helpless, hating the anguished sound of Jimmy's voice. Correction. Jim. People named "Jimmy" didn't crash borders, rescue people, evade monitors and then vanish into the night.

If things hadn't been so serious, he would have suggested drinks all around. Lots and lots of drinks.

Not that Steven felt he was contributing anything at this point. It was clear during the wild ride back to Jim's place, snaking one moment along building rooflines only to drop to skim practically at pavement level, that Sandburg was seriously ill. To make things worse, his brother - cool, calm, and unafraid while hanging out of transports and crashing through Provincial security barriers - degenerated into a semi-hysterical wreck. Since he was flying evasive maneuvers through the middle
of Cascade at max velocity, it was all a bit worrying.

Sandburg's behavior was inexplicable. Physically, he was a mess, trembling uncontrollably and shuddering in pain. He clung to Jim one moment, asking frantically if Jim was okay, nearly weeping in apparent relief. The moment he seemed satisfied that Jim wasn't in distress, he climbed over Steven and plastered himself up against the far side of the transport, as far from Jim as he could get. The only thing they could get out of him was an incoherent denial, that he couldn't be Jim's Guide. Wanted to, but couldn't. Demanded to leave the transport, even though it was obvious he couldn't get ten feet on his own. At one point, Steven felt compelled to haul Sandburg bodily onto his lap to prevent him from bailing out through emergency ejection hatch. A horrifying possibility, since they were streaking along just below the tops of the buildings.

The hurt that flooded across Jim's face was an expression Steven recognized from their childhood. It broke his heart. And then he lost it. They made it back to Jim's place without crashing only because the universe felt like bestowing a miracle.

Faced with sentinel and guide in meltdown, Steven did what he could to take charge. Sandburg was filthy and felt like a block of ice. Steven didn't have his brother's physique, but he hauled Sandburg bodily into the hygiene suite and dumped him into Jim's shower, clothes and all. He ordered his brother to find food, hot drinks, clothing to fit their guest - anything to keep him busy and distracted.

Sandburg didn't protest as Steven stripped him and scrubbed. Jim protested about everything, but did as he was told. Eventually, Sandburg was clean, clothed, and buried in blankets on Jim's sofa. Improved, but he still wasn't making any coherent sense. Actually, neither was Jim.

Steven was in way over his head.

"Jim, stop it!" he finally spat, raising his voice. "Sorry. Sorry. Steven pointed a Sandburg sternly. "Not another word. Not one word." He propelled Jim back a few steps so he wasn't looming over the prone Sandburg. "Jim, listen to me. You don't know shit, and neither do I. We need a doctor, or a sentinel-guide specialist. Something."

Jim still looked distraught and confused, but at least he was thinking. "Right. Right. I'll call Cameron and Diwa." He fled to the kitchen. Steven could hear his low, frantic tones as he activated the com unit and, no doubt, woke some poor soul out of a sound sleep. Whatever.

Steven knelt by Sandburg's side. He looked pale and spent. If they could just get some food and fluid into him, maybe that would help. He slid an arm under the man's gaunt shoulders. "Come on, try some, okay?"

He coaxed a few swallows into him. Sandburg was fighting to stay conscious, his crystalline blue eyes fluttering shut at intervals. "You don't understand," he whispered. "Can't have a pairing. Never. They'll know. Stay invisible. Those are the rules - have to."

His voice faded away. His head lolled back, eyes closing. Steven looked toward the kitchen. Jim was still on the com, answering questions in a terse, strained voice. He was on his own. He gave Sandburg a gentle shake. "Why? Whose rules?" There was no response. Steven whispered harshly, "Why won't you help? Don't you want him?"

Sandburg's eyes flew open. "Yes - can't. They'll hurt her. Hurt..." And just as quickly he slipped away, wrapped in wave after wave of pain.

Her? A woman? How did that figure?
Jim was back. "Bundle him up. Cameron and Diwa are going to meet us at Major Incident. Can you hold him?"

"Of course, but don't you -"

"No," Jim said, although the statement seemed to pain him. "Cameron, the guide, says no. We'll take my transport. Better to leave yours off the street for awhile."

Steven looked up from his efforts to secure the blankets. "Just promise you'll tone it down. Your flying scares the life out of me."

Jim just gave him a little smile, which Steven thought was scarier still.

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For the second time in twelve hours Steven Ellison entered the Major Incident Unit. At least this time he wasn't sneaking in. The place was in chaos, on full alert. He and Jim exchanged guilty looks. Their little incursion and rescue mission had upset a lot of people. Guide Thomas Cameron, along with a uniformed medic, met them and immediately took charge of Sandburg. Two physically imposing specimens, both Captains and looking positively stormy, swooped down on Jim an instant later, hustling him off to an interior office. Something about an alert that had been issued and been downgraded and what the hell did he know about it.

Steven briefly considered the merits of a quick European vacation.

Sentinel Diwa watched Jim and the Captains disappear behind closed doors, and drew Steven aside. "You wouldn't happen to know anything about that Boundary intrusion, now would you?" he asked quietly.

Steven scrunched his nose. "I might," he said ruefully.

"Okay," Diwa said, looking around to see if they'd been overheard. "I'd sort of not mention that. Worst case, play dumb."

"That I can do," Steven said. "Around here, stupid is my middle name. I don't know a thing."

"Wise choice," Diwa said, giving him a reassuring nudge. "We might keep you. You'd fit right in."

The two men watched a heated conversation starting up between Jim and the two Captains. "I'm going to crash that party and remind everyone that sentinels, especially inexperienced ones, get a pass on some of these things," Diwa said. "Find someone in Jim's unit to hang out with. Look for the orange shoulder flashings. I'll come find you when I'm done."

Steven wandered down what looked like a quiet hallway, and was promptly intercepted by a slender, blue-eyed woman sporting an orange shoulder braid and an Austro-Pacific accent. "I think I'm looking for you," Steven managed to stammer. "Maybe you could tell me your name."

"How nice," Megan Connor quipped. "And you would be?"

"Steven Ellison. I came with Jim." In the awkward pause, Steven decided a bit more information was needed. "I'm Jim's brother."

"Whoa. You're kidding." They were abruptly joined by another tall S.I. with a ready grin. "Henri Brown. All these years I thought Ellison arose spontaneously, an independent force of nature."

Another grin. "I think your father was here yesterday. Damn near a family reunion."
"He was," Steven said. "I'm sure it was memorable. Our father tends to make an unforgettable entrance."

"That's one way of putting it," Brown said wryly.

"Maybe we can keep this on the low key side," Steven suggested. "Somewhere out of the way, perhaps?"

"We can hang out here, at least until Captain Banks gets done chewing Ellison out."

Connor led the way, talking as she went. She escorted him into an interior room, and gestured toward the clutter that covered every surface. "So you found Sandburg. He's been my special assignment for the last few days."

"Some research project," Steven said, scanning the room. "He doesn't have a criminal past or anything does he?" Steven hated to even think of Jim's reaction if that were the case. Things were already bad enough.


"Actually, he said something at Jim's place that puzzled me," Steven said. "If you're the local expert, maybe you can make sense of it. He wasn't very coherent, but he talked about staying invisible, and following rules. Like someone or something wouldn't allow him to be Jim's guide. You have any idea what that could mean?"

"Unfortunately, yes. For some reason, the Ventriss family seems to have a hostile interest in Sandburg. She was silent for a moment. "Did you know Alicia?"

"Alicia? The Ventriss fosterling?" Steven asked, surprised at the question. "Sure. She was younger, but all the aristo kids get thrown together at some point. Now that was one scary individual. Anyone with sense tried to keep their distance."

Connor considered that. "She was Sandburg's sentinel. She tried to kill him before they severed."

Steven sat down in the nearest chair with a thump and gave a low whistle. "Yeah, that would qualify as complicated."

"We suspect that the Ventriss family forced the pairing, but we can't figure out what hold they had over Sandburg. He still seems under their control." Connor shrugged. "Not being able to figure it out is starting to make me a little crazy, too."

Steven leaned forward. "When Sandburg was rambling, he mentioned a woman. 'They'll hurt her,' or something like that."

Connor's demeanor changed completely. "What did he say exactly?"

Steven thought carefully. "The whole time was pretty confusing. He kept telling Jim he couldn't be his guide, that we didn't understand. I was trying to get him to eat something and he just blurted that out - all that gibberish about rules and being invisible. When I pressed him, he got really upset and said, 'they'll hurt her.' It didn't make any sense. Was he talking about Alicia? But why would Sandburg be protecting someone who tried to kill him?"

"Maybe it's the woman in the drawing he's talking about," Brown said.

"What drawing?" Steven asked.
Connor and Brown exchanged looks. Brown selected items from one of the piles. "This was found at Sandburg's residence. It was hidden, so he must feel it's important. We're not sure how, or even if, it all fits." He handed them to Steven.

Steven sorted methodically through the drawings. He looked back at the two Security Investigators, a bit stunned. "I know this woman."

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"I do not believe this!" Simon Banks raged. "We do not run operations in the Boundary."

"It wasn't an operation, sir. I was on personal time."

"And you wouldn't know anything about an alert just this morning!"

Jim's face was impassive. "Not in an official capacity, sir. I was on Medical Caution and at home. How could I know anything."

Taggart crossed his arms, a scowl on his face. "Someone accessed Major Incident stores last night without logging in. The only thing I can find missing are two plastocartons of reflection panels. You wouldn't know anything about that either, I suppose."

"I was off duty, Captain, and escorted home, if you recall," Jim said, his voice totally without inflection.

Banks came out of his chair, leaning over his desk. "Reflection panels. That's how our so-called intrusion vanished into thin air. I don't believe this. Son of a bitch."

Connor burst into the room. "Captains, we've had a break in the case. How Ventriss has been able to control Blair Sandburg all these years." Brown and Steven Ellison were on her heels.

"Pirates," Banks snarled. "I command a bunch of renegade pirates, and none of them know how to enter a room with respect."

Steven placed the final drawing of Naomi and Blair on the conference table. "I know this woman only by the name Sky. She was retained by Lady Elizabeth Ventriss. Lady Elizabeth was interested in environmental reclamation, and this woman was involved with some naturalism sect. Tap into the energy of the earth stuff. It was years ago."

"Fine. That explains why she and Blair Sandburg might have been at the Ventriss estate," Banks said. "So what?"

"We just cross-checked some dates," Connor said. "Steven Ellison says that it's common knowledge that Lady Elizabeth Ventriss crashed her own personal flitter and perished in the accident, along with her spiritual advisor."

"But that's the point," Steven said. "Sky - Naomi - this woman - wasn't killed."

"How do you know this?" Jim asked harshly.

"Because the Council of Lords rehabilitation facility is under the direction of the Council President, a position our father held until last spring," Steven explained. "As Seneschal Ellison, I supervised and reviewed the patient accounts on his behalf. There was a discrepancy about this patient. This woman - Sky - or Naomi Sandburg - is very much alive and a patient at the facility. I recognize her face from the vid files."
"Why would you remember?" Banks asked tersely.

"Because her designation is unusual. Everything about her is unusual. She's in the accounts as Ventriss anonymous, non-inheriting bloodline." Steven read the confusion on Banks' face. "That usually means a distant relative, or a closer generation born outside of the recognized bloodline."

"Child of a mistress, that sort of thing," Jim volunteered.

"The Ventriss family uses the facility for a fee, but conducts her care privately, with their own medics and physicians." Steven gestured toward the final drawing. "It's all very irregular. I asked questions that weren't fully answered. I'm sure this is the same woman."

Connor broke in excitedly. "Captain, the dates check. This has to be the lever, the reason Blair Sandburg dumped all his plans and accepted Alicia as his sentinel. That happened less than one week after Lady Elizabeth died in the accident."

"That has to be it. Ventriss has been blackmailing Blair with his mother's wellbeing ever since," Taggart said. "Simon, it makes perfect sense."

"That's what Sandburg kept saying," Steven said. "They'll hurt her... By the ancestors, what have those bastards been doing?" He looked appalled.

Jim was on his feet. "No wonder Blair - Captain, request permission to -"

Banks cut him off. "Steven Ellison, as Seneschal of House Ellison, do you formally confirm this information? We will need your testimony to obtain a Law and Justice Search Order."

Steven was already on his feet. His hazel eyes sparkled with a light reminiscent of his brother's on the cusp of solving a case. "Captain, you won't need a warrant. Until next spring, I share the supervisory role with the incoming Seneschal. I can walk you through the back door to review the records and right into her room. Legally, with the full authority of the Council of Lords."

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Security Services appreciated the merits of handling things in-house whenever possible. The medical treatment suite was no exception. High intervention treatment rooms spun off in an arc from a large reception suite. Minor injuries could be handled in smaller sections furnished with comfortable furniture and mobile medical stations, allowing an injured officer to be accompanied by his partner and commander in a relaxed setting.

Sandburg was ensconced in a treatment chaise, attended by a medic and Guide Cameron. Joel Taggart occupied the nearest comfortable chair. Despite objections from the medic and cautions from Cameron, the intense conversation had continued for nearly an hour, but the need to get Sandburg's statements codified for evidence overrode their concerns.

Taggart sighed. Sandburg would be an excellent witness against Connal Plummer and Garrett Kincaid, although he insisted on testify under protection, which meant he would present his evidence in private directly to the adjudicator. That classification would conceal his identity in the official record. At any mention of the Ventriss family, however, the well dried up.

Taggart kept at it. He was stalling for time. By now, Simon and the Ellison's would be on the grounds of the Council of Lords rehabilitation facility. Their success, or failure, might loosen Sandburg's tongue. "Blair, we can't just let you walk out of here unguarded. Brad Ventriss has made credible threats."
"I don't know anything about Ventriss," Blair insisted. "He buys my services, that's all. I was late with the delivery. I'm sure he was just blowing off steam, spoiled aristocrat and all that. There's nothing I can tell you."

"We can't keep you safe unless we put him away."

Blair looked away. The cocktail of severance drugs and nutritional rehydration was apparently helping. The young man had stopped shuddering, his muscles were relaxed and his color looked better. A gaunt exhaustion still lingered around the eyes. "I'll be fine. I don't want any protection. I refuse."

"Ventiss and his thugs trashed your place. It's not habitable. This wasn't casual harassment, they mean you serious harm." Taggart paused. He hated to do this. "We could lose the case against Plummer and Kincaid."

"My testimony is on record," Blair said, his eyes darting everywhere but Taggart's face. "That's not the same as answering questions in a live deposition. And what about Jim. Don't you care about what happens to him?"

"Jim - he'll be fine. He has help now. He'll go through selection and be just fine." Blair's hands began to tremble. The medic cast a warning glance at Taggart, and adjusted the medication slightly. "Simon said you accepted him, when he saved you on the roof of the Plummer estate. Why are you denying him now?"

"Captain Taggart, please," Blair pleaded. "I need to leave. Jim will be best served if I'm not here."

"He needs to seek a guide, without the distraction of my presence."

Taggart leaned back. He'd pushed enough for now, but this wasn't over. Damn it, why hadn't they heard any news? He changed his voice to a very formal tone. "Guide Sandburg, Security Officer Daryl Banks will be here shortly and will escort you to your residence." Taggart kept a large hand on Blair's shoulder. "I insist, however, that you complete your medical treatment with our staff. Close your eyes, son. It won't be long."

The uniformed medic noted Taggart's wordless instructions. As soon as Sandburg's eyes were closed, he adjusted the programming on the medication cuff, adding a tiny bit more sedative to the severance medications and slowing the flow of nutrient fluids. No harm in buying a little more time, all in a good cause. Blair lost the battle. His eyes drifted shut.

Half an hour later, the suite door opened to reveal a Daryl Banks. He approached Taggart and bent to whisper his message. "Captain Taggart, the delivery you were waiting for has arrived. It's not good."

Taggart nodded, but his eyes asked for more.

"There was evidence of torture, Sir," Daryl whispered, barely loud enough to hear. "She's alive, but just."

Taggart clenched the arms of the chair in silent rage.

Sandburg's rather drowsy eyes opened. Taggart nodded to the medic to remove the cuff, and extended his hand, helping Blair into a seated position. "This is Officer Daryl Banks. As you may have guess, he is Captain Banks' son. He will be your escort for the day."
A double tone pulsed from Daryl's wrist com. The arrival was imminent. Taggart rose. "Guide Sandburg, we are grateful for your service, and have a small token of our appreciation for you."

There was a shuffling of feet and murmured voices out in the hallway. Jim and Steven Ellison, followed by Simon Banks, moved through the door and stepped aside, revealing a pale figure in a hoverchair, escorted by two medics.

"Blair? Sweetie?"

"Mom?" Blair struggled to his feet. Taggart steadied him, escorting him the few steps to his mother's side. Blair dropped to his knees, embracing her with both arms, even though she seemed too fragile to touch. "Oh, mom. Mom." He looked up at the others, overwhelmed by the sudden turn of events. He managed to choke out a single word, "How..."

"They came to find me," Naomi said gently, cupping his cheek in a thin, nearly translucent hand. "It's going to be just fine, sweetie. Really, it is. The hard part is all over. Breathe the free air."

Blair looked over his mother's shoulder at Jim and the others, tears brimming in his eyes. "Thank you. By all that's right and beautiful, thank you."

&&&&&

As one, the others eased away, leaving the two Sandburg's to their reunion, and to the attentions of the hovering medics. Taggart motioned for Daryl to remain. The others silently reconvened in the Captains' shared office suite. The other members of Major Incident streamed in, eager for news.

Steven Ellison was visibly shaken. "It's heinous, beyond words."

"Sandburg?" Banks asked.

"Willing with Plummer and Kincaid," Taggart answered. "A clam for anything Ventriss, but now that she's here, I think that will change."

"We need to put them in a medical-access safehouse," Jim said. "Lord Ventriss is going to figure out pretty quickly that we've snatched her, and that his hold on Blair is potentially gone. The two of them can bring charges. The only option he has is to eliminate the danger to House Ventriss. We can't trust any Medical Center security to keep either one of them safe."

"I'll make the arrangements," Banks said. "Rhonda can contact the Prosecutor Sanchez and get the protection orders drawn up." He quickly moved to key in instructions on his assistant's com.

"I feel responsible," Steven said, horror lacing his voice. "I should have pushed harder. The oversight was my job."

"It wasn't your fault," Jim said gently. "Everyone in this room can attest to how devious Ventriss father and son are. The aristocracy has its flaws, but no one would suspect this - this crime against humanity. It's barbaric."

"Well, people, they're not getting away with it," Banks said firmly. "Jim, you're in charge of their protection detail as long as the medics clear you. Connor, Brown, assemble your evidence for presentation. Rafe, process the evidence we brought from the Council of Lords rehabilitation facility."

"I'll handle Sanchez and Law and Justice," said Taggart, already halfway out the door.
The group dispersed. Jim tapped his brother's arm, and motioned him to follow. Steven stood silent by Jim's desk while his brother made necessary arrangements. "Sometimes it seems easier for other families, doesn't it Jim?" he said quietly. "Why couldn't our family love each other like that?"

"I'm not sure easier is the word," said Jim, watching his brother carefully, then looking away. "Maybe they just fight harder for each other."

Steven leaned his palms on the desk. "Forgiveness and acceptance will do that, I suppose. Not a natural Ellison impulses. Neither is trust, or faith, for that matter." Steven gripped his taller brother by the shoulder. "And what about you, Jim? Are you ready to fight for what you want? To take a risk and not look back?"

"Sandburg?" Jim gave a distressed sigh, gazing at the floor as if it would yield the answers he sought. "He suffered for her, practically died for her, and she still needs him. How can I interfere?"

"And now she's safe," Steven countered. "He's free to make his own choices. So are you, without any interference from anyone else. Not Carolyn, not Father, not even me."

"Your interference has been pretty admirable so far," Jim said. "I wouldn't mind so much, you know, if you stuck around."

"Then take my advice and don't wait for any one else's permission."

Jim sighed. "Diwa and Cameron told me to trust my instincts."

"Then fight for him, and fight for our family, on your own terms." Steven gave him a small shake. "Our terms. The days of Lord William playing despot are over if we stand together. So his mother needs care, and he'll be worried about that. What of it? We, the two of us, can make that happen. Better than Blair can alone. The question is, are you sure? Sure about him?"

"Depends," Jim said slowly, watching his brother through a changed, and changing, perspective. "Do I have my brother watching my back?"

Steven smiled. "Like two halves to one whole. You're the one who has to take the leap of faith."

"You do remember that I threatened to shoot you," Jim said with a tiny smile.

"Yeah, but that was yesterday, and you didn't. That counts."

Jim looked towards the door, the yearning clear on his face. "Yeah, Steven, I'm sure. On both counts."

Then Steven crossed his arms, his satisfaction apparent. "Then you'd better go get him. Hey, I can be your backup," he added jauntily.

They returned to the treatment suite. Blair had moved to a chair with his mother next to him. Additional medical staff had already arrived. Naomi had rallied for the reunion with her son, but her reserves were flagging. They were preparing to move her at start intensive treatment immediately. With one last squeeze of his mother's hand, Blair went to meet them.

"I don't know how you did this. Is it real?" Blair asked. Emotion washed across his drawn face, and he struggled to retain his composure.

Jim swallowed hard and nodded. "Ventriss can't touch you, either one of you. Not ever again." He tipped his head toward Steven. "This is my brother, Steven. I - we - have some long term plans in
mind, that is - uhm, if you - ." His voice trailed off, not quite knowing what to say.

Steven rested a hand on his brother's shoulder. “Guide Sandburg, let me – both of us – assure you that your mother will be cared for. I believe my tongue-tied brother would like to know your intentions, if it is possible for you to act upon them at this time.”

Blair's eyes went wide. "But your father - Lord Ellison - he - ."

"He isn't here," Jim said firmly. "And he doesn't make decisions for my life. I don't need a parade of guides, not when I already know you're the guide I trust."

Blair squared his thin shoulders, trying not to stumble over the phrases traditional for this moment. “I so state, with free intent, both the giving and taking of obligation.” With a final longing glance at Naomi, Blair extended both hands, which Jim took in his own. With tears streaming down Blair's cheeks, he spoke two words that meant the world.

"My Sentinel."

Jim let out the breath he'd been holding. "With free intent, both the giving and taking of obligation, my life in your hands, as yours is in mine. My guide."

A glorious smile broke across Blair’s face. It was not part of the traditional pledge, but Jim added it anyway.

“Always.”

The End

**Dang, Edwards still has her stilletos, Kincaid isn't on that desert island yet, and Brad Ventriss remains an unrepentant lizard. Sigh. I'll suppose we need another story. I'll get right on that...**

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