A Gathering of Sentinels
by LadyRa

Summary

Blair's taken against his will and brought to a holding area for Sentinels that are in desperate need of a Guide.

Yeah, yeah, yeah. Whatever.
Thanks to all my fab betas: Morr, Jenn, Hawthorn and Trish, and thanks to Teresa for her great ideas.
No episode spoilage. None, nada, zip. All right, I lied. Talks about Brackett, and other stuff. Not episode based, though. Well, maybe it is. I'll have to see how it turns out. Damn, okay, there's stuff about Sentinel Too, Parts 1&2. A lot of stuff. Sort of ignores everything that happened after that in season 4.
NOTES/WARNINGS: Mystical guide/sentinel stuff. If you hate that kind of thing, run away. There are also threats of non-consensual sex but nothing happens.

It happened so quickly, Blair didn't even have time to be afraid until he found himself in a dark limousine sitting across from two men. One was a huge honking guy pointing a gun at his head. The
second man was in an expensive suit smiling at him in a way that made Blair's skin crawl.

"Mr. Sandburg, I presume?"

Blair ran a shaky hand through his hair. "Shouldn't you have made sure of that before you had your gorilla grab me?" He sincerely hoped that being a wise ass wouldn't get him killed. "What, ah, what's this all about anyway?"

"I need an expert on Sentinels and I think you're the man for the job."

Blair felt his heart skip a beat and then it started to jackhammer. He cleared his throat. "I don't know what you're talking about." From the look on the man's face, Blair guessed he didn't sound very convincing. He tried again. "Come on, man, let me go. You've got the wrong guy."

The man picked up a thick file next to him and handed it to Blair. "I disagree."

Blair didn't really want to open the file because if he did, and it was filled with the stuff he was afraid it was filled with, it would mean that he was in some serious shit.

"Open it." It wasn't a request.

Blair ran another hand through his hair and then, eyes squinting and body leaning away from the file as if it might contain something explosive, he opened it up. A picture on the top of the papers inside alone told him that he was definitely in big trouble.

Brackett. Lee Brackett. The former CIA agent who had blackmailed Jim into helping him steal an Air Force reconnaissance plane. Unsuccessfully, but it had come pretty damn close. He tapped the page, hoping the man couldn't see how much he was shaking. "Am I supposed to know this guy?"

Blair dissembled.

"Mr. Sandburg. Let's stop the game playing. I know who you are. I have all the information Brackett had and more. My team has been debriefing him for a year and I know everything Ellison did for him, and how it was you who enabled him to do it. Brackett had the right idea. You hold the power as the Guide. Ellison would be nothing without you."

Blair began to sift through the papers and his heart sank. There was no point in trying to plead ignorance. His paper from college was in here, Jim's medical records, both from the Army and from Cascade General, all of Brackett's surveillance notes regarding him and Jim, including transcriptions from a couple conversations where Blair was talking Jim through the use of his senses. "Fuck."

Blair let the file fall in his lap and his head dropped against the head rest. In a second, his naiveté was swept away. How presumptuous he'd been, thinking they were keeping this a secret. Especially after Brackett. Fingers of fear crept down his spine. "Where's Jim?" Blair couldn't stand the thought that they'd gotten him, too. That he was going to be put in a lab somewhere and dissected.

The man waved a dismissive hand in the air. "I don't need him. I only need you, Mr. Sandburg."

Blair scrunched his face up. "I don't get it. Why me? What good am I by myself?"

The man tsked at him. "You underestimate yourself, young man. Too long resting in Ellison's shadow, I don't doubt. Too long being dismissed by him and his ilk. Their loss that they couldn't appreciate what they had."

Blair didn't want to feel complimented but he had to admit he did. Sort of. In a creepy kind of way. In a snarky vindicated kind of way that made him feel like he was betraying Jim. But the guy had a
point. Blair often felt like he did a lot of work and got little or no recognition for it.

He took a deep breath, trying to find a calm center somewhere in the midst of his chaotic thoughts. Defending Jim had become something of a habit, the guy couldn't help being the way he was. Blair hoped that was the case, anyway. A vision of Jim kissing Alex on the beach shot through his mind and he winced. No matter how much meditation he did, Blair couldn't seem to exorcise that moment.

Picking through the morass of emotions tearing through him, Blair settled on confused. "I still don't get it. Why me? What do you want with me? I can't be much of a Guide without a Sentinel." He frowned at Muscle-man. "And what's with him? Excuse me if I don't have happy fuzzy feelings about this when he's pointing a gun at me."

The man smiled that creepy smile again and Blair wished he could move farther away. "I have Sentinels."

Blair's jaw dropped. "What?"

"I have Sentinels. Sentinels, my dear boy, are a dime a dozen if you have the money and the manpower to look for them."

Blair couldn't believe what he was hearing. He thought of the years he'd been looking, the time and money and favors it had taken to search before he'd found Jim. "I don't understand."

"Of course you don't. Sentinels who don't have Guides don't do well. They tend to become recluses, hiding themselves away. Or they go insane, lost in their minds, quivering in the corner of a dayroom in some mental institution." A look of disdain crossed the man's face. "Some of them turn to crime, but they don't last long, and they usually end up dead." There was a significant pause. "Or worse."

Blair looked sharply at the man, wondering what else he knew. Who else he knew.

The man continued. "You might have talked a pretty young nurse into faxing you medical records from Cascade General, but it was merely coincidence that Jim Ellison ended up there. One chance in a million."

Blair felt like he was in the Outer Limits. This guy knew everything about him, stuff he couldn't possibly know. He focused back in on the important thing. "You have Sentinels?" The thought of any Sentinel in the hands of this guy was unsettling. "Who are you?"

"You can call me Mr. Smith. That's all you need to know." He took a quick look out the window. "We'll be taking a short plane ride."

Blair put up his hands in an effort to stop everything. "Whoa. This is crazy. What do you want with me?"

"Oh, I would think that would be clear by now. As I said, Sentinels are a fairly common breed. It's Guides that are in short supply. And Guides like you are even rarer."

Blair loathed that small part of him that preened at the man's words. He blew out a breath of frustration. "What the fuck are you talking about?"

"Language, language, Mr. Sandburg. Cursing is a sign of an uneducated mind, which you certainly do not have."

"Stop. Just stop. I don't understand." Blair needed a chance to regroup. Things were moving too fast.
"You'll soon see for yourself and everything will be made clear. At least your part in it."

The limousine pulled into a small, private airfield and, after a few seconds, the door was opened and the driver, holding another gun, waited patiently for Blair and the two men to exit the vehicle.

Blair had a crazy thought that maybe he should make a run for it but quickly discarded the idea. Muscle-man was taking his job seriously. Besides, Blair was reasonably certain Mr. Smith, or whatever the hell his name was, wanted him alive, so whatever this was, as bad as it might be, it wouldn't end up with him dead. At least Blair hoped that was the case.

He saw a small airplane sitting on the tarmac and wondered how Jim would find him. Wondered if Jim had even noticed he was missing. They hadn't exactly been getting along like a house on fire since the whole Alex thing. They weren't talking much, let alone spending their free time together.

Jim would no doubt assume Blair was shacking up with someone, shake his head in disgust at his table-leg-humping roommate, and dismiss him from his mind.

Blair bit back a merciless laugh. There'd been no table-leg-humping going on for a long time. Blair had been too busy thinking about humping his Sentinel. Or he had been until Alex. That whole thing had completely short-circuited him. Even though he was the one who'd come up with all the Sentinel excuses for Jim, even though he was the one who'd helped Jim work his way through whatever insanity had possessed him, it had still felt like the keenest of betrayals.

It wasn't just because she had killed him, although that was a biggie. The part that hurt the most was something Blair didn't have the right to feel. Jealousy--a vicious green-eyed monster that nibbled at his self-esteem every night. He was jealous and heartsick that Jim had chosen someone like Alex over him. That despite whatever rationalizations Blair could come up with, Jim always chose someone like Alex over him.

Muscle-man prodded Blair back to the present moment and he stumbled out of the limousine, squinting as the sunlight hit his face. It figured he'd get kidnapped on one of the few beautiful sunny days in Cascade.

A beefy hand wrapping around his bicep dissuaded Blair from any further ideas of trying to escape. He had to take an occasional running step to keep up with his kidnappers, and with the way his mind was spinning it was all he could do to stay upright.

He did take a moment to see if there was anyone he could signal for help but the small airport seemed deserted. Before he knew it, he was being herded onto a small plane and strapped in, Muscle-man directly across from him, gun unwavering.

"Where are we going?" Blair asked Mr. Smith.

"That's not important."

"I won't help you."

"You will."

The implacable calm of the man was grating. "I won't. Whatever you're doing, it's wrong or you wouldn't be kidnapping me. You'd have just come and asked for my help."

"What I'm doing doesn't matter. All that matters is what you do."

Blair gritted his teeth for a few seconds, wanting to throttle the guy. "I won't, and if you knew me at
all, you'd know that."

Mr. Smith smiled again. "I do know you, and that's why I know you'll help."

Blair fisted his hands in his hair, tempted to yank it out in frustration. "What do you mean?"

"I know you'll help because you're a compassionate man, Mr. Sandburg. And these Sentinels need your help. You won't be able to refuse them. No more than you can refuse Jim Ellison, despite how he treats you."

Blair could feel the allure of the dark side beckoning to him, wanting to feed on the words being spoken to him, but he refused to give in to it. Jim didn't deserve it. And even if he did, that was between the two of them to work out, not something to be discussed with someone like this creep. "Leave Jim out of this."

"As you wish." The man opened a magazine, dismissing Blair out of hand.

Blair wasn't sure which bugged him more--when the man was speaking or when the man ignored him. Leaning back in his seat, he stared out the window and watched as Cascade grew smaller and smaller as the plane flew ever higher.

When Jim first saw a big spotted cat dart in front of him and race around the corner, he almost had a stroke. It had looked like Alex's spirit guide, and there was no way, no how, Jim was prepared to deal with her. The last he'd heard she was still catatonic in some mental institution in Oregon, and as far as Jim was concerned she could stay there.

Yeah, he'd felt some compassion for her as she slowly went insane, maybe because he saw himself in her. Saw what his life could have been like if he hadn't found Blair, or if Blair hadn't found him.

Jim grimaced as his sense memory recalled the taste of Alex. The thought of touching her, kissing her, made him sick to his stomach. No matter what excuses Blair had come up with for him, Jim couldn't forgive himself, nor could he find a way to wipe away the memory of the look on Blair's face when he'd found them on the beach.

Jim knew he'd done some shitty things in his life, and there was no doubt that when it came to beautiful women he tended to think with his dick first. But what he'd done with Alex was beyond anything he'd thought himself capable of. She'd killed Blair. And then he'd kissed her, would have screwed her if Blair hadn't come along. It made Jim feel nauseous that something so fucked up inside him could take control like that.

Jim scrubbed his face with his hand trying to eradicate the memory and then, belatedly took off after the cat. A fucking useless lot, in his humble opinion, Jim thought. Spirit animals showed up just to confuse the hell out of you and then left you to figure it out on your own.

The only time his panther had really made a difference was when he'd gone after Blair's wolf and helped bring him back from the dead. That thought brought Jim's mind straight back to Alex.

He ran around the corner and stopped in surprise when he saw the cat just sitting there. Well, not exactly sitting there. It was spitting and snarling, and its front claws were extended and scratching through the air.

A multitude of thoughts went through Jim's brain. The first was the fact that it did look like Alex's leopard. The second was that it didn't look good. It was mangy; the hair on its torso existing only in clumps, the skin in between was flaky and red with a rash. Its pupils were a dull white as if in the last
stages of glaucoma. Even its snarl sounded pitiful.

For an alarming moment, as a paw almost reached him, claws extended, Jim wondered if it might be real; maybe it had escaped from some traveling zoo or from some owner who had been mistreating it.

A kid on a skateboard went whizzing by him and rode right through the leopard. Right through. Not real then. His next thought was that he hated this mystical shit. Hated it.

He gave a quick glance around to see if his panther was around. Jim rolled his eyes at its absence. Of course not. Why should it be around when he might actually need the damn thing? Jim pulled his phone out and flipped it open, but before he dialed it, he second-guessed himself and flipped it shut.

The leopard snarled at him again.

Jim snarled right back. "Shut up." He wasn't in the mood for ghost animals, he wasn't in the mood for dealing with this shit without Blair, and he for sure wasn't in the mood to deal with Alex or, more truthfully, how he was when he was with Alex. What he was in the mood for was to turn back the hands of time back to when he and Blair got along. Before Alex had come and fucked everything up.

He should call Blair and tell him about the leopard. Jim knew logically that everything had gone wrong with Alex because he and Blair hadn't talked. But even as he flipped the phone open again he felt his usual resistance. Despite everything Blair had done for him it still went against the grain to ask for help. To open up, especially about this sort of stuff. Because talking about it made it more real and Jim didn't want it to be more real. He wanted it to be less real. Not real at all.

He looked around again, making sure nothing bad was happening. After all, the first time he'd seen Alex's spirit animal, a robbery was going down. Focusing his senses, Jim scoped out the area. Finding nothing out of the ordinary, he looked down and realized the cat was gone.

Breathing out a sigh of relief, Jim sagged momentarily against the brick wall of the building. Before he could talk himself out of it he pushed the speed dial for Blair's cell phone. It rang seven times before finally rolling over into voice mail. "Sandburg, call me," Jim snapped curtly into the phone.

Jim considered where Blair might be. His Guide was finally back to a full schedule; he hadn't been in the best of shape when they'd arrived back from Mexico and it had taken him a few weeks to get back to fighting strength. Sort of fighting strength.

He wasn't fighting with Jim anymore. Everything that had happened with Alex had taken all the punch out of Blair. He tiptoed around as if waiting for Jim to throw him out of the loft again. It was making Jim crazy.

Jim didn't know how to deal with this kind of Sandburg. He was used to an in-your-face sort of Sandburg. A Sandburg who took none of his shit and gave it back two-fold. A Sandburg who always bounced back.

He wasn't bouncing much these days. Something crucial had happened in Mexico, before Mexico, and it had broken something that wasn't mending. Jim wished that Blair would shove him around, demand an apology, force him to talk about what happened, extract apologies of sufficient sincerity to begin the process of making things like they were before.

But Blair hadn't said a word. And so Jim hadn't either. They'd gone to get Blair's stuff, reinstated him into his small room, and carried on.

Jim hated it.
He glanced at his watch, figured that Blair would be on his way to the station right now. Deciding he'd go meet him there, Jim loped to his truck, started it up, and headed downtown.

Jim almost tripped over a fox as he entered the lobby of the Cascade Police Department. When no one else noticed it, he bit back a curse. As he punched the button for the elevator he let his senses roam to see if he could pick up the presence of his Guide.

When he felt nothing, Jim frowned and punched the elevator button again, impatiently. When the doors opened he took one more cautious and scowling look for the fox, but it was nowhere in sight. Grumbling, he got on the elevator and punched the seven for Major Crimes.

It wasn't until he got to his desk and saw a huge boa constrictor wrapped around the legs of his desk that Jim began to think that something was seriously wrong. He flipped his phone open and dialed Blair again. When he got the recording, he snapped it shut. "Damn it."

Jim looked down at the snake which was currently giving him a baleful eye. He recognized the species from Peru. It was a Peruvian red-tailed boa, more commonly referred to as a mantona. "Fuck."

Simon was suddenly standing next to him and Jim startled; he hadn't even heard him approach. "Something wrong, Ellison?"

Jim's eyes darted around to make sure no one was paying the two of them any undue attention. After ascertaining that they weren't, he pointed to the floor. "Do you see that?"

"See what?" Simon already sounded weary of whatever game he thought Jim was playing.

Jim let out a sigh. "The snake?"

Simon took an apprehensive step backwards. "There's a snake in here?" He cautiously looked under Jim's desk.

That alone told Jim that Simon didn't see it. The damn thing had to be ten feet long and there was no missing it. "Fuck," he said again, heartfelt, as he frowned at the snake.

Jim felt Simon's gaze on him and could only imagine the frown forming on his boss's face. Jim kept watching the snake, wishing it to perdition. Simon grabbed the sleeve of Jim's jacket and tugged on it. "My office. Now."

Jim let out another sigh, glowering one last time at the snake. It hissed at him in return, and continued to hiss, its tongue flickering out, as Jim followed Simon into his office. Jim moved to the window, and Simon took his usual place behind his desk.

"Tell me this, Jim. Do I even want to know why you're seeing snakes?"

Jim shook his head. "Have you heard from Sandburg?"

Simon frowned. "Don't change the subject."

"I think this might be the subject. He should be here by now."

"So the kid's late. What's the big deal?"

Jim peered out the window, hoping he would see Blair's Volvo chugging up the street. He was starting to get a really bad feeling about the fact that Blair wasn't here. Even though the two of them
weren't talking much, Blair was still showing up when he said he would, and if he couldn't, he called. Short phone calls, to the point, but still, he called.

Biting the inside of his cheek, Jim turned to Simon, leaning against the window. "Do you know the name of the place where they have Alex?"

"Why?" Simon asked, with a look of 'I need a vacation, badly, starting right now' all over his face.

Jim let out a sigh. "Because I think that, uh, that she might be around again. And she might not be alone. There might be another Sentinel involved as well. Maybe more than one."

Simon picked up the phone and punched in a few numbers, glaring at Jim while the phone rang. "You think she's back? Just exactly when were you planning on letting me know this?" he scolded angrily. When someone answered the phone, he started hollering, demanding they track down the number for Alex Barnes' hospital, find out if she was there and what her status was, and to call him back with the information yesterday.

"Where's Sandburg? Talk to me, Ellison."

Jim scowled. "I'm, uh, I'm seeing--" God, he hated this. He needed Blair to be here so Jim could explain it to his Guide, and his Guide could explain it to Simon. Somehow Blair always made the Sentinel stuff sound less crazy.

"What are you seeing? I can already tell I'm not gonna like this and where the hell is Sandburg?"

Under less tense circumstances, Jim might have smiled. Even Simon knew the Sentinel stuff went down easier when Blair was around. He was also probably, and understandably, concerned about Blair's well-being. He hadn't exactly come out on top the last time a Sentinel had come calling.

"I'm seeing spirit animals," Jim blurted out. "I saw a leopard right before Alex showed up last time and I saw it again on the way to work. There was a fox downstairs and there's a huge boa constrictor using the floor space under my desk." Jim deflated, his confession sucking all the air out of him, and he sank down into a chair.

Simon stared at him, his eyes incredulous, and then he moved to the window facing Major Crimes to look at Jim's desk. He spun around, a scowl on his face. "Are you on drugs?"

Jim let his head fall back. "I wish I was."

Simon pointed with his thumb over his shoulder. "There's a boa constrictor out there under your desk?"

Jim didn't want to look but he forced himself to his feet and joined his captain at the office window. There it was, undulating around the desk legs, as if there was no beginning or end to him, an uroboros in the flesh. Whatever. Jim wanted to shoot it. He hated this shit. "Yup, it's there."

"What does it want?"

Jim felt consumed with weariness. "I don't know. All I do know is that the last time this shit started to happen, Blair ended up dead." And that was NOT happening this time.

There was a knock on the door and when Simon opened it, Rhonda handed him a piece of paper.
Simon read it and handed it to Jim. "She's still there. Still comatose."

Jim closed his eyes, relieved.

"So where is Sandburg?"

Simon's annoyed question interrupted his short-lived sense of relief. "He should be here," Jim said, pointing at the floor of the office, making it clear that Blair should be standing right in front of him.

"Did you try him at home?"

Jim pulled out his phone and called the loft. When he got the answering machine, he hung up. He tried Blair's cell phone, and then his office at work. No answer anywhere. "Shit. I have to go find him," Jim said in his tone of voice that meant don't-try-to-stop-me.

"I'll go with you." Simon grabbed his suit jacket and shrugged into it.

"You don't have to, Captain. I'll be fine. I just need to find him." Simon let out a sharp laugh. "Yeah, that's what you said to me on the way to Mexico. I'll believe it when I see it."

Jim glared at Simon but his boss just glared right back. Giving in, Jim opened the office door and stalked out. He didn't even give the boa constrictor a look as he walked by it. And when he got on the elevator, he did his very best to ignore the tiger that was growling from the corner.

Simon must have seen something on his face because he asked nervously, "Something in here with us now?" He gave the small space a careful going over.

Jim just shook his head and refused to make eye contact with the damn thing. It was easy to ignore when it was just growling and letting out occasional chuffs of annoyance, but when it let loose with a loud roar, Jim winced and put his hands over his ears.

Simon let out a long beleaguered sigh. "I don't want to know, do I?"

Jim shook his head again. "No."

"I didn't think so."

Not another word was said as the elevator made its descent to the ground floor. When Jim tripped over the fox again in the lobby he shot Simon a look. "Don't ask."

"Don't worry, I won't." Simon gritted his teeth around his cigar so hard Jim was afraid he was going to bite it in two.

As they arrived at Jim's truck, Jim stopped and then looked at Simon. "Let's take your car."

Simon gave Jim's truck a narrow-eyed look. "Why?"

Jim stood at attention, his gaze focused over Simon's shoulder, his back ramrod straight. "There's a golden eagle sitting on my truck."

Simon pinched the bridge of his nose under his glasses. "I knew I should have stayed in bed today."
Then he swung around. "Fine, let's take my car."

Jim looked daggers at the eagle and then followed Simon to his sedan. Relieved that no animals seemed to be either on, under, or in the vehicle, Jim slid into the passenger seat. "I think we should go to Rainier first."

Simon nodded and started the car.

It was a short flight, and Blair hadn't lost sight of the ocean until the last few minutes. Blair guessed they were still in Washington, or at the worst, Oregon. The jet landed, and Blair was herded into another limousine.

He couldn't believe that Mr. Smith, or whatever the hell his name was, could possibly have Sentinels. Like, if you had enough money, you could order them through some exclusive catalog.

Blair had been so excited to meet Alex when he'd first realized she was another Sentinel. Jim was his Sentinel; he always would be. But having the opportunity to study another Sentinel would have given more credibility to his work, would have allowed Blair to test all his hypotheses out on a second subject.

Second subject. Meaning Jim was his first subject. His primary subject, he'd called him on his research tapes. Not a friend, let alone a best friend. Blair tightened his lips and swallowed against the sting of tears. He'd gotten it so wrong. Jim had been right about that part. Keeping Jim in the dark about Alex hadn't been the act of a friend. Hadn't been the act of someone that Jim could trust.

Blair let out a sigh, wishing his memories of the past few weeks would leave him the hell alone. If he wasn't pushing down his anger at Jim's actions regarding Alex, or how it felt to be shoved into that damn fountain until he was forced to breathe in the cold dirty water, then he was berating himself for putting the whole disaster in motion by keeping information from Jim and treating him as if his primary role in Blair's life was as a research subject.

Blair knew, rationally, that coming clean to Jim might not have changed anything. Jim still would have been attracted to her, and maybe Blair would have still ended up dead. But at least he wouldn't have to feel so damn guilty about his part in the whole mess.

The limousine pulled into a driveway. Blair saw a sign flash by, something-something sanitarium. He swallowed against the rise of acid in his throat, wondering if this was where Alex was being kept.

If that was the case, Blair almost hoped Jim didn't come looking for him. The last thing he could stand to watch again was Jim holding Alex's hand, brushing the hair off her face, even if she was in a coma. His hands fisted at the thought, at the vision of Jim being kind to her in a way he was so rarely kind to Blair.

At the same time Blair was almost undone with a yearning for Jim to hold him, comfort him. He ached with it. Because he needed to hear the words he said, "He'll find me, you know."

"Jim Ellison?" Mr. Smith's voice sounded more amused than concerned.

Blair nodded firmly, wanting the man to be worried, wanting him to be afraid of Jim.

"I doubt that."

"He's good at what he does. Once he realizes I'm gone, he'll figure out something happened to me."
"That may be true, but he won't find you here."

The man's arrogance was annoying. "Have you forgotten that he's a Sentinel? No matter how clever you've been, you'll have left some clues behind that he'll find." Blair couldn't help the pride in his voice. Jim was truly awesome.

The limousine pulled into an underground garage. Mr. Smith smiled smugly at Blair. "Even if he should find you, Mr. Sandburg, are you sure you want him coming here?"

Blair's brows furrowed at that. "What do you mean?"

"Think about it. All these Sentinels. Even if he does come, don't you think he'll be too busy trying to copulate with them to bother about you?"

Blair's fingertips were digging into his palms and he was rigid with anger. If he'd been alone with the man he might have tried to throttle him; only the presence of Muscle-man held him back. "How do you know what happened?" His most painful secrets were being held out to the light of day and he hated the man for it.

"As that file clearly showed, Mr. Sandburg, I've been having you watched."

"Did you know Alex Barnes? Did you know what she was like? Did you?" Blair could hear the accusations in the questions, knew Mr. Smith would hear them, too.

"I knew she had a propensity toward violence, yes. However, she was safely locked away."

Blair's heart was hammering in his chest. "But you were wrong, weren't you? She got out. Did you know she got out?"

"I was informed of it immediately, of course."

Another flash of rage swept through Blair. "So you knew what she was capable of? You let her kill me and mess with Jim's head that way? What kind of monster are you?"

For the first time, Mr. Smith appeared almost uncomfortable. "Yes, well, that was a misunderstanding. I wasn't as clear with my orders as I should have been. My people had orders to watch you; I should have made it clearer to them that I needed you alive."

That didn't even come close to making Blair feel better, in fact it appalled him. "And Jim, what about Jim?"

Mr. Smith recovered his composure as he only shrugged, unconcerned. "Ellison wasn't important. Only you were."

"She had enough nerve gas to kill millions of people. You should have helped us stop her." Blair would never understand people like him. Like her. People who stood by and let others be hurt.

The infuriating smug smile was back. "Like your Mr. Ellison did? My men told me he let her go. He saved her life, more than once. And he deserted you in the middle of the night, in the middle of the jungle, to go rutting after her." His eyes lit up with an unholy amusement. "It might be quite interesting to see what Ellison does with several Sentinels."

Blair had never wanted to hit someone as badly as he did now. He hated this man. Hated him for his callous disregard of the safety of the world, and hated him even more for his ability to twist a knife into every wounded place in Blair's heart.
The limousine stopped, and Muscle-man escorted Blair out of the vehicle and into a door marked Private Entrance. Mr. Smith led the way down several hallways until they came to another door marked Monitoring Suite. He unlocked the door and pushed it open.

Blair was shoved into the room and Mr. Smith invited him to sit near a bank of monitors. "Mr. Sandburg, here are your new subjects. I think you'll see that they are in need of your assistance."

His eyes moved from one monitor to the next, five in total. Each screen showed a small room, maybe ten feet by ten feet. They were sparsely decorated, holding only a bed and two chairs. There was a door in each room that Blair guessed led to a bathroom. There had been windows, high up on the wall like transom windows, but they'd been covered over. Four of the rooms had occupants.

Slowly, as if drawn by some invisible thread, Blair found himself sitting in front of the monitors, his heart going out to each of the four. With the exception of one, none of them looked well. "What's wrong with them?"

"Their senses are driving them insane. They need a Guide."

His gaze was caught by the girl in room four. She couldn't be more than ten or eleven. He tapped the screen. "Why is she here? Where are her parents?"

"They're dead."

Blair shot him a venomous look. "Because of you?"

Mr. Smith shook his head. "No. They conveniently died on their own right after I discovered her."

Blair came off the chair and lunged for the man. He was stopped when Muscle-man simply moved in his path. Blair bounced off him and went flying to the floor. He staggered to his feet. "She should be in a loving home, not being treated like some lab rat."

"Unlike the way you treated your subject, Mr. Sandburg? I've seen your notes."

"That was different and you know it." Blair ignored the small voice inside of him that wondered just how different it had been. "He was in his own home, in the job of his choice, surrounded by friends. It was his decision; I couldn't make him do anything he didn't want to do."

Mr. Smith let out a mirthless laugh. "Again, you underestimate yourself. I do believe he would do anything you asked. Such is the nature of Sentinels and Guides."

Blair moved back to the monitors and watched the little girl. She was sitting on her bed, her legs pressed up tight to her body, thin arms wrapped around her knees, her dark tresses matted. She was singing softly and rocking herself back and forth.

"You have no right to do this." Blair's voice was shaking he was so livid.

"Life is often unfair, as you well know. There will be rewards for them if they learn to do as I ask."

"I won't help you."

"You will. The longer they stay here, the worse they get. They need you."

"They don't need me. They need to be put back where you found them. You say it was a coincidence that Jim and I met, but maybe it's more than that. Maybe it's fate or destiny. Maybe if you'd left them where they were they might have met someone to be their Guide." He looked at the
Sentinels again and then up at Mr. Smith. "You have to let them go."

"That wouldn't suit me or my plans for them."

Blair was disgusted at the cavalier attitude Mr. Smith had, as if these Sentinels had no rights, no value outside of their worth to him. He tapped the screen for room 5. "Where's this one?" It looked at if someone had been in the room recently; the bed was still rumpled. Blair looked a little closer. Dark spots of red dotted the linens, back wall and floor. They looked suspiciously like blood.

"That's a good question." Mr. Smith picked up the phone. "Where's Subject Five?" There was a pause. "When did it happen?" His eyes grew dark with annoyance. "She was a valuable specimen; I'm not pleased." Another pause.

If Mr. Smith was talking about anything other than the health and well-being of a Sentinel, Blair might have felt a perverse enjoyment that someone had pissed the guy off.

"I know I left orders--" Mr. Smith glanced at Blair and cut himself off. "We'll talk about this later." He hung up the phone and turned to Blair. "Apparently, she's dead. She was put down while I was collecting you."

Blair shot him an appalled look. "Put down?" His voice cracked he was so upset. "We're talking about human beings here, not dogs. Why? Why would you do that?"

"She became unmanageable. It will happen to the rest of them if you don't help."

In pained disbelief, Blair's eyes ran over the monitors for rooms one to three. They were all young. Not as young as the girl in room four, but he'd bet that none of them were over the age of 21. It was possible the Hispanic man was a little older, but not by much.

He was in room two and looked serene in comparison to the occupants of the other rooms. The stocky Hispanic was sitting on the floor by his bed; his legs crossed Indian-style, his hands resting on his knees. Blair guessed the man was meditating; he just had that look about him.

The young black woman in room one looked the most alert even if it was anger spurring her on. She was walking around the room, running her hand along the walls. Blair suspected she was looking for weaknesses, for a way to escape. Twice she slammed her open palm against the walls in sheer frustration.

Room three was torn apart; the chairs were in pieces, the mattress ripped in places, the stuffing torn out. There was blood running down the young man's face, arms, and legs from cuts he must have gotten when he'd attacked his room so violently. He was screaming at the video camera. Blair couldn't hear what he was saying, but it was clear from the expression on his face that it was vituperative in nature. Every now and then spittle would fly from his lips.

Room four held the little girl, and the fifth room was empty.

Blair couldn't imagine what the imprisonment was like for them if all their senses were truly enhanced. No privacy, no rational stimulation, no one to help them deal with runaway senses, being treated like animals. He closed his eyes as his own situation became clearer. Mr. Smith was right. He would help these people. He had to. Anger racing through him again, he glared at Mr. Smith. "What do you plan to do with them?"

"That doesn't concern you at present. All I need for you to do is assist them in gaining some control."

Blair knew that he might be making them stronger only for them to be used against their will, but he
couldn't leave them like this. "I want to see the little girl first. And I'll need a first aid kit for the one who's bleeding."

Mr. Smith's smile curdled Blair's stomach; the man had won this round and Blair hated that he'd been so easy to manipulate. When Mr. Smith gestured at the door, Blair rose reluctantly and followed him out.

Jim wanted to hit something. They'd found Blair's backpack by his car. In it were his phone and, even more importantly, his laptop. Something Blair would never voluntarily choose to be parted from.

He'd searched the area carefully, looking for anything that might indicate who had taken his Guide and why, but other than a tire tread and a partial footprint, there was nothing. Neither the footprint nor the tire tread were anything out of the ordinary. Tires just like it were on thousands of cars, and the footprint revealed nothing more than the past presence of a man wearing a size twelve shoe.

There had been nothing at home to indicate foul play, no messages on the answering machine requesting Blair's presence somewhere; there was no blood at the scene, not even signs of a struggle. No one on campus had seen anything suspicious. But as Blair parked in a distant lot to keep his parking fees down, there wasn't much foot traffic in the area other than people going to and from their cars.

No one had tried to contact Jim demanding ransom or some service in exchange for the return of his Guide. It was making Jim crazy. Someone had just snatched Blair up and spirited him away and there was nothing for him to do but wait.

Now back at the station, he slammed himself down in his desk chair and glared at the phone as if its very silence was taunting his ineptitude. He found himself straining to hear his Guide's heartbeat, his laughter, his enthusiastic voice waxing poetic about something Jim couldn't be bothered with. Right now, Jim would have sold his soul to listen to anything Blair had to say.

The little girl didn't even look up when Muscle-man unlocked the door so Blair could enter the room. The door was shut and locked behind him. Blair sat on one of the chairs and watched her for a while. She was slender and looked athletic, young arm muscles clearly defined peaking out from the short sleeves of her pajamas. The pajamas were pink, with white and blue dogs all over them. They made Blair's heart hurt. Clearing his throat, he said, "My name is Blair, what's yours?"

The little girl kept rocking, ignoring Blair.

He moved to the bed, sitting as far away from her as he could, but situating himself so she couldn't help but see him. "I see you have hair just like me. Kind of hard to take care of, isn't it?"

She glanced at him quickly, her eyes darting to his hair as if to check the veracity of his words.

He spoke again. "Did your mom used to comb it for you? My mom used to do that for me."

She shook her head. "My sister did."

"Your sister? Wow. I never had a sister. Is it nice having a sister?"

She nodded, her brown eyes huge on her small face. "Do you know where she is, Mister? The other man won't tell me."
Blair worked hard to keep his anger from showing on his face. "No, I don't. I'm sorry." He gestured at her hair. "Want me to try and comb out your hair? I have a lot of practice at it."

She shook her head and a tear rolled down her cheek. "My head hurts."

Blair gave her a thorough look and realized that there were rashes on her skin and she was holding her body rigidly. "Does everything hurt?"

She nodded, miserable.

"Is my voice too loud?"

Another nod.

Blair softened his voice. "I think I can help you a little. Will you let me try?"

One more nod as another tear tracked down her cheek.

Blair wanted to give her a hug so badly it was making him crazy, but he knew it would only hurt her now. "Okay, I need you to picture a straight line. On one end I want you to imagine that you can't hear anything. No noise, no voices, nothing. Then, on the other end, I want you to imagine things being as loud as they can. So noisy you want to cover your ears and scream really loud to try and fight back. You got that?"

She nodded.

"Now, I want you to figure out where you are on that line. I'm thinking you're probably pretty near the really loud side, right?"

When she nodded, he continued. "Okay. Now, nice and slow, I want you to imagine yourself just sliding down that line towards the quiet part. Not all the way, just maybe half way. Keep sliding until my voice doesn't hurt you any more. Can you do that?"

Her eyes stayed on his as she furrowed her brow and concentrated. Suddenly her eyes opened wide.

Blair smiled. "I'm guessing that helped?"

She nodded in relief. "Yeah, it's better. Thanks, Mister."

"You can call me Blair. What's your name?"

"Amelia."

"Well, Amelia, I'm very glad to meet you. Ready for me to help you more?"

At her nod, Blair walked her through a similar exercise for the rest of her senses. He watched happily as she slowly relaxed. She let out a long sigh and gave Blair a tremulous grin. "My sister used to help me before. She'd hug me and I'd feel better."

"Would you mind if I gave you a hug?"

She shook her head shyly.

Blair held out his arms and she came to him readily, snuggling onto his lap. He held her tightly, running a hand comfortingly up and down her back. "Think you can sleep now?"
She nodded against his chest and let out a big yawn.

"I might not be here when you wake up, but I'll come visit you again."

"Promise?"

"I promise." Blair hoped it was true, that Mr. Smith would allow him to visit as often as he wished it. "And just remember those lines in your head if you start to hurt again, okay?"

Another sleepy nod, and then her eyes drifted shut and she sagged against him.

He held her for another minute and then gently laid her on the bed, pulling the covers over her. "Sweet dreams, Amelia." Blair watched for a few minutes, fighting a sting of tears. It wasn't fair that she was here, that she'd been taken away from her family, from her sister, who was most probably her Guide, and locked away by a man who had every intention of stealing away any bright future she might have had.

Blair vowed to fight as hard as he could to free her. To free them all. Thinking of the rest of them made him remember the man who had been bleeding. He needed to see him next. Blair knocked softly on the door to be let out.

"Jim, go home."

Jim shook his head.

"You can't do anything here. If someone calls I can have it routed to your cell phone. If Sandburg gets free, he'll call your cell phone. If we do figure out where he is, you need to have eaten and slept or you'll be no good to him. Go home."

Jim didn't want to leave. He didn't want to go home to an empty apartment.

"That wasn't a request. It was an order. Go home and I don't want to see you here any earlier than eight a.m. Is that clear?" Simon growled.

Jim nodded wearily and stood, collecting his jacket. Without another word, he headed for the door.

Blair had thought that all five cells would be in the same area, but they weren't. He was taken to an entirely different wing. The only reason he could think of for this arrangement was to make sure the Sentinels couldn't easily hear each other.

Blair passed multiple patient rooms on the way to his next destination but all the rooms were empty, their doors standing open. Mr. Smith, or whatever his real name was, must have bought the sanitarium and then transferred everyone, except for the Sentinels, out to other centers.

As they approached the last room in the wing, Blair began to hear the cussing. This kid was beyond pissed-off. By the sound of him, Blair wasn't even sure he was completely sane anymore.

He waited as Muscle-man unlocked the door and opened it. Instead of leaving him inside alone, this time his guard preceded him into the room and stood threateningly against the door as he shut and locked it.

The young man sneered at the guard but left him alone otherwise. Blair wondered if the Sentinel had tried to attack Muscle-man before and found it a useless endeavor. The guy was built like the rock of
Gibraltar.

Blair wasn't so lucky. The next thing he knew, the kid launched himself in his direction, fingers spread, claw-like, ready to eviscerate him. Blair let out an involuntary cry and took a step backwards, only to find the guard stepping in front of him.

The kid hit him hard, bounced off and fell to the floor. He stood, shook it off, and picked up a piece of his broken chair, holding it front of him like a weapon.

Muscle-man moved so fast, Blair almost missed it. In seconds, the kid was disarmed, his hands were cuffed behind his back, and he was being forced to his knees.

Blair was both impressed and dismayed. The guard knew his stuff, but he was part of the reason this kid felt the need to fight in the first place. Blair sank down to his knees, too, and tried to make eye contact. "Hey, my name is Blair. I'm here to help you."

The kid spit at him and even though Blair leaned back, the spit still hit his cheek.

Muscle-man kidney-punched the young man and he grunted.

Blair wiped off his spit and then glared at his guard. "Don't hit him again. None of this is his fault."

"Who the fuck are you?" the kid snarled. "I don't need your fucking help. The only thing I need is to get the fuck out of here." He struggled against the cuffs, shifting his weight, as if he was thinking of trying to get to his feet.

Muscle-man pressed down on his shoulders, making sure he didn't go anywhere.

Blair tried again, staying farther back this time. "Listen. I know your senses are out of control--"

"You don't know fuck about me, asshole."

"Oookay." Blair sat back on his heels and considered the situation. He carefully assessed this second Sentinel and saw a young man with hazel eyes spitting with anger and confusion. His hair was dirty blond, greasy, with spots darkened by blood. He only wore a pair of jeans, and he was skinny, his rib cage pronounced, stomach concave.

There were tattoos down both arms, a mixture of violence and beauty, skull and crossbones caressed by roses, a dagger with drips of blood falling from the tip brushed up against what looked like the riotous explosion of colors in a sunset.

Underneath the blood and bruising, he was covered with a rash. His forehead was wrinkled in pain, his eyes squinted against the light. Blair could see that on a good day, the kid would be spectacularly handsome.

"Let's try this again. I know you're angry, but I had nothing to do with you being brought here. I'm here against my will as well. But I do understand what's happening to you, that your senses are out of control, that you hurt, that you're confused, and I think I can help, if you let me."

His eyes glittered at Blair in anger. "Fuck off."

Blair gestured at the kid's body. "You're hurt. I can clean those cuts, and help you control the pain. I can make that rash go away, too, help make the noises less loud, make the light less bright. I can make things easier for you."
"You gonna fuck me then?"

"What?" Blair stared at him in revolted astonishment.

"If you want to make things fucking easier for me, then how 'bout you get on your hands and knees and let me fuck you. Let me have at your skinny white ass, and give you a good fuck."

Blair tried to keep it all in perspective, but he was afraid he was losing the battle. Pushing his anger aside, he asked, "What's your name?"

"Why? So you can yell it out while I fuck you?" He pretended to be in the throes of sexual ecstasy. "Oh, yeah, oh, John, fuck me, fuck me hard, fuck me through the floor." He grinned meanly at Blair, thrusting his crotch in Blair's direction, an obvious hard-on straining against the fabric.

"So, your name is John?"

"Fuck off."

Blair wanted to leave the room, badly. He wanted Jim to be on the other side of the door, kicking it in, then holding him, and telling him that it was all going to be all right. Or maybe he'd get a whiff of the pheromones John was putting out with that cock of his, and Jim would push Blair aside, and they'd go at it together, Blair a reluctant audience to Sentinel mating instincts.

A little sick to his stomach, feeling besieged by both his current situation and his imagination, Blair stood and moved closer to John. He had to remember that John was a prisoner here, that he was being driven insane by his senses. That he was not to blame for the things he was saying and doing.

Trusting that Muscle-man wouldn't let anything painful happen to him, Blair reached out and touched John's arm. He didn't know if it would help, but he did know that often his touch was all Jim needed to get back in control.

The kid twisted away, fell to his butt, and kicked out with his feet, connecting painfully with Blair's shin. As Blair stumbled, he saw the guard's fist smash into John's chin. The boy hit the ground with a splat, the punch having knocked him unconscious. Blair tried not to feel it, but a part of him was glad.

Jim lay on his bed, staring at the ceiling. He couldn't remember when the loft had felt so empty. Not that Blair hadn't spent a few nights away now and again, but Jim always knew he was coming back.

Even the night Jim had kicked Blair out and emptied the place of all the furniture hadn't felt as empty as this. Of course, Jim had been a crazy person at the time and had wanted it empty, so that didn't really count.

The animals had disappeared. No fox, no tiger, and no snake hissing at him in displeasure, no golden eagle lording it over his truck. Jim wondered where they'd gone. He sort of wished they'd show up again. At least it had been something. Maybe they'd been trying to tell him something important. A message about Blair. He should have paid more attention to them, asked them why they were bothering him.

Jim had never liked the answers he'd gotten from his panther, but at least they were answers. Better than this gaping unknown that was filling his apartment.

Deciding he wasn't going to get any sleep, Jim arose, put on his robe, and headed downstairs. He was going to make some coffee, but when he opened the cabinet and saw all of Blair's tea, he chose
to make a cup of tea instead, a way to feel Blair's presence.

Blowing on the tea to cool it down, Jim moved to the balcony, opening the doors and stepping through. He leaned against the railing, casting his eyes over the water, the lights from the surrounding buildings shimmering on the surface. "Blair, where the hell are you?" he asked, expecting no answer.

Which was why he almost had a heart attack when a huge great-horned owl practically flew into his face, hooting loudly.

"Jesus," Jim yelled, dropping his mug, hearing it shatter into pieces. He put his hand over his chest, thinking it might help keep his heart from hammering its way out.

The owl alighted on the railing and stared at him with its great yellow unblinking eyes.

Jim stared back. "Are you real?" He wished there was someone around who could corroborate as to whether an owl was really sitting there.

The owl blinked and hooted, moving a little closer to Jim.

Feeling like a complete idiot, Jim asked, "Are you here to tell me something? Do you know where Blair is?" He sincerely hoped no one was watching him have either a conversation with himself or, even worse, with an owl.

When the owl only blinked, Jim tried again. "You, uh, you haven't seen a wolf around, have you?"

Nothing.

"Damn it." Jim gingerly walked around the broken pieces of mug and went inside to get a broom. When he got back the owl was gone but he heard it hoot and, after he looked over the railing, Jim saw it flying south. It seemed to turn its head to look at him for a second, and then it was gone.

Jim thought about it for a second and decided it was good enough for him. He ran up the stairs, got dressed, grabbed his keys, and headed out into the night.

When Blair got back into the hallway, he leaned against the wall to try to compose himself. That had not gone well. He let out a pained snicker at that understatement. He rubbed his shin, which was probably already bruising; the kid had kicked hard.

He glanced up at Muscle-man, only to find him staring at him impassively, ready to take him to his next adventure. Blair could only hope it would go a little better than this encounter had. "Has he always been like that?"

The man just stared at him.

"Come on," Blair snapped. "I have to know what I'm up against. I need to know how much of that is him, and how much of it is due to his senses driving him crazy."

"The kid was always an asshole, but he's gotten worse over time," the man answered begrudgingly.

"How long has he been here?"

"Two months."

Blair's jaw dropped. "He's been in that little room for two months?" He was pretty sure he'd be
insane after that long an imprisonment, too.

The guy shrugged.

"How about the rest of them? How long has the little girl been here?"

"Two weeks."

"And the young black woman?"

"A month."

Blair felt like he was pulling teeth. "The Hispanic guy?"

"Pretty close to a month."

"How about the one that died?"

"She was already in a coma when he brought her here."

Blair's hands fisted. "In a coma? Was it Alex Barnes? Is that who the fifth one was?"

"Blond chick? Big tits?"

Blair nodded with a grimace, troubled that anyone would end up with that as their epitaph, even someone like Alex. Alex—who had been put down, like some unwanted feral cat. The whole thing made him so unbearably sad. These were human beings with a phenomenal gift and look how they were ending up. Kept prisoner, dehumanized, unloved.

"Let's go see the next one." Maybe he couldn't help John, but he had already helped Amelia, and maybe he could help the last two as well.

The guard gestured Blair down the hall, and Blair obediently headed off. They took an elevator to the third floor, and again, he was taken to the farthest room. The guard opened the door, and let him go in alone.

The peacefulness in this room was such a contrast to the last room that reality seemed to shift and Blair felt as if he were dreaming. The young Hispanic man was still sitting on the floor, his legs crossed, hands resting gently on his knees. His eyes were closed, and Blair used the time to take a good look.

He was large. Not fat, but large. He looked strong, not the strong that came with working out in a gym and lifting weights, but the strong that came with using your body for a living. He wasn't particularly good-looking, his face a little droopy, nose too big, neck too short.

But then he opened his eyes and smiled at Blair and the light of his soul shone through, and Blair couldn't remember when he'd seen something so appealing. He didn't even know the guy, but he liked him already.

Still smiling, the man said, "I knew you were coming."

Blair couldn't help but smile back. "You did? How?"

He pointed to the corner of the room behind Blair. "He told me."

Blair turned to find his spirit wolf sitting there on its haunches, its tongue hanging out of its mouth,
teeth showing in a wolfish grin. Blair approached it carefully. He'd never actually interacted with his wolf other than the day he'd died. And he wasn't sure he could call that an interaction; he'd actually been the wolf. "He talks to you?"

"He communicates. They all do."

Blair put a hand out, then pulled it back.

"You can touch him, he won't mind. He wants you to."

Not needing to be told twice, Blair put out a hand and ran his fingers through the soft fur. "You're beautiful."

There was a chuckle behind him. "He thanks you."

One hand still entangled in fur, Blair half-turned until he was facing the young man. "Why can you talk to him, and I can't?"

"You can, you just need to learn how."

"Wow." Blair fought the urge to bury his face in the wolf's thick scruff. Still confused, he asked, "Why is he here? With you?"

"I don't know. I had hoped he was here as a portend, but he and my spirit animal have not--." He shrugged. "Perhaps he thought I might be able to help you."

There was so much he wanted to ask, but remembering he hadn't introduced himself, Blair said, "I'm Blair, by the way."

The Sentinel put a hand on his chest. "Hector."

"Hector, it's very nice to meet you." Blair meant that as sincerely as anything he'd ever said.

"It is an honor."

"Where's your spirit animal?"

Hector shrugged. "Out hunting, I suspect." He grinned. "Or causing trouble."

Blair continued to touch the wolf, and between it and the instant camaraderie of this new Sentinel, Blair felt more at peace than he had in weeks. He sat down at the wolf's side, pleased beyond the telling of it when the wolf lay down as well, resting his head in Blair's lap.

Hector smiled. "He approves of you."

"I'm glad."

A few minutes of silence passed as Blair continued to commune with his wolf, enjoying the quiet company of Hector. "Have you met John?"

Hector nodded. "I can feel his pain. He is in desperate need of a Guide."

"He wouldn't let me near him." That wasn't strictly true. He'd have been glad to have Blair near him—or more correctly, under him. Wishing he didn't need to see the troubled boy again, and feeling guilty that he felt that way, Blair let his head sink down until his forehead rested on the wolf's head.
For the first time, Hector lost the serene expression on his face. "Are you here for him? I had hoped you were here for me."

Blair raised his head, not understanding. "Uh, I think I'm here for all of you."

Hector shook his head, his look kind. "A Guide can only be with one Sentinel."

Blair thought about Alex, about how badly his good intentions to help her had turned out, and wondered if Hector was right. But then he thought about Amelia; he had made her feel better. "I don't understand. Why can't I work with all of you, if you need my help? I can show all of you exercises and meditations to help with your senses." He gestured at the man with an open palm. "Although, you seem to know more than me, so I'm guessing you don't need that from me."

Hector scooted across the floor until his knees were only a couple inches apart from Blair's. "You know you are a Guide?"

Blair nodded.

"Were you called to come here?"

"Here, like this building?"

Hector nodded.

Blair shook his head. "No. This guy grabbed me and brought me here."

"Ah, I see. I was mistaken. I had hoped once there were five of us, that the Guides would be called."

"Five of you? Five Sentinels?"

"Yes." Hector smiled again. "But perhaps you were called. After all, God works in mysterious ways. I would have you choose me."

Blair felt out of his depth, knew that things were happening here that were more important than the simple words being spoken. "I don't think I understand. What is this choosing?"

"The Guide chooses the Sentinel. The Sentinel can only hope that he is chosen to be a Guide's lifemate."

Blair's eyes opened wide. "Lifemate? Like in a marriage or something?"

"Only if that is what the Sentinel and the Guide wish. It does not need to be sexual in nature."

"Maybe you could start at the beginning. I don't know much about being a Guide, I mean other than the practical parts, showing a Sentinel how to control his or her senses."

Hector smiled kindly. "Then you know what is important."

"How do you know so much about Sentinels and Guides?"

"In my village in Peru where I grew up, there have always been Sentinels. Many Sentinels, but few Guides. The elders decided that wherever the Guides were they must be too far away to hear the call."

It was weird for Blair to hear that somehow Guides were a rarer breed than Sentinels. Mr. Smith had said the same thing, but Blair wasn't ready to believe anything he said. Up until this very moment, it
had never crossed Blair's mind that he was anything special at all--just someone lucky enough to get interested in Sentinels and actually find one. "How did you end up here?"

"My grandfather sent me here to find my Guide. He had a vision that I would find my Guide far from home."

"How did Mr. Smith find you?"

"My spirit animal brought me here."

"What?" Blair's jaw dropped. "Why would it do that?"

Hector shrugged. "I do not know, but she is wiser than I and I have learned not to argue." Smiling again, he added, "I now believe that it was for you to find me."

Blair didn't want to hurt Hector's feelings, but he needed to explain a few things. "I, uh, I already have a Sentinel. His name's Jim."

Hector shook his head. "You may know a Sentinel, but you are not his Guide. You have not bonded with him. You are not his lifemate."

"How do you know that?" Blair wasn't sure how he felt about that. A part of him was put out that anyone would think he and Jim weren't together as Sentinel and Guide, but another part of him, a sad and weary part, perceived the truth of Hector's words. How could they be bonded when oceans of unspoken words lay between them? He dropped his head, the unbearable sadness rising again inside of him.

A wet tongue rasping on his face from his jaw to his temple snapped him out of his mood, and Blair laughed as he pushed the wolf's head to the side. "Yuck." He wiped his face with the back of one hand and then wiped it on his jeans. "Tell me about this bonding. If it's not sexual, what is it?"

"Where I come from, a Guide chooses his or her Sentinel. There is a knowing, a rightness. The Sentinel may of course refuse, but I have never seen it happen. No Sentinel wants to live his or her life without a lifemate."

"Okay, so what happens if the Sentinel says yes?"

"They make a blood pact. It is a simple ritual, but it gets imbued with the power of the Guide and the Sentinel, and the two become one."

It sounded like a marriage. "And it's not sexual?" Blair couldn't seem to get past that. He couldn't see himself being Jim's lifemate, still living in the downstairs bedroom, while Jim lived with his wife upstairs.

"I know it is different here than in my village. At home, a Guide or a Sentinel can be married to other people, but their spouses understand that their first commitment is to their lifemate. They are supported by the other people in the village, so if the Guide and Sentinel must be away for a while, their families are watched over." A look of sadness crossed Hector's face. "Here, everyone is alone."

"I'm sorry. I'm sorry you're here and not home safe in your village."

"There are times when I wish I was home again, but not if my path here has led to you."

Blair was surprised at the pull he felt. Even Jim, for all that he was a good friend, often made Blair feel as if he were little more than a bother. He certainly rarely sought him out specifically for his
services as a Guide. Jim only yelled for help when it was a matter of life and death, or when Blair pushed and pushed until Jim gave up in sheer exhaustion.

Sighing, wishing he felt happier about it, he reiterated, "I'm with Jim."

Hector studied him carefully. "You have chosen him?"

Blair nodded.

"He has accepted?"

Blair hesitated. Had Jim accepted? He thought about lying in his hospital bed after drowning, his invitation to Jim to join him. And Jim's very clearly implied: thanks, but no thanks.

Hector's eyes opened wide, giving his face almost a comical look. "He refused you?"

Blair felt the need to defend his friend. "He didn't understand what I was asking. I didn't understand what I was asking. It's been hard for both of us, especially for him. Having these senses has been a struggle for him, in a lot of ways. And all the mystical stuff, it makes him uneasy." But Blair wondered. Their spirit animals had just merged and Jim had brought him back from the dead. If he refused an invitation then, when the evidence of their connection was unavoidable, how likely was it that Jim would ever choose Blair as his lifemate?

Biting back a sad laugh, Blair shook his head. He couldn't even imagine asking Jim again, let alone suggesting they partake of a blood ritual. Smiling sadly at Hector, he added, "And rituals aren't really his thing."

"Blair, I do not have the right to tell you what your path is, but I wonder what it is that keeps you by this man's side. Is it because he is a Sentinel and something within you recognizes your rightful place as a Guide? Because if that is so, I am also a Sentinel, and I would honor you as my Guide. And I would never refuse your offer if you chose me." This last line was accompanied with a look of scandalized disbelief that someone would have refused Blair.

It made Blair feel good to be wanted this way by Hector. Even as he found it hard to breathe knowing that Jim didn't.

Hector continued. "If it is because you are attracted to him as a man, as a sexual partner, then I would still honor you as my Guide." He smiled and added, "I would be disappointed because you are a beautiful man, and it would be my pleasure to be loved by you, but I would respect who you chose as a spouse."

For the first time in his life, Blair was speechless.

Jim knew he was nuts for doing this, but he started up the truck and pulled out of his parking space. He glanced up at the sky, hoping to see the owl again, or maybe a golden eagle, but the sky remained overcast and depressingly empty.

Determined, nonetheless, he drove until he reached the highway entrance and chose south. Wishing he'd stopped for a cup of coffee, Jim settled into the drive, wishing, uncomfortably, for a sign.

When it appeared, Jim almost drove off the road. It wasn't every day a huge boa constrictor suddenly showed up in the passenger seat of his truck. Especially one that seemed to be frowning at him.

Jim snarled at it, "What the hell did I do to you?" He pulled off the side of the road, deciding that if
he was going to talk to a snake he probably shouldn't be driving. "You're lucky I didn't get in an accident."

The snake went on frowning at him.

All of Jim's frustration came to a head. "You know what? Fuck you. That's all I have to say. If the only reason you showed up was to make me drive off the road and then give me attitude, go do it somewhere else." He shooed the snake. "Go on, get out of here."

In response, the snake pulled itself into a tight coil, making itself right at home.

Jim grabbed the steering wheel very tightly, grinding his teeth, ignoring his passenger. Then, when he couldn't stand it another minute, he looked over, only to find that it was gone. He looked out the window and saw it slithering through the grass, heading in the direction Jim had been driving. "Next time just leave a map, why don't you?" he yelled out the window. Sighing, and then shifting the truck into drive, he pulled back onto the highway.

A few minutes later, above and beyond all the reasons he already should be feeling nervous, Jim started to have a sense of dread. It was just how he'd felt when he'd climbed those stairs to Hargrove Hall, only to turn and see a body in the fountain, knowing it was Blair. Loss. Complete and utter loss. He had no idea where Blair was, but he had to get there, now.

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Blair stared at Hector for a minute, then down at the wolf. His mind still a blank, he leaned back against the wall and closed his eyes. He strove for a safe subject. "You mentioned something about five Sentinels. What did you mean?"

"It used to be, in the olden days, that Sentinels and Guides called to each other."

Blair kept his eyes closed, smiling at Hector's voice. He was a natural storyteller. "Go on."

"But back then, things were quieter, and the call was able to travel many miles, over many lands. It might take years, but they would always find each other."

"Like Plato's split-aparts."

"Yes. Two halves of one soul."

Blair let out a contented hum. Once, he would have thought that was what he and Jim were, or could have been. A vision of Jim and Alex kissing came to mind, and he realized that he had no idea what he and Jim were now. "Sorry, I interrupted you."

Hector smiled kindly. "But over time, the land grew noisy. Too many people, too many villages, and the calls were left unanswered. Sentinels searched for their Guides, and Guides searched for their Sentinels but many went to their graves alone. The few who found each other are spoken of in song and fairy tales."

Blair smiled again. "I'd like to hear some of those one day."

"You need only ask."

"Go on with your story."

"One day, a wise Shaman decided that this could not go on. He started gathering the Sentinels in hopes that if enough were together, the call to the Guides would be sufficiently loud to be heard over
the din of every-day life. He discovered that if five Sentinels gathered, the Guides would follow. They would appear and they could choose their Sentinel and complete the bond."

"Why five?"

Hector cocked his head to the side. "Five senses. Five elements. It is a number of great power."

"There are only four of you now. One of the Sentinels died."

"I wondered if that was so. I saw its spirit animal and knew it was ill." He looked around the room. "I imagine that is where my spirit animal has gone, to find a fifth Sentinel, so the call can continue."

"They'll do that?"

"Yes. Spirit animals also crave their lifemates."

Blair looked down at his wolf and softly caressed his muzzle. "What is your spirit animal?"

"She is a mantona."

Blair shook his head, not understanding. "A boa. A Peruvian red-tailed boa," Hector boasted proudly. "She is very big, and very beautiful."

Blair grinned at him. "I'd like to see her."

"You will." It sounded like a promise.

Blair felt a little overwhelmed by the wistfulness of that promise. "Hector, I don't--"

Hector put his hand on Blair's knee. "I do not wish to make you uncomfortable. It is the Guide's choice. I am merely telling you that I am willing. More than willing."

Feeling awkward, Blair brought things back to their current situation. "I'm not sure how Mr. Smith thinks I'm going to help you. You seem to have all your senses under control."

"I have spent all of my childhood with other Sentinels who assisted me."

"So do you really even need a Guide?"

A look of yearning crossed Hector's face. "Yes. I will not be complete without one. I have seen Sentinels who were successful in finding their lifemate, and ones who were not, and I would not choose to live unbonded. Neither would any Sentinel, if he or she could make that choice for themselves. There is a serenity, a sense of home with a lifemate. I see it in their eyes."

Blair had a hard time equating what Hector was saying with how Jim often treated him. But maybe it was him and not Jim; Blair didn't think he'd ever brought a sense of home to Jim so maybe he was the wrong Guide. Ignoring the pain that thought brought him, he said, "Maybe it's because of what those Sentinels were taught that they want it. Jim never really seemed to need me, except when his senses went nuts on him."

Hector leaned forward and ran the backs of his fingers down Blair's cheek. "I think your Sentinel is a fool."

"Maybe it was me. I mean, I didn't really know what I was doing, I made him do all sorts of experiments." Blair forced the rest of the truth out. "And some of them were just for me to gather
knowledge, not to necessarily help him. He hated it most of the time and I still did it." The painful memories brought a lump to Blair's throat. "He said he didn't trust me."

"I still think he is a fool." Hector's voice was both kind and condemning.

Blair didn't want to talk about it anymore. His emotions were still so labile when it came to Jim. Before the last few weeks, he'd thought of himself as a fairly flexible guy, able to roll with the punches. But lately, it seemed like every punch knocked him to the floor. "Hector, can I ask you a question?"

"Of course."

"You said you could sense John. Can you tell that there are other Sentinels around?"

He nodded. "Yes."

Blair frowned. "And it doesn't make you all territorial, sort of threatened?"

Hector shook his head. "No."

"And when you're with them, or with a woman Sentinel, do you have this need to, I don't know, like, to sort of, need to mate? Anything like that?"

Hector's heavy brow furrowed. "No. Why do you ask?"

Blair closed his eyes to hide his unhappiness. All the excuses he'd made for Jim in Peru seemed to shrivel up and blow away. If it wasn't Sentinel instincts that made Jim act the way he had around Alex, what did that leave? Blair didn't want to believe that lust alone would have driven Jim to kiss the woman who'd killed him. A sense of piercing loneliness wailed through his soul.

Hector touched Blair's knee, again. "I have made you sad."

Blair shook his head, lips pressed tightly. Forcing the words past the lump in his throat, he said, "No, it's all right."

"It's not. Tell me what is disturbing you."

Blair glanced up at the Sentinel, saw the compassion in his eyes, his willingness to help however he could, and Blair found himself just opening his mouth, the words tumbling out. He talked about Alex, about Jim, about dying, about finding them on the beach, everything.

And while every word hurt as it left his lips, it also helped purge the pain. This was the first time he'd been able to talk about any of this, to anyone. Jim didn't want to talk about it, and there really hadn't been anyone else Blair could talk to who wasn't too invested in Jim to see their way clear just to listen and be what Blair needed. When he was done, tears were streaming down his face.

Hector leaned forward to gather him up and pull him into a hug.

Jim's panther suddenly growled from the truck bed. "Jesus." Jim narrowly missed swerving off the road again. "Could you give me some warning before you do that?"

The growl turned into a roar.

Jim had just about had it. He knew Blair was in trouble. He knew something was wrong. He knew he had to find Blair, but no one was helping in any way that was actually constructive. He was about
ready to start shooting the stupid animals if they didn't tell him something useful.

He saw the tip of a tail out of the corner of his eye and, turning his head, Jim let out a curse. He pulled the truck to the side, turned it off, and jumped out. He knew they weren't flesh and blood but the sight of his black panther and that stupid snake grappling in the back of the truck was a little too much to take close up.

Jim wished he knew for sure what it meant. Guessing was taking him someplace he didn't like--another Sentinel was after Blair. He yelled at them. "Instead of fighting with each other, why don't you show me the fucking way to go?" Only the realization that he'd be putting bullet holes in his truck stopped him from drawing his gun.

A car whizzed by, honking at him. Jim flipped it the finger and almost wished the car would stop so he could take his frustration out on whoever was inside. He supposed it was a good thing the car kept going. He needed to get on the road again, but wasn't sure he could drive with his panther snarling and spitting just a few feet away. Jim felt its unease deep in the marrow of his bones.

When his phone rang it scared the shit out of him.

He wrestled the phone out of his pocket. "Ellison."

"Jim? It's Simon."

Jim couldn't hear with all the ruckus, so he moved to the front of the truck, and then sighed when he saw a fox sitting there, staring at him. "Shit."

Another car sped by.

"Where the hell are you? Is that traffic I hear?"

Jim didn't really want to tell Simon where he was. He couldn't believe he was there by the side of the road in the middle of fucking nowhere, wishing his stupid spirit animal would just eat the damn snake already.

"Jim?"

"I'm about five miles from the Oregon border," he finally said between gritted teeth.

"Do I want to know why?"

"No."

"Shit."

Jim couldn't agree more.

"Did you hear from Sandburg?" Simon's voice held all sorts of wistful hopefulness.

"No, not exactly."

"I really don't want to know, do I?"

"You really don't."

"Do you need some backup?"
Jim cast a disgusted look into the back of the truck. "Simon, I don't even know where I'm going." He hated this.

There was a long silence.

Jim completely understood.

"Are you gonna be okay?"

"I have no idea."

There was another long silence.

"Where exactly are you?"

"I'm on Interstate 5, about five miles past Ridgefield." The fox was winding itself around Jim's legs now. He heard a roar from the back of the truck and turned just in time to see the snake slither over the side and vanish into the underbrush. Jim smiled at his panther; he was sure it was smiling back.

The fox started trotting up the road. A shriek caught Jim's attention and he looked up in time to see a golden eagle swooping past, heading south.

"Simon, I gotta go."

"Jim, call me when you get to wherever you're going."

"I'll try."

"Maybe I should come out and join you."

"I can't wait for you. I have to go." Not wanting to hang up on Simon quite so rudely, he climbed in the truck, tucking the phone under his ear as he started it up and shifted it into gear. It was not the smoothest of starts, the truck jerked and almost stalled, but then it caught and surged onto the road.

Jim lowered his head to look for the eagle and saw a spot way in the distance--due south. Beginning to think that maybe he wasn't completely crazy, that the spirit animals would actually take him to Blair, Jim blew out a long breath.

"You still there, Jim?"

"Yeah, I'm here."

"Call me. I mean it."

"I will." With that, Jim hung up and tossed the phone onto the passenger seat.

Blair was the one who finally pulled back. He looked at Hector sheepishly, embarrassed he'd lost control like that.

Hector spoke first. "I am pleased that you have trusted me with this confidence. I wish I knew the words to say that would ease your pain."

Blair let out a sigh. "Me, too." He leaned back against the wall again. "So, you never heard of Sentinels acting like that?"
Hector shook his head. "No, I am sorry."

"Yeah, me, too," Blair repeated. He ran his hand down the wolf's body, feeling comforted by its faithful presence. "What is the ritual you were talking about?"

Hector's eyes shone. "Do you wish to perform it with me?"

Blair sat up straight, abashed at his thoughtlessness. "Damn, I'm sorry. I didn't mean to--." He shook his head. "Sometimes I talk without thinking." He put out his hand, relieved when Hector held it tightly. "I just have to talk to Jim first, you know? If he's not interested, if he says no again, then--" Blair couldn't even finish his sentence.

It wasn't that he wasn't drawn to Hector; he was. And with Hector, he could truly explore everything it meant to be a Sentinel and Guide. But, despite everything that had happened, even with the distance that had been steadily growing between him and Jim, Blair couldn't imagine choosing someone else. It just felt wrong. He hoped he wasn't being a complete fool.

Hector squeezed his hand. "You are a good man and Jim is lucky he has your loyalty." He let go and then, half teasingly, half seriously, he added, "But, if he refuses you, or treats you badly, I will have to teach him a lesson."

Blair let out a strangled laugh, and ran a hand through his hair. "I might like to see that."

The door opened behind him. "Time to see the next one," Muscle-man directed, in a tone that brooked no disobedience.

Blair gave his wolf one last pat, sorry to be leaving it.

"Take him with you. He is yours."

"He'll come with me?" Blair thought that sounded wonderful. He glanced at Muscle-man and saw his look of confusion, making Blair guess he couldn't see the wolf.

"If you ask politely," Hector teased.

Blair shot him a smiling look over his glasses and stood, attempting to send a mental request to the wolf. The wolf stood, grinning at him.

Hector rose to his feet as well, and Blair stared up at him, not sure what to say. He felt as if he'd spent lifetimes in this room and that he was leaving a different person than he'd been when he'd arrived. "Hector, thank you."

Hector smiled broadly, responding by giving Blair a big hug. "Thank you. You have renewed my hope that there are Guides out there, that they are good people, in need of their Sentinels. I will be waiting." His eyes left little doubt that he'd be waiting for Blair.

With a brief nod, one hand on his wolf's head, Blair followed the guard out of the room.

Jim's phone rang again. "Ellison."

"I think I know where you're going," Simon advised, his tone unhappy.

"I'm glad one of us does," Jim snapped back.

"I just made a phone call, and the sanitarium where they're keeping Alex Barnes is in Hillsboro,
which is about thirty miles from you, in the direction you're going."

"Fuck." Not that it surprised Jim. Of course this had to be about Alex. Of course it had to get even more complicated. The only thing he was glad about was that he still felt mostly sane. At least he wasn't having any urges to go back and empty his loft, or to kick Blair out of his life. In fact, if anything, he felt the exact opposite. He needed to find Blair and hold him tight.

"I'm on my way, Jim."

"Simon, you don't have to do that."

"Sandburg's in trouble, right?"

"Yeah," Jim answered cautiously.

"Then, I'm on my way. If you start going all wacko again, he might need some help dealing with you, let alone getting out of whatever situation he's in."

Jim tried to rein in his temper. "I'm fine, sir," he forced out.

"Right, I've heard that one before."

There was a moment's pause, and Jim was pretty sure he wasn't going to like what followed. For a brief moment he thought about tossing the phone out the window.

"Listen, Jim. I know you care about the kid, but I also know that things haven't been great between the two of you lately. If Alex is conscious and this is all some sort of trap, she'll use anything she's got to get between you. And, unless I'm wrong, it didn't take much for her to get you to turn your back on Sandburg the last time."

As Jim drove over the border into Oregon, the phone went out the window.

Blair waited anxiously as the guard opened the door to the last Sentinel's room. His anxiety increased when he entered with Blair and closed the door behind the two of them. The feel of his wolf at his side gave him some added courage.

The young black girl glared at him. "Who are you?" she demanded.

"Uh, my name's Blair Sandburg, and I'm here to help you, if I can."

She sent him a scathing look, which made it all too clear what she thought of his help, and exactly what he could do with it.

He tried again. "No, really. I'm not with them; I'm a prisoner here, too. I just know something about what you're dealing with, and I really can help."

Blair guessed she was sixteen or seventeen. Despite the presence of Blair and Muscle-man, she continued to pace the small room, her nostrils flaring to account for the new odors now pressing on her. She was dressed in navy blue sweats, the sleeves shoved up above her elbows, displaying skin that had been scratched until it bled.

The girl's feet were bare; her hair cut down so only a very tight curl covered her scalp. She had large brown eyes, with lashes thick and long. Her lips were full and, when she snarled, Blair could see that her front teeth overlapped a little.
When she started scratching at her arms again, Blair moved a little closer. She glared at him, but then she suddenly lowered her eyes and took in the wolf. "Is he yours?"

Blair nodded, his hand resting on the wolf's head. "He is." He looked around the room. "Where's yours?" he asked cautiously.

Her eyes grew suspicious again. "Where's my what?"

Blair grimaced a little and shut up. Maybe she thought the wolf was real. Maybe she had no idea that she had a spirit animal. But, then, it was odd she could see his. Maybe it was because he was a Guide. It bothered Blair that he knew so little. "Do you, ah, do you know why you're here?"

"Maybe you should tell me why you think I'm here," she challenged right back, clearly not willing to give anything away.

Deciding to go for blunt, Blair answered her. "I think you're here because you did something that gave away the fact that you can see better, hear better, and smell better than anyone else around you. Maybe you were good at sports, or got great grades--"

She snorted at that.

"--Or maybe you used your senses to do something illegal, I don't know, but something gave it away. And the man who runs this place wants people like you."

She cocked her head to the side, again, just like Jim did, and Blair knew she was listening to his heart, to his vitals, trying to figure out if he was lying or not.

"I'm telling the truth, and you know it. And I can help you."

"Like how," she bit out.

He gestured toward her arm. "I can help with your sense of touch, so everything doesn't bother you, for one."

She scratched at her arm and then stopped. Her gaze bounced back and forth between Muscle-man and Blair, her eyes hard and untrusting. "Yeah, and then what?"

"You mean what else can I do?"

"No, after you help me. Then what? What happens to me? What do I hafta do?"

"What do you mean?"

"Just what I said. What do I hafta do? And what do I get out of it? If someone wants me for something, I wanna know what I'm gettin' out of it. Am I gonna get paid? 'Cuz I ain't doing nothin' for free." She scratched her arm again.

Blair blew out a breath and then bit his bottom lip, thinking that Mr. Smith might have hit the bonanza with this one. Someone young enough and angry enough to be an Alex in the making. Determined to keep it from happening, he said, "You were given these senses for a reason. To help protect those who can't protect themselves."

"Hey, white boy," she responded angrily, "ain't nobody in my life ever did me no favors, and I ain't gonna do none for them. You want somethin' from me, you pay for it."

Blair stole a moment to think of Jim, of his integrity and decency and wondered how he'd ended up
that way between his senses, his family, his experiences in the Army, and his divorce. Then he gazed at the black girl. Is this what Sentinels in this country were turning into? Angry girls who expected to be taken for a ride, or young men without a shred of humanity left within them? Blair didn't believe it, couldn't believe it. "What's your name?"

"Latisha," she answered sullenly.

"Latisha, I'm Blair. It's nice to meet you."

She just stared at him. Blair heard a noise behind him and realized the guard had left and what he'd heard was the door being locked. Maybe Muscle-man decided that she wasn't going to hurt him, or maybe he just didn't give a shit because it was time for lunch.

Blair gestured at the chair. "You mind if I sit down?"

Latisha shrugged. "Whatever."

Blair sat. "Listen, can we start over? I just want to help. I don't want anything from you except for you to listen and try to do what I tell you." At her look, he hastily added, "Just stuff in your mind, nothing physical or anything. I just want to help you feel better right now, and then maybe, later, if you want to, I can teach you more about your senses."

"Like what kind of stuff in my mind?" she asked, her eyes flinty, hands on her hips.

The suspicion in her eyes made Blair feel sad. He suspected too many people had told her to do a great many things she hadn't wanted to do. This girl and John needed years of therapy, not a crash course in being a Sentinel, only to be used and then discarded when they no longer suited Mr. Smith's purposes.

"Where did he find you?"

"Who?"

"The guy who brought you here."

Her chin lifted aggressively. "Juvie. What's it to ya?"

Blair pursed his lips. "You mean a juvenile detention center?"

She just glared at him.

"What were you in for?"

"Nothin'."

"Right." He scraped his hair back with his thumb and ring finger. "What did they say you did?"

"They say I tried to rob some old lady."

"Hmm."

Her chin rose again. "But, I didn't do nothin'. And even if I did, she deserved it, anyways. Stupid bitch."

"Oh, boy," Blair muttered, under his breath.
Jim was almost immediately sorry that he'd tossed the phone out the window, but he couldn't take the time to turn around and find it. Besides, it was probably trashed.

He drove for a few more miles and then remembered that Blair's backpack was in the truck. He reached for it and with one hand on the wheel, worked his hand inside, looking for Sandburg's phone.

Successful, he pulled it out and checked the battery, smiling grimly when he saw that it was charged. Amazing, he thought sarcastically to himself, something was going his way.

He started pressing buttons. Simon was probably right; it probably would be a good idea to have some backup. Just in case. The phone barely rang before his boss answered. "This better be you, Ellison."

"It is."

"What the fuck happened?"

"I lost the connection," Jim lied. "Listen, as long as I'm heading that way, why don't you give me the address of the damn place." It would be a relief not to have to depend on Ringling Brother's Barnum and Bailey Circus to help him find his way.

Just then, as he was about to pass an exit, Jim saw a tiger sauntering down the side of the road, heading west. "Fuck. Hold on, Simon." Jim dropped the phone and shifted, jerking the steering wheel hard to the right. For a heart stopping moment, Jim was afraid the truck was going to flip over, but in a few seconds the truck settled back down, all four wheels firmly on the ground.

Scrabbling for the phone again, Jim put it to his ear. "Sorry about that."

"What's going on?" Simon sounded like he really didn't want to ask.

Without thinking, Jim started to answer. "I saw a tiger--." He snapped his mouth shut. After a second, he said, "Never mind."

"You know, if I lived a normal life, which I did, by the way, before you started up with this Sentinel gig, I'd be calling the men in white coats to pick you up."

"At least I'm going to the right place for that, sir." They could put Jim in the room next to Alex, and they could drool together. The thought of being anywhere near Alex made Jim's stomach hurt. If that bitch so much as batted an eyelash at him, Jim was gonna just fucking shoot her, and then go kiss Blair, just to even things up.

That caused another sensation in his stomach, but this one didn't hurt. It sort of felt like he'd gone over a hill too fast. A sort of free-fall sensation. Suddenly his panther was back and purring. He butted his forehead against the side of Jim's face, which, given his size and weight, essentially shoved the other side of Jim's face against the window.

Jim shoved back. "Hey, I'm trying to drive here, okay?" Then he realized that he'd touched the damn thing. Only the fact that it was purring loud enough to shake the truck convinced Jim that it was probably safe to touch it again. Keeping one eye on the road, the phone tucked under an ear again, he reached out and touched its flank, amazed at how thick and soft its pelt was. He'd never touched it before purposefully, not that he'd necessarily wanted to. Somehow it always seemed safer to keep his distance.

"Who the fuck are you talking to, Jim?"
Jim decided to ignore the question. "What's the address?" Simon rattled it off and Jim had to focus to hear through the purring. Then, from one second to the next, the panther was up and spitting and snarling at something that had just jumped into the truck bed. Jim looked in the rear view mirror and saw that the tiger had decided to hitch a ride. "Oh, for Christ's--, Simon, I gotta go." Jim disconnected, tossed the phone under the passenger side dash and pulled over again.

Thankfully, his panther leaped out the window and joined the tiger in the back. Watching them carefully, this time deciding to stay in the truck, Jim realized that they weren't really fighting. There were lots of teeth and claws on display, but they mostly just stalked around each other, roaring. Jim rolled his eyes. "It's a damn pissing contest," he muttered under his breath.

He pulled back on the road. At this rate, he'd never get there.

Blair sat in his chair, legs crossed under him, and realized he was in the middle of an ethical quandary. He'd been listening to Latisha tell her version of the facts, and Blair, feeling the need to be completely fair, had to acknowledge that there might be a slim likelihood that her version of the truth could be what really happened, but he doubted it.

She'd been talking non-stop for fifteen minutes about how it wasn't her fault that the old lady had been in the wrong place at the wrong time, and didn't she know that old people like that should just stay home anyway, because they're too damn slow and deaf and stupid. And it wasn't her fault that the lady couldn't keep her balance and had fallen down, and yelled out loud enough for everyone in the whole fucking town to hear her.

And it wasn't her fault that her purse had gone flying and the wallet had gone flying even farther, coincidentally, right into Latisha's pocket, and wasn't that a miracle. And it wasn't her fault that a cop car rolled around the corner, and it was only because she was black that the lady pointed to her, because she'd only been trying to help. And life just wasn't fucking fair.

Blair wholeheartedly agreed with her. Life, as a matter of fact, right now, pretty much sucked. During her recitation, she kept scratching and intermittently wincing, the way Jim did when his senses were bothering him. Blair was pretty sure he could help her, assuming she'd listen. But this is where his quandary came in. If he helped her, she'd fit right in with Mr. Smith's plans. All Mr. Smith would have to do is offer her money, or power, and the opportunity to shaft all the people in the world who'd done her wrong, and she'd jump on his bandwagon so fast, his head would spin. And Blair would be loosing a new Alex on the world.

Suddenly the room was filled with flapping wings and shrieking. Blair ducked down, covering his head as he felt a talon come uncomfortably close. His wolf moved in front of him, snapping at the bird, which Blair now recognized as a golden eagle. "Whoa," he said. It wasn't every day you saw a golden eagle, let alone in a locked room where there hadn't been one a second before. "Is he yours?"

Then Blair realized that part of the shrieking was Latisha. "Get it away, get it away!" She was standing on the bed, flapping her arms around her body as fast as she could, ostensibly to protect herself, but she looked like she was going for liftoff.

Blair had to bite back an hysterical laugh. "Latisha. Stop. It won't hurt you. I think it's your spirit animal." When he saw his words were having no effect, he stood and held out his arm. "You, bird, come here."

He felt a moment of intense shaman-ness, as the eagle came to roost on his arm. Blair was very grateful that, for whatever reason, the eagle's claws weren't digging holes in his arm. He'd have to
remind Jim that layers came in handy sometimes for other things than just staying warm. "Hey, you're a beauty." Before he reached out to touch, he checked in with his wolf. His spirit guide was once again sitting on the floor, tongue lolling out of his mouth, looking completely unconcerned.

Blair stroked the bird along its neck. It blinked solemnly at him. Blair glanced up at Latisha, who was still standing on the bed, pressed into the corner. "See, it won't hurt you."

"Get it out of here."

"It's yours. It's because you're a Sentinel." Blair stroked the bird again. "This is a magnificent animal." He glanced up at the young black teen. "This is what you have inside. All this beauty, and power, and magnificence. Don't waste it stealing wallets from old ladies, for God's sakes. Be something wonderful." He held up his arm, displaying the bird. "Be this."

Latisha stared at him as if he'd just sprouted a set of his own wings. But she also had a funny look on her face as she finally calmed down enough to look at the bird. "He's mine?" she asked, as if not daring to believe it.

"He sure is. Isn't he beautiful?" Blair took a closer look. "Although it might be a she, for all I know." He smiled at Latisha. "Come on, come touch her, him, whatever."

She carefully made her way to the edge of the mattress, then stepped to the ground. The eagle just watched her. "Here, sit down, and put your pillow in your lap," Blair coached.

She obeyed him, and Blair sat down next to her, encouraging the eagle to step off his arm, onto the pillow. The bird complied with minimal fuss, and stared up at Latisha. Latisha stared back.

Blair left them to it, slipping off the bed to pay attention to his own spirit animal. The wolf rolled over, baring its white belly, grinning up at Blair. Grinning back, Blair started giving his soft furry belly a rub.

Latisha interrupted his love-in with his spirit guide. "When I was a kid, I saw this show once, and it talked about how the eagles were goin' extinct. How come I have one?"

Blair looked up, surprised by the tone of her voice. All the anger and defensiveness was gone. And what was left was a young woman who had suddenly been given something that was beyond her understanding. By the shine in her eyes, Blair thought it might be a gift beyond price as well.

Thanking all the Powers That Be that maybe his spirit animal could do what he could not, he said, "It's because you're special. Don't ever forget that. That bird knows it. You think it'd sit like that for anyone else?"

"It did for you." There wasn't any jealousy in her voice, just a continuing wonder.

"I know, but I'm sort of special, too. I'm a Guide, I'm sort of the other half of a Sentinel."

"You mean like the other half of me?" She couldn't take her eyes off the eagle, and had finally gotten bold enough to stroke its feathers with her fingertips.

"Uh, not exactly. I mean, there's someone else out there, another Guide that will belong to you. I'm just here to help. I already have a Sentinel, sort of." Blair felt a moment's despair and then, in a burst of defiance, decided that it was true. If Jim didn't want him, Hector sure as hell did.

Her eyes flicked up to stare at him. "You mean I get an eagle and someone like you, just 'cuz I can hear and see good?"
Blair nodded, hoping it was true. Assuming what Hector said was real, and assuming the other Sentinels' spirit guides were out hunting for a fifth Sentinel, and assuming that if the spirit guides were returning to their Sentinels it meant that a fifth one had been rounded up, then there was a remote chance that the Guides would be coming. "It might take a while to find him or her," Blair decided to qualify honestly, recognizing that was a lot of assuming.

"Why didn't no one ever tell me?" She touched the bird again. "Why didn't I ever see it before?"

"I don't know." Blair wished Hector were here, maybe he'd know.

There was a knock on the door, and it opened to reveal Mr. Smith. "Mr. Sandburg, a moment of your time."

Blair reluctantly stood up, hating to break up this sudden rapport they'd developed. "I'll see you later, Latisha."

She nodded absently at him, most of her attention still on the bird in her lap.

Blair couldn't help grinning as he left the room.

It was the fox that tipped Jim off to the next exit, and he turned west on Route 8 as it trotted down the road. When he looked in his rearview mirror a few minutes later, the fox was sitting in the back, along with his panther, the tiger, and the boa constrictor. He scowled at them. "So glad I could give you a lift."

His panther yawned at him.

Jim thought it was bizarre they were all sort of getting along, on top of the already complete weirdness about everything. His panther had hated Alex's leopard; there had been no simple posturing between the two of them. If they'd been real, they'd have torn each other apart. Another quick look made Jim think that the panther wasn't crazy about the boa constrictor. He kept snarling at it, and then licking its chops, as if hoping snake was on the menu for the evening.

And that was another weird thing. Where was Alex's leopard? And where was the eagle and that damn owl? Jim wished Blair were here right now. His Guide would probably sell his soul to be able to see all these spirit animals lounging around together.

Assuming he could see them. Jim wasn't sure Blair had ever seen his panther. Obviously, he'd seen it when they'd done that vision-merging thing, but Blair had never acted as if he'd noticed it when the black cat had been prowling around the loft. It sort of seemed like something Blair would have mentioned if he had.

For that matter, Jim also had no idea if Blair's wolf was ever hanging around. He found he didn't like that idea. Not the hanging around part, but him not being able to see it part. He wanted to be able to see Blair's wolf, and not just when he was shooting it or trying to bring Blair back from the dead.

And suddenly, there it was. Blair's wolf. Right by a gravel drive, under a sign that said Hillsboro Hills Sanitarium. Jim hit the brake and pulled off to the side of the road. He wasn't quite ready to just drive in and announce his presence.

Jim watched as all the spirit animals jumped or slithered out of the truck. When his panther moved to the wolf and butted heads with it, Jim felt such a longing for Blair that it brought a lump to his throat. Only the belief that he was only minutes away from seeing his friend kept him from leaping out of the truck and running to find him.
Mr. Smith did not look happy. "I'd like an explanation, Mr. Sandburg."

Brow furrowed, Blair shook his head. "I don't understand."

"I brought you here to help them, not to push them into psychotic breakdowns."

Blair was still mystified. He looked down at his wolf only to find that it was gone. Looking down the hallway, he saw no sign of it. Shrugging, he looked up at Mr. Smith. "I still don't know what you're talking about."

"Each of the subjects is talking to thin air, patting something that isn't there. Even Subject Two--"

"He isn't Subject Two," Blair objected hotly. "His name is Hector."

Mr. Smith kept talking as if Blair hadn't spoken: "--is exhibiting the same symptoms."

"They're not psychotic, they're talking to their spirit animals."

"Spirit animals." Mr. Smith spat the words out as if a bug had accidentally flown into his mouth.

"Yeah, spirit animals." He jerked a thumb over his shoulder. "She has a golden eagle, Hector has a snake. I don't know what Amelia or John have."

"So you're supporting them in this delusional behavior?" Mr. Smith looked less than enraptured by the thought.

"It's not delusional. They're real. Just because you can't see them, or believe in them, doesn't make any of this less real. Most people wouldn't believe in Sentinels, but you know they're real."

"What I know is that I need these Sentinels to be able to concentrate on what I tell them to do, not have conversations with imaginary friends."

"You just don't get it, do you? These are beings of power, and I don't just mean the spirit animals. Being a Sentinel isn't just about having a genetic advantage. It's so much bigger than that. It's about being a protector, about protecting the tribe."

"Please spare me your hyperbole, Mr. Sandburg."

"I'm dead serious, here. You're messing around with primal powers, with mythic archetypes. These people have a purpose, a mission. You saw what happened to Alex."

"Yes, she overdosed on whatever toxic concoction she made in the jungle."

"No, she didn't. Jim drank it, too, and he went into the pools, just like she did. But she lost her way, because she stepped off the path. Her senses were eating her alive and I think it's because she misused them. The same thing could happen to all of these Sentinels."

"Alex was able to complete several errands for me before she became unstable. She served her purpose."

Blair glared at the man. "You can't treat them that way. They're people. They're--they're Sentinels. They can make the world a better place, man, and you're treating them like disposable diapers."

"You tell him, white boy," a supportive and angry voice shouted through the door they were arguing in front of.
Blair couldn't help but grin at the door, even though he knew Latisha couldn't see him, but then he turned back to Mr. Smith, deadly serious. "Why won't you see this? Using these Sentinels to do your dirty work is dangerous. I can't even imagine the bad karma you're accumulating."

"I believe I'll survive the experience," Mr. Smith answered scathingly. "Perhaps I'm not making my expectations clear enough. I brought you here for only one reason, and that was to help these Sentinels get better control over their senses. It was not to help them find their destiny, or to have them all start babbling at invisible spirit animals. I would suggest you rethink your strategy or our working relationship will be coming to a precipitous end."

Blair didn't think that meant he'd be handed a pink slip. Despite the risk, however, he shook his head. "I can't do that. If I help you, I'll destroy them."

"Perhaps you need a stronger inducement, then." Mr. Smith turned to Muscle-man. "Sam, after listening to the conversation between Mr. Sandburg and Subject Two, I don't believe he will be of use. Please dispose of him."

Blair's jaw dropped in horror. "What? You mean kill him? You can't do that."

"Actually, Mr. Sandburg, you will find that I can do anything I want." Mr. Smith nodded at Sam, and Sam turned and headed down the corridor.

Blair ran after Sam, grabbing his arm. "This is murder. You can't just go in there and kill an innocent man, a good man. Don't do this."

Sam shook him off and kept walking.

Blair tried again, this time leaping on the man's back. "I won't let you. He doesn't deserve this, none of them do." Even as Sam was dislodging him, Blair kept pleading, "I work with the police, I can get a deal for you. I can keep you out of jail, but not if you do this. Think about what you're doing." He hung on like an octopus.

Finally Sam threw him off hard enough that he slammed into a wall. Sam continued his walk down the hall. When Blair found his feet, he also found Mr. Smith holding a gun on him. "I think that's enough. Sam has a job to do, and I'd appreciate it if you'd allow him to do it."

Blair shook his head in disbelief. He'd met a few bad people in his tenure with Jim, but he had no frame of reference for a man like this. Life meant nothing to him. Nothing. And because of it, he was going to win another battle; Blair couldn't let Sam shoot Hector. "Tell him to stop. I'll do what you want." He could hear the defeat in his voice.

Mr. Smith called out, "Hold on, Sam," and then turned a mocking smile on Blair. "I'm glad you're reconsidering."

"You will end up paying for this, you know," Blair hissed out.

"I look forward to it."

All of Jim's senses were wrapped around his and Blair's spirit animals. And they were all wrapped up in each other. Not sexually, but in every other way. Jim couldn't tell where one ended and the other one started. They were like a tangle of puppies, or kids playing Twister.

Jim found himself disconcertingly aroused. Not because of the animals, but because they were a visual reminder of himself and Blair. And that led to thoughts of the two of them wrapped around
each other. This wasn't the first time he'd had thoughts like this, but watching their spirit guides together made it seem, so, well, so possible.

His panther suddenly snarled, and Jim was forcibly reminded that he was here to rescue his Guide. He brought all his senses to bear on that and the sudden deluge was both intoxicating and worrisome. Intoxicating, because he'd been denied too long the sound, smell, and sight of his Guide. Worrisome, because his Guide's heart was tap dancing against his ribcage.

Having no idea if it would work or not, Jim whispered to his spirit animal, "Go to him. Protect him."

As if the giant beast had always been his to command, the panther extricated himself from his tumbling partner and slunk off into the underbrush toward the house. The wolf sat on its haunches, watching Jim with wise eyes, reminding Jim of Blair.

Blair had to capitulate for now, but he swore he'd find a way to get these Sentinels free. Suddenly, out of the corner of his eye, he saw Jim's black panther, and something inside of him snapped. He swung out as hard as he could, his fist connecting with the side of Mr. Smith's face. The man staggered up against the wall, still managing to hang on to his gun.

Blair screamed at him, "You told me you didn't have Jim. Where the fuck is he?" He started advancing on the man. "If you've done anything to him, I'll--"

"Take another step and I'll shoot you." One eye on Blair, Mr. Smith gestured for Sam. "There is a possibility Jim Ellison is on the property. Please find him and bring him to me. He might be the best inducement to ensure Mr. Sandburg's cooperation."

"No!" Blair yelled. "Leave him alone." He flung himself at the panther, pleading, "Tell him to leave. Tell him to go and never come back."

The panther pressed close, snarling up at Mr. Smith.

Jim winced as Blair gave his presence away. He knew his Guide hadn't meant to, but it was going to make the whole sneaking in and rescuing bit a little more complicated. However, Jim was also pitifully happy at how upset Blair had been on his behalf. Maybe they weren't talking much these days, but at least Blair still cared for him.

He listened carefully and could hear Sam's footsteps walking slowly around the perimeter of the building. Jim decided he'd take him out, then go inside and get Blair.

Blair was horrified that he'd given Jim away, but felt a fierce relief that Jim wasn't locked up in one of these rooms. Blair was going to do whatever it took to make sure he never was.

Feeling the strength of Jim's panther behind him, Blair looked up to find Mr. Smith frowning down on him. "Mr. Sandburg. I am beginning to think that you are not worth the trouble you are causing me." He lifted his gun, aiming it at Blair's chest. "I'm afraid our partnership is coming to a close."

Visions of Alex swam through Blair's mind, of her pointing her gun at him, dragging him outside, hitting him, drowning him, and Blair suddenly found it hard to breathe. He wasn't ready to die again, and he had a sneaking suspicion that Jim wouldn't be able to command his spirit animal to pull him back from death if either his head or chest was blown apart.

He needed to move. He needed to move now. But as he saw Mr. Smith's trigger finger tighten, Blair
was paralyzed. The panther started to yowl and he moved in front of the Guide. While Blair was appreciative, he didn't think a spirit animal Mr. Smith couldn't even see was going to stop a bullet.

There was a pounding on the locked door behind them, and Latisha yelled, "Don't you hurt him, you asshole! Leave him the fuck alone."

Suddenly, in counterpart to the young Sentinel's warning, the eagle was there as well, shrieking and dive-bombing Mr. Smith, its talons scratching his face, his hand. Mr. Smith cried out, slashing his arms through the air, fighting against an invisible enemy.

Blair used the reprieve to snap himself out of his paralysis, processing this new information. Mr. Smith might not be able to see the spirit animals but he could certainly feel them. Blair needed to disarm him while the man was so thoroughly distracted. But before he could move, Mr. Smith started shooting wildly at his invisible enemy.

Blair ducked as the bullets started flying. Two of them slammed into and through the door and Blair heard a sharp cry, followed by the sound of something falling to the floor.

Risking injury, Blair quickly moved to the door. "Latisha? Latisha, are you all right?" When there was no answer, Blair yelled at Mr. Smith, "I think you shot her! Give me the keys."

Mr. Smith was in no condition to listen. The eagle was still attacking, even more ferociously than before, the bullets unable to harm it. As Blair watched in stunned disbelief, a fox joined the fray, darting in and out, nipping the man's shins.

Jason slapped the siren on and through an elaborate and painfully jerking eight-point turn managed to get the ambulance turned around on the small country road.

His partner, Marilyn, stared at him. "What are you doing?"

Jason shook his head. "I don't know. I don't know what's wrong with me. I just know we have to go this way."

"Go this way, where?" Marilyn's hand was grasping the dashboard as the ambulance started moving way faster than recommended in the training manual. "Jason, we're supposed to be going off shift, they're going to need the ambulance. You can't just take it for a joyride."

Jason let out a frustrated noise. "I know that. Don't you think I know that? But--" He stopped talking and lowered his head to look out the top of the front windshield. "See that owl up there?"

Marilyn looked, squinting her eyes, but shook her head. "No." Jason slammed his hand on the steering wheel, hard enough to make Marilyn wince. This was not the Jason she knew. She reached out and touched his arm. "Jason, talk to me." While she waited for him to speak, she looked at him.

Jason was a good-looking black man, as solid as they came. He was reliable, honest, loyal, a veritable Clark Kent of color. Marilyn considered him a good friend and felt lucky to be his ambulance partner. But about a week ago, he'd started acting strange. Going for long drives with no apparent purpose, looking at the sky all the time, startling easily, losing his place in conversations. When she realized he still hadn't talked, she tried again. "Jason."

He scratched his short hair for a minute and then sighed. "Marilyn, I don't know what to tell you. But, I need to do this, and I need you to trust me. Maybe I'm going mental, and if so, I'm sorry you have a front row seat, but I think something important's going on."
Marilyn thought about it for a second. "You mean like Close Encounters of a Third Kind important?"

Jason flashed her a delighted smile. "Yeah, like that."

She lived for those smiles--not that way--she wasn't attracted to him in that kind of way. She had a husband at home that she adored. But Jason was a serious man, and when she was able to coax a smile out of him it always felt like a victory of sorts.

She weighed the weirdness factor against her friendship, and the crazy thrill of hope that maybe she could actually see an X-files kind of adventure up close and personal, and she nodded emphatically. "Then, carry on, young Skywalker. Go find your destiny." She looked out the window again. "There's really an owl up there?"

"Yeah. It's been following me around, and I think it wants me to follow it now." The smile slipped away. "But I think something's gone wrong, and we're running out of time."

She punched his arm. "Then move this bucket of bolts. We're got an imperial starship to outrun."

He gave her an incredulous look. "Are you on something?"

Marilyn laughed merrily, knowing suddenly she was about to become part of something marvelous. "Maybe, I don't know. I'm just feeling the need to let my inner geek shine." She looked at him. "Do you mind?"

He actually laughed. "No, I don't mind. You're a good person, Marilyn. Thank you."

The look on his face told her that he hadn't expected to be believed. She pointed an imperious finger out the front window. "Let's move it."

Jason nodded firmly. "We're moving." He pressed the gas pedal harder, and the ambulance shot down the road.

When Jim heard shots ring out, he cursed and moved faster. He needed to put Sam out of the equation immediately, so he could get inside without interference. He heard bullets hit someone, and heard Blair's cry that someone had been shot. While he wasn't happy about anyone getting shot, he was guiltily grateful it wasn't Blair.

He heard a step and stopped all his movement, waiting. Sam stepped to within three feet of him, and Jim was on him with his arm around his throat, grabbing for his gun.

Jim's panther was starting to get in on the action, slinking low, belly to the ground, advancing on Mr. Smith.

Blair wasn't quite sure what to do. He still couldn't quite believe that these animals could make themselves physically real enough to kill if they chose to. He was pretty sure that the animals would respond to him, and if he ordered them to, would stop the attack. Maybe it was because he was the only Guide around while there was a mystical convergence of Sentinel presence and power.

But because he knew they would listen to him, it brought it home fiercely that he also held the responsibility for these Sentinels. He was their Guardian. If he let Mr. Smith continue what he was doing, these Sentinels, including Jim, would continue to be at risk, let alone countless other Sentinels the bastard might be able to round up.
Blair had meant what he said when he'd told Mr. Smith that he was dealing with primal power, with mythic archetypes, and that his disregard for that would get him in the end, but Blair hadn't exactly meant it. At least not quite so literally. Blair winced as the eagle tore a chunk of bloodied hair out of Mr. Smith's head. Or quite so graphically.

He wasn't sure he could just stand there and do nothing, no matter how much he hated the man. Blair felt the division run deep inside of him--the man, who couldn't countenance killing, no matter what the justification, and the Guide, who knew justice must be done, who would protect his Sentinel, all Sentinels, no matter the cost. He wondered how often Jim felt this way. Wondered what would happen when he chose one half, and denied the other.

And just that fast, the decision was made, and Blair was on his feet, moving toward Mr. Smith, heading for his weapon, planning to disarm him. No matter what, he couldn't stand here and let a man be torn to pieces in front of him.

The panther sprang just as Blair got close enough to grab the gun. The force of the large body landing on Mr. Smith forced a terrified grunt out of him and he began shooting again.

The first bullet flew close enough to Blair's head to take off a curl or two; the second one creased his arm. Blair saw his death arriving as the gun aimed at his chest, knowing he wouldn't be able to move away fast enough, when a blur of grey slammed into him, knocking him to the floor.

Jim had expected that the element of surprise would be sufficient but he was wrong. Sam was strong and well-trained, and it had ended up being a fight among equals, a vicious fight that was going to end only when one of them went down. Only Jim's senses, his abilities to translate Sam's small movements into insight about the man's weak points, gave Jim an edge. And when the man left himself open, even if it was only for a second, Jim saw it, and struck. His leg kicked out and his foot connected with the man's jaw so hard, Jim could hear the henchman's spine snap.

Sam went down like a felled tree. He wouldn't be getting up again.

Jim heard bullets start to fly again, and the sound of Blair's grunt of pain shot through him, the smell of his Guide's blood making his own blood run cold. He ran for the building, listening intently for Blair's heartbeat. It was difficult to hear over the blood-curdling cries that were filling the air. Only the fact that Jim could tell it wasn't Blair making those cries kept him sane.

He ran to the front door to find it locked. Yanking out his gun, Jim shot the lock and kicked the door open. He ran down hallways and up stairs, following the sound of Blair's heartbeat, eliminating all the other sounds.

When he arrived at his destination, he came to a complete stop, his eyes having trouble taking in a scene that belonged in Rudyard Kipling's Jungle Book.

Blair was on his stomach, his forehead furrowed in pain and frustration. He was attempting to get up, but the large gray wolf sitting on him was making it an impossible task. In addition to keeping Blair down, the wolf was intermittently growling menacingly at the other man in the tableau.

The man was on his knees and Jim gave the guy credit for staying even that vertical, because most people would already be out for the count or running for their lives. A golden eagle was clawing at his face, and Jim could see that one eye had already been damaged beyond repair. A fox was yipping, zipping in and then away, every time taking a trophy with him, a strip of clothing, a small hunk of flesh.
And--Jim winced--his panther was doing his best to get to the man's throat. It was why the man wasn't even bothering to defend against the other attacks. All his energy was being used to protect his vulnerable neck. Something about the odd way he was moving told Jim that he couldn't see what was attacking him.

Out of the corner of his eye, Jim saw a tiger rounding the corner, and the snake was coming from the other direction. Jim knew they were all heading toward the man, and that he'd be dead in a matter of moments.

Blair finally bucked up enough to unseat the wolf, who let out a yelp and then turned to snarl at Blair. His Guide took in the picture of the man being slowly mutilated by the spirit animals--which answered Jim's question as to whether he could see them--and then Blair let out a command. "Stop. Stop it now."

To Jim's absolute amazement, the animals did stop. They weren't happy about it, but they stopped, snarling, spitting, forked tongue flickering in and out, angry chuffing, all waiting for Blair.

Jim felt a sense of power in the air, something he'd sensed before without knowing what it was, but never this strongly. Using his wolf as a support, Blair pulled himself to his feet.

Blair flashed his wolf a weary smile and then his eyes sought out Jim. There was a mixed look there that Jim had a hard time interpreting. He could tell that Blair was glad to see him, glad he was okay, with a little worry mixed in for Jim's scrapes and bruises, but there was also weariness and fear and anger, and they all bled together until Jim was dizzy with the barrage.

Jim shook his own head to clear it, and then realized that Blair was standing in front of the man on his knees. "You can't win. I told you what might happen and now you know it as well. Give me your gun, and I'll offer you my protection."

Jim suddenly realized that the power was coming from Blair, in waves, literally pouring off of him. And every one of the spirit animals was in thrall to him. Jim felt it, too; felt Blair's allure. He took a step toward his Guide, stopping when he heard the siren. Two sirens.

Simon chomped on his cigar, cursing everything he could think of. This happened to be a very long list, at the top of which were a certain Sentinel and Guide of his acquaintance. Along with the cursing was a gut-churning fear that he wouldn't get there in time to help his friends. That Jim would go nuts again, and this time Blair would really die, and stay dead.

He saw an ambulance up ahead, speeding, lights flashing. "Shit," Simon cursed again. He knew it; something had gone really wrong. As usual. Simon sped up, passing the ambulance, trusting that it would follow him. He didn't see the great-horned owl who lighted to the top of his mars light and held on, after turning its head and blinking at the driver of the ambulance behind him.

Jason saw that blink, and his heart skipped a beat. He pointed toward the cop car. "He's going there, too. We just need to follow him."

Marilyn shrugged her shoulders, holding on tightly to the dashboard. She grinned wildly. "Just use the Force, Luke."

He snorted out a laugh, stunned at how weird his life had become, and followed the cop car.

Blair held out his hand. "Mr. Smith, give me your gun," he repeated. "It's over."
Jim watched as Mr. Smith thought it over. He had to hand it to the guy, he might be the bad guy here, but he had balls. It wasn't everyone who could be attacked by invisible monsters and still look like the situation was under control. Jim retrieved his gun from his back holster, suspecting this was not going to go down well.

The sirens were closer and out of the blue a great-horned owl was flying around frantically. Jim assumed it was his nocturnal visitor from last night. The distraction was all Mr. Smith needed. He had his gun up and pointed at Blair in less than a second. "I don't believe it is, Mr. Sandburg." His finger tightened on the trigger.

Jim shot him, but not in time to stop Mr. Smith from firing a bullet directly at Blair, at point blank range. Jim's heart stopped as he saw Blair fall to the ground. But then his senses started to report in. Blair was still breathing, the bullet had impacted the wall and the only blood he could hear gushing was Mr. Smith's.

He looked at Blair again, only to find that Blair was covered in boa constrictor. As he watched, Blair smiled up at the snake, reaching out to touch her head. "You must be Hector's." The snake's tongue flicked out to taste Blair and Jim could feel the snake's pleasure from where he was standing. Blair smiled even wider. "He's right. You're very beautiful."

This was wrong. Jim knew it was wrong. Wrong on a colossal scale. Every touch Blair made to that snake felt like a betrayal. Like he was watching his spouse in bed with someone else. Apparently his panther felt the same way. He stalked the snake, snarling at him, blood from Mr. Smith still smearing his teeth. The snake hissed back, unwavering from his spot on top of Blair.

Suddenly Blair let out a cry and he pushed at the snake. "Latisha. She's hurt."

The snake complied with his wishes and slithered off. Blair looked at Mr. Smith's body and grimaced. Jim, guessing what Blair needed, crouched and went fishing in the dead man's pockets until he found a set of keys. As he moved to the door, the golden eagle landed on his shoulder, shrieking.

"Ow," Jim complained. "Hush." The sound was like ice picks going through his brain. "That's gonna be too loud for her, too. You should know that."

He figured out which key it was and opened the door. Both the eagle and owl flew in, the owl lighting on the bed looking down at the body on the floor with an unblinking stare. The eagle landed next to her and shrieked again.

Blair was next to Jim, both of them hunkering down, one on each side of her, to see how the young black girl was doing. Jim listened for a pulse. "She's alive. Her pulse is fast but strong, she'll be all right." He sent his gaze over her, finding her injuries. "She's been shot, twice. Once on the leg, once in the arm. She's lucky, they're both pretty superficial." Jim pointed to the chair where he could see signs of impact. "She hit that hard going down, that's why she's out."

Blair looked up at him with a grim smile. "Thanks, Jim. And thanks for finding me."

Jim saw the look of gratitude, but he saw something else, too. A look of wariness, like Blair didn't really trust him.

Jim bit the inside of his lip as he realized why. Why should Blair trust him, given his track record with other Sentinels? "I'm all right, I mean, I'm not, well, whatever that was with Alex."

Something in Blair relaxed, but not entirely. Jim didn't like the distance he felt between them. He
hadn't liked it for weeks now, but he really didn't like it now. Especially with that damn snake hovering outside and the Sentinel that was attached to it.

The sirens, very close now, shut off. Jim heard a door slam open and then Simon's voice. "Jim?"

Jim trotted to the head of the stairwell and yelled down, "Simon, we're up here." He heard other footsteps behind his captain. "Who else is here?"

"Ambulance." Simon, arriving at the top of the stairs, took in the scene. One very dead and partially torn apart body, Blair kneeling over another body in the room directly ahead. "Who are the bad guys?" Simon barked out.

Jim appreciated Simon asking before he started shooting. He pointed at the dead body. "Him and one other outside."

"Anyone I need to worry about?"

Jim shook his head. "Not any more."

Simon nodded. "Sandburg okay?"

"I think so."

Simon gave Jim a sharp look. "You think so?"

Jim shrugged. "He's all right." He pointed at Blair, as if to demonstrate the fact that he was, in fact, all right. "He got winged by a bullet, and--"

The rest of his sentence was cut off by the arrival of two others. One was a black man, Jim guessed his age to be about 26, and an older woman, closer to Jim's age, carrying boxes of gear. The man was on the edge of panic. "Where is it? I lost it."

Jim frowned, wondering what the hell the guy was talking about. "Where's what?"

"That damn owl. I've been following the stupid--" He stopped when he saw Jim's finger pointing to the room in front of him. And there it was, the owl, sitting on a bed. And on the floor--"Jesus."

The man pushed his way into the room, the woman behind him. "What happened?"

Blair looked up at the man. "She was shot. Can you help her?" He moved out of the way, shifting to the edge of the bed. Jim stood in the doorway, next to Simon.

Jim could feel the currents of power in the air and not all of them were coming from Blair. They were rippling all around him, like waves and undertow.

The black man reached out to start his assessment and the second he touched her, Jim could feel the power in the air start to grow. The owl let out a resounding hoot, and the eagle shot into the air, zooming out in the hall where Jim was standing. He circled the hallway, shrieking.

The young black girl opened her eyes and she stared at the man hovering over her. Jim half expected her to let out a scream, but, instead, she smiled. He smiled back. The eagle flew straight back toward the room. At the last second, the owl took flight as well, and they flew into each other in a flash of blinding light.

The memory of what it had felt like when Blair's wolf and his panther had leapt into each other that same way crashed into Jim, and it took all the strength out of his body. He fell to the floor, landing
on his butt, hard. Somehow, he'd completely forgotten what it had felt like. For that blinding second, he and Blair had been one. He'd found home, he'd found whatever it was he'd been searching his whole goddamn life for.

He'd watched Blair puke out the fountain water, stunned by what he was feeling, and by the fact that Blair was alive. Then the paramedics had come and taken his Guide away, and after Simon had helped him up, and he'd been questioned about Alex, and started feeling consumed by her again, most of it had drifted away.

The memory of it had taunted him as he'd stood by Blair's bed, and it had flared for a second when Blair had teased him about the mysterious and invited him to join him, but Jim had a job to do, so he'd shoved it down deep, and left Blair in that hospital bed and gone to fucking rut after Alex. Jim felt a gaping chasm inside himself as he realized what he'd thrown away. It made him want to weep.

"Jim, you okay?"

Jim looked up to see Simon reaching down with a hand to help him up.

Dazed, Jim accepted the help hanging onto the doorjamb for added support. He looked down at the floor where the young Sentinel and her new Guide were busy smiling at each other.

Jim knew that's what they were. Sentinel and Guide, the way he and Blair were, or were supposed to be, but somehow weren't. The eagle and owl both sat on the bed, side-by-side, staring at their respective Sentinel and Guide, expectant looks on their faces.

Then the girl looked away and up at her eagle, and then up at Blair. "Is he what you were talking about?" She pointed at Jason.

Blair nodded, smiling, sniffing. "Yeah. I think so."

She smiled back and then touched his arm where he'd been winged. "You all right?"

Blair nodded again. "I'm fine."

She frowned and then looked back at her Guide. "Somethin's supposed to happen, but I don't know what. Do you?"

The black man shook his head. "No, I just knew I had to get here. But you're right, whatever it is I'm here for, it's not done." He glanced up at Blair. "Do you know what's going on?"

Blair pursed his lips and for a moment. "No, but I know someone who does." He stood. "You keep working on Latisha and I'll go get Hector."

Jim's hackles rose. He knew Hector was the Sentinel who belonged to the snake.

The man smiled at the girl. "Latisha?"

She nodded.

"I'm Jason."

Blair headed for the doorway, working his way around the two paramedics and then squeezed by Jim and Simon, picking the keys out of his hand before Jim could stop him.

"I'll go with you, Chief," Jim told his Guide, having no intention of letting him be alone with this Hector guy.
Blair shrugged. "Whatever, but I gotta go." He started jogging down the hall.

Jim made to go after him but he was brought up short by a strong hand around his bicep. "Want to tell me what's going on, Jim?"

Jim blew out a breath, reminding himself that Blair would be hurrying back as well. It's not like the two of them would have a lot of time to do whatever Jim's imagination could picture them doing. He felt something slither over his foot and, glancing down, saw the snake staring up at him with a supercilious expression on its face that made Jim want to drop kick it to Nevada. He glared down at it. "Never in a million years. Get your own fucking Guide."

If snakes could laugh, this snake would be laughing at him.

"Ellison, who the fuck are you talking to?"

Jim pulled himself together. "Captain. Simon. Shit." He didn't know where to begin. Most of all because he didn't know anything, except that Blair was okay, there were other Sentinels here, the bad guys were dead, and Jim might have blown the most important thing in his entire life without even knowing it.

"Not a good beginning. Want to try that again?"

Jim scraped his fingers through his hair that he knew was thinning even more due to the events of the last few days. "I think we need to wait for Blair to get all the answers."

Simon bounced on his toes, the way he did when he wasn't particularly pleased. "Did you call for the ambulance?"

"No."

"Hmph." Simon sighed and looked down at the dead body. "Do I even want to know what killed this guy?"

"I did, sir, when I shot him."

"And did you decide to have some of him for lunch after that?"

Jim shot Simon a look, only to see Simon shooting a much more lethal one back at him. "Listen, maybe you should just go, I'll clean up this mess and be back as soon as I can."

He heard footsteps and saw Blair and a large Hispanic man moving towards them. As they approached, Hector's eyes met his and then flashed to Blair. A look of condescending pity crossed the Hispanic man's eyes, and it made Jim want to jam the man's snake down his throat.

Hector entered the room with Blair at his side. When Hector saw what was going on, he smiled. Speaking to Jason and Latisha, he asked, "You both want this?"

Jason shrugged as he nodded, currently engrossed in cleaning the gash in Latisha's lower thigh; he'd cut the sweats to reveal the wound. "I don't even know what this is, but I know I need it."

Latisha agreed, "Me, too." She glanced up at Blair. "He told me someone would come for me."

Hector smiled up at Blair, his face beaming. "Blair is a very wise Guide; you would do well to believe what he says." He flashed another look at Jim, as if to rub it in Jim's face that he was a first-class idiot.
Jim didn't need any help in feeling that way at this particular point but he wasn't about to admit it. He glowered back.

Hector put his attention back to the scene in front of him. The woman working on Latisha's arm looked up. "I'm Marilyn, by the way."

Latisha, Blair and Hector all greeted her. Then Hector said, "You need to step away for a moment, Marilyn."

She gave him an odd look, but obeyed.

Then Hector crouched down and touched Jason's wrist. "You must be willing to share blood. Are you?"

Jason stared down at his gloved hand, which was smeared with Latisha's blood. "Is it safe?"

"Does it matter?" Hector countered back, kindly.

The black man looked at his glove again and shook his head. "No." He peeled the glove off his hand. "What do I need to do?"

"Do you have something sharp?"

Jason reached into his first aid kit and pulled out a plastic-wrapped scalpel. He opened it up and offered it to Hector.

He didn't take it. "When I tell you to, you will need to cut your hand. Not deeply, just enough to bleed." He looked down at Latisha. "I know you are already hurt, but this cut must be intentional, with this ritual in mind. When I tell you, will you give Jason your hand to cut?"

She hesitated only for an instant before nodding.

"Jason, you must tell Latisha that you choose her to be your Sentinel, and Latisha, once he offers the invitation, it will up to you to accept or not."

Hector smiled at him. "You will, once you have said the words. There is a sort of magic in this bonding. Trust me, and if you cannot trust me, then trust Blair." He looked at Blair, lifting a hand to tuck a lock of hair behind Blair's ear.

The look on Jim's face must have alerted Simon that killing was on his mind, because he found himself being hauled back several feet by his captain.

Jason drew in a deep breath. "Latisha, I choose you for my Sentinel."

Latisha's eyes filled with tears. "Okay," she choked out. "Good," she added, a tear rolling down her cheek.

"Now," Hector prompted, "make a small cut on each of your hands."

Jason made a cut on his hand, and then, wincing, made one on Latisha's hand as well.

"Now clasp hands, and say these words: I pledge my life to thee, your enemy is my enemy, your friend, my friend." He grinned, "Then we'll all step back and let the fireworks begin."
Simon interrupted. "What does that mean exactly?" he asked in a threatening tone. He barked at Latisha, "How old are you?"

"Seventeen," she spat back. "Old enough."

"Not from where I'm standing."

Blair moved to Simon's side. "Simon, this isn't about sex, or anything that's going to put her in harm's way. I promise. I know you don't like to talk about this stuff but she's a Sentinel and she needs a Guide. And this is how they commit to each other."

"Did you and Jim go through this shit?" he challenged.

Blair shot a sad look at Jim and shook his head. "No."

"Then why do they have to do it? You two worked all right together without any of this voodoo crap."

Blair let out a sad laugh. "Did we, Simon? I'm not so sure."

Hector looked at Simon. "They will be fine. And this is a blessing for us to watch this ritual. Once you see it, you will understand." He gestured to Jason and Latisha that they should touch their hands together.

Latisha held out her hand, and Jason met her halfway. They both intoned the words as instructed and a flash of light burst through their fingers, bouncing around the room, touching everyone like a ray of sunshine, before slowly settling like pixie dust on Jason and Latisha.

They stared at each other and then Jason, with a voice cracking with emotion, said, "Oh, baby, I'm so sorry. I won't ever let anything bad happen to you ever again, I promise you."

Latisha burst into tears and fell into his arms, sobbing her heart out against his chest.

They all stood there in silence, watching the pair, feeling the power of the moment that had just passed. Jim glanced at Blair, saw the stark yearning on his face as he stared at Jason and Latisha. He also saw Hector reach for Blair's hand. "Do you see how it is, Blair? Do you see why I would choose to bond with a Guide? Why I would choose not to live my life alone?"

Blair looked up at the Hispanic man, pointedly not looking at Jim, and nodded, whispering, "Yes."

Jim could see it, too. See what he'd said no to that day. He could feel it between Jason and Latisha, almost wrapping the two of them up in a cocoon of belonging. Neither of them would ever be lonely again.

Suddenly Blair stood up. "There are other Sentinels here we need to set free."

Simon cursed. "Is Alex one of them?"

Blair shook his head. "No, she's dead." He pointed out into the hallway. "He had her killed."

Pushing his way through the crowded doorway, he held the keys tightly. "He would have killed them all, sooner or later. He didn't see them as anything of value except what they could do for him."

"Them?"

Blair looked up at Simon, his eyes bright. "Sentinels. The best this world has to offer, and he treated
them like animals."

Simon looked down at one of the biggest enigmas his life had presented to him, and fought back an overwhelming need to hug the young man and hold him tightly. "I guess he made a mistake if he thought you'd help him do that."

Blair's lips tightened and he sniffed. "Yeah, I guess." He blew out a shaky breath. "I better go get the other two."

Hector spoke up. "I will go with you."

Jim glared at him and put a very territorial hand on Blair's shoulder. "I'll go with him."

Blair moved out from under Jim's hand. "Hey, Simon, you wanna go with me?"

"Is it safe to leave these two alone with each other?" Simon murmured out of the side of his mouth.

Blair just looked up at Simon and Simon almost reared back at the look in Sandburg's eyes. They said that it didn't matter, that nothing really mattered; they said that Blair was hurting deep inside where maybe nothing could ever reach.

Simon pulled Blair to his side and slung an arm around his shoulder, feeling as protective of Sandburg as he was of Daryl. "Yeah, Sandburg, I'll go with you." Simon glared at Hector and Jim, hoping he was telling them to get their shit together, and if either of them hurt Blair he was putting a bullet through their hearts and asking questions later. He pointed at the dead body. "Why don't you do something with him." Then he looked down at Blair. "Which way?"

Blair pointed down the hall to the left. "Let's get Amelia first." As they walked down the hall, he looked up at Simon. "Jesus, Simon, she's only eleven years old." His voice cracked again and Simon had to rub his eyes under his glasses as he continued to accompany Blair down the hall.

As Marilyn worked around Jason and Latisha, continuing to get her cleaned up and all her wounds patched, Hector stood in front of Jim. Silently, they each grabbed a side of Mr. Smith, and carried him outside, leaving him next to Sam. As they walked back in, Hector asked, "Now do you understand what you've lost?"

"I haven't lost anything," Jim said, angrily.

"He chose you, and you refused him. Why would you do that? Blair is-- he is beautiful, the face of an angel and a soul to match. There isn't a Sentinel on earth who wouldn't accept him. Except you. You do not deserve him."

"And you do?" Jim challenged, furious. "Is that what this is about? You taking my Guide from me?" He'd tear Hector apart first. As they reentered the building, he let the door slam shut behind them.

"He is not your Guide. He is a Guide who longs for a lifemate, who longs for his Sentinel. It was what he was made for. Just as I was, and just as you should be." Hector studied him in a way that made Jim ashamed. "What has happened to you to make you refuse an offer by one such as Blair? Was this Alex Blair told me about that enticing, that she could pull you away from your destiny?"

Jim couldn't stop a gasp from escaping, feeling a keen sense of betrayal that Blair had told Hector about Alex. He felt walls closing in on him.

Hector put a hand on his shoulder. "Do not blame him. He was so sad and so frightened for all of us.
And--," Hector drew a long breath, "--and he was missing you. He asked me what it was like to be with other Sentinels and when I told him that I had been with Sentinels my whole life, without any problem, he was confused and hurting."

It suddenly occurred to Jim that he was with a Sentinel, two of them, actually four, if you counted the two he hadn't met yet, and he was fine. Pissed as shit, and ready to take this trespasser on, but he wasn't crazy like he'd been with Alex. Jim put his hands up as if to ward off the devil and took a step back, a wave of guilt washing over him.

The words tumbled out of his mouth. "I don't know what happened. I couldn't stop myself, I--it was like nothing else I'd ever--I didn't want--fuck, she'd killed him--I hated her, I don't know what happened to me, I hated her, I wanted to kill her for what she'd done to him and instead--." Jim fell to his knees, almost retching, tasting her in his mouth, feeling his arms around her, remembering how he barely pulled the gun down in time to keep her from killing Blair for a second time. "Oh, God." He spit out the taste of her, sickened.

Jim could feel Hector staring at him, but he just couldn't find it in himself to care. All he could see was the look on Blair's face, in the hospital, on the beach, when they got home from Mexico, over the last weeks, and then in that room when Latisha and Jason bonded. He let out a groan and curled up in a ball on the floor. Through his misery, he heard Hector walk away.

Simon's hand was resting on Blair's shoulder as he continued to walk down the hall. "Sandburg, can you tell me what's going on?"

Blair looked up at him. "Are you sure you want to know? Because if you don't, I totally understand, and if that's the case, then maybe I shouldn't tell you too much, you know?"

Simon stopped and stared down at Sandburg, thinking that maybe it was time that he did understand, that he stop trying to hide under rocks, and maybe, possibly, try to be of some assistance. "I do want to understand, and I'm sorry I've been such a jerk about it all."

Blair's eyes widened. "You haven't been a jerk, Simon. I don't know too many other captains who'd put up with the stuff you've had to deal with and not kick me out long ago. You've been great."

Simon was grateful for Blair's words, even knowing he'd been anything but great. "Yeah, well, I want to really understand, so tell me what you can."

Blair nodded. "Close your eyes."

With a certain amount of trepidation, Simon obeyed. He felt a slight pressure against his closed eyelids and felt a surge of something rush over him, like opening up an oven door and feeling the waves of heat flow out.

"Okay, you can open your eyes now."

Simon did, and when he looked at Blair, he saw that next to him stood a wolf, and down at Simon's feet was a small red fox. Simon blew out a breath, thinking to himself that he really should be careful what he asked for. He stared at Blair. "How did you do that?"

Blair shrugged. "I don't know. I mean, I do know, now, but I don't think I could have done it before. I think that having a gathering of Sentinels creates a, well, a pool of power, of knowledge, that for some reason I can tap into. It's kind of cool." He grinned at Simon, and Simon was glad to see that some of the shadows in Blair's eyes were easing.
Blair put his hand on his wolf. "This is my spirit guide." He pointed at the fox. "That little one there belongs to Amelia." He started walking down the hall to the room at the end. "There isn't time to tell you everything now, Simon, but what you need to understand, what I kept trying to tell Mr. Smith, what I've tried, over and over again, to tell Jim, is that being a Sentinel isn't just about having enhanced senses."

He arrived at the door and, after unlocking it, opened it up. "Amelia?"

"Blair?" A small girl raced to him and wrapped her arms around him.

Blair crouched down so he was closer to her height. "Hey, you all right?"

She nodded, although her eyes were full of tears. "I heard stuff, and he told me you were hurt." She pointed at her fox to make sure Blair understood she meant her spirit guide. "I told him to go help you."

Blair gave her a hug. "Thanks, the help came in handy. You should have seen him."

She beamed at her fox and then touched Blair's arm. "You're bleeding."

"Just a little." He turned to include Simon. "Amelia, I want you to meet Simon, he's a good friend of mine."

Simon crouched as well. "Hello there, Amelia."

She smiled shyly at him, and Simon cursed the dead man lying on the floor, deciding that being eaten to death was too easy a death for him. He didn't know what the man had wanted to do with this little girl, but it made Simon's blood boil.

Blair brought back Simon's attention from his silent reverie of mayhem. "I'm pretty sure that Amelia's sister is her Guide, so we need to find her."

"Amelia, we'll take you home with us, and Simon can help us do that."

"Where are her parents?" Simon asked out of the corner of his mouth, to Blair.

Blair whispered back, as he winked at Amelia, "Whispering won't help, because Amelia is a Sentinel."

Simon rolled his eyes, embarrassed that he'd forgotten. He always forgot. It was much easier forgetting. Blair went to pick her up and Simon watched him grimace as he tried to support her with his wounded arm. Simon stole her from Blair with a smile. "How about I carry you so Blair can rest his arm?" he asked Amelia.

She nodded and laid her head down on Simon's shoulder. Somehow, however, he knew that her eyes never left Blair. Simon didn't blame her. For some reason, he could hardly take his eyes off the kid either. Whatever he'd done to Simon's eyes, it had removed a lot of blinders. Even though he wasn't a Sentinel, Simon could see that Blair was almost vibrating with power, and it was a bit intoxicating. Not in a challenging-Simon's-lifetime-of-heterosexuality-kind of way, but it was as if he could see straight into Blair's heart and soul, and Simon found it humbling.

Simon suspected that if he were suddenly transported to the jungle, to a place where Sentinels and Guides were a natural part of life, and a videotape was played of him doing his usual yelling at Sandburg and telling him to shut up and shoving him out of his office, that Simon would end up with a hundred arrows in him. He wasn't sure they wouldn't be well deserved. At least he wouldn't be alone; Jim would have two hundred arrows sticking out of him.
Simon realized they were heading back to where the rest of the gang was. "Don't you want to go get the last one?"

Something guarded crossed Blair's face. "I don't want Amelia there when we go get him."

Simon let it go, not wanting to discuss whatever was going on in front of the little girl, but he could guess that this last Sentinel was a piece of work. Images of Alex crossed his mind and he winced.

As they rounded the last corner, Simon saw Jim curled up on the floor.

Blair let out a cry and ran to him. "Jim, what happened?" He got down on his knees, touching his friend. "Jim?"

Jim unfolded and wrapped himself around Blair.

Blair shot a mystified and worried look up at Simon, but his hands closed around Jim's back, patting him softly. "Jim, are you hurt? Are you sick?"

Jim shook his head and just pressed even closer to Blair. Blair ran his hand down Jim's hair, wrapping his fingers around the nape of his neck, pushing Jim's head down onto his shoulder. "Just take it easy, I'm here."

Simon watched them for a few moments, then decided whatever was going on with Jim wasn't life threatening. He saw a panther lounging close by, wondered who he belonged to. By elimination, he guessed it was Jim's. When the wolf trotted by and practically sat down on the panther, a shit-eating grin on its face, Simon figured for sure the panther was Jim's. He wasn't sure who the snake belonged to, but he gave it a wide berth.

Biting back an hysterical laugh, he poked his head into Latisha's room, only to find her fast asleep, her head resting on Jason's thigh, Marilyn sitting by both of them. "Hey, everyone okay in here?"

Marilyn nodded, although she looked worried. "I'm wondering if you can help us out."

Simon nodded wearily. "I'll try."

"Jason here sort of, well, we were supposed to have the ambulance back a while ago, and I was wondering if you could call his boss and tell him some story about why we're here, and how you needed our help. I really don't want to lose my job, and neither does Jason."

Simon could see his future rolling out in front of him as lead obfuscator for a legion of Sentinels. Thinking of Blair he let out a laugh. Not lead obfuscator, that was Blair's job. His second in command, then. "Sure. Who do I need to call?" He balanced Amelia on one hip as he reached for his phone. As long as he was making phone calls, he might as well start the search for Amelia's sister, as well.

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Blair held onto Jim, feeling the tremors shaking his friend's body, wishing he knew what was going on. "Jim, talk to me, man. I can't help if I don't know what's happening to you. Is this about your senses?"

Jim let out a shuddering breath and pulled back a little, so he could see Blair's face. "I want to be your Sentinel."

Blair's heart started to race. "You are my Sentinel."
Jim shook his head. "No, I'm not. Not the way I'm supposed to be. Like them." His head jerked in the direction of Latisha's room.

For some reason, fear swept through Blair. Here, finally, was his heart's desire being offered to him on a silver platter, and he was terrified. Terrified that he couldn't trust Jim, that Jim would end up betraying him again. Blair didn't think he would survive another betrayal if they became closer, if they became inextricably linked to one another.

Suddenly the space between them felt like a safety net instead of the instrument of torture it had seemed to Blair for the last weeks.

"Blair, please."

Blair heard the pleading in Jim's voice, was sure his fear was plastered all over his face for Jim to see, let alone the smell of his sweat and the racing of his heart. "Jim, maybe we should wait a while, you know, let everything get back to normal."

Jim's eyes narrowed and his jaw tightened. "Why? Why do we need to wait?" He glanced at the snake. "Is it because of Hector? Do you want him as your Sentinel?"

Blair shut his eyes, feeling swamped with frustration at Jim's usual response to feeling threatened. He always struck out, and the person he usually struck out at was Blair. He didn't think he had the energy to talk Jim down from this. Especially as Blair had wondered what it might be like with Hector.

Blair loved Jim in every way a person could love someone, but he wasn't sure Jim was good for him. And even though Blair wouldn't have believed it possible, maybe Jim wasn't the Sentinel for him. "I need some time before I can go there with you."

"Why?" Jim asked desperately. "You were willing to go there with me before. Have things changed that much?"

Blair raised incredulous eyes to Jim, wondering how he could even ask that. Jim closed his eyes and hung his head down. "God, Blair, I'm sorry. You don't know how sorry I am. Please, you have to believe me."

Blair wanted to, he wanted it desperately. He might have been able to before, but now that he knew Jim could be with other Sentinels, Blair didn't know what to believe. "What was it, Jim? If it wasn't that she was a Sentinel, why did you act that way? How can I believe that you won't do it again?"

"I don't know." Jim scrubbed his face with his hands. "Jesus, I don't know. Maybe you can't." He pulled his legs up tight to his body and dropped his head to his knees. "Jesus, I fuck everything up."

Blair's eyes stung with tears, and his throat was so tight it was hard to breathe. "No, you don't." He touched Jim's shoulder, feeling his friend's desolation as keenly as if it were his own. "Jim, you don't."

Jim lifted his head, his weary eyes red-rimmed. "Tell me what I haven't fucked up, Chief. Tell me what I've done right in my life."

Blair didn't know what to do with this version of Jim. It didn't help that he didn't have a whole lot of answers for his friend. A fucked-up family, fucked-up marriage, fucked-up love life, fucked-up military career, fucked-up friendships. "Jim, you're important to me."
Jim's eyes blazed into his. "Then be my Guide."

"That is not your choice, Sentinel," Hector chastised him, interrupting their conversation.

Blair recoiled from the look Jim shot Hector. Glancing up at Hector didn't exactly reassure him. Hector wasn't looking any friendlier. "Hector, what's going on?" Blair could guess that some of the tension was the fact that both of them wanted him as a Guide, but there was something else in Hector's face. "What is it?"

Hector crouched down next to him and caressed his face.

Jim shot out a hand and slapped Hector's hand away.

Blair put up a hand to keep Jim back. "Stop it." He meant it. And by the look in Jim's face, he could see that Jim understand it for the command it was. He turned back to Hector, noticing he had a file in his hand. "What is that?"

Hector touched his face again, and Blair let him, knowing that a part of him was glad that it bothered Jim, even while the better part of him knew he was being mean and childish. The back of Hector's fingers lingered on his cheek. "You are so beautiful."

Blair could feel himself redden. "Hector." He put a warning in his voice.

Hector let out a sigh and dropped his hand. "You know that I would accept your offer if you would choose me as your Sentinel?"

Blair nodded, putting up a hand again to keep Jim back and silent.

"But, I also know that your heart lies elsewhere. And while I believe I could make you forget, in time--" Jim's panther let out a resounding snarl. Blair bit back a smile as his wolf cuffed it.

When Hector stayed silent, Blair put his hand on his arm. "Hector, what are you saying?"

Hector handed him the file. "I do not wish for you to choose me because of a false belief that you have been betrayed." He touched Blair's face again, his eyes troubled. "I believe that once you read this, you will choose another, and that causes me much sorrow."

Blair grabbed his hand, holding tightly. "I don't understand."

"I know." Hector tapped the file. "Read it, and then choose your Sentinel." He stood and stared down at Jim. "It is the Guide's choice and I respect that. I respect Blair. But I will be watching, and if you harm him, there will be a price to pay."

Hector turned and headed to Latisha's room.

Blair listened to Hector's greetings to Latisha and Amelia, and he glanced at Jim. Jim was staring at the file, at the name on the file. Alex Barnes. Blair closed his eyes, hugging the file to his chest, not sure he wanted to open it. His eyes lit on Hector for a moment, remembering how calm he'd felt in the man's presence, what it would be like to be a Guide for someone who completely accepted his destiny as a Sentinel. Someone who could teach Blair so much.

Then he glanced at Jim. And as much as he longed for the peace Hector offered, Blair knew there was no contest. His soul cried out for Jim. It always had. He opened the file, letting Jim read it over his shoulder.
The first thing they both saw was a picture of Alex and all the aliases she'd operated under. Alex Barnes, Alicia Bannister, Anne Bailey, Arlene Backston. Jim had no idea why she'd been so hooked on the initials A.B.

A part of Jim's brain started coming up with possible explanations for the choice of initials, even as he began to read the pages over Blair's shoulder.

Absolute Bitch, maybe.

There were transcripts of interviews. Interviews of men that she'd somehow convinced to do her dirty work—to help her with crimes, to let her out of jail, to set her free without an arrest. Men who had no idea why they'd done what they'd done. Why they'd felt so compelled to protect her, to sleep with her, to do anything she asked.

Arrogant Babbler.

Men who had woken up out of a trance-like state to find themselves trying to futilely withdraw money from empty bank accounts, being arrested for aiding and abetting a criminal, or being divorced by angry and betrayed wives. Men who had never done an illegal or immoral thing in their lives.

Aggravating Backstabber.

She'd done it here, as well. In between her time at the California Women's Prison in Corona, where her senses had come on line, and when she'd gone to Cascade, she'd been here, taken by Mr. Smith for her Sentinel abilities. She'd been here a week when she'd grown tired of the accommodations and convinced a now ex--and probably dead--employee to help her escape.

Asinine Bimbo.

She'd tried to do it again when she'd woken up from her coma, but Mr. Smith had left a system of checks and balances in place this time, and when a guard started acting oddly, she'd been killed. End of story.

All Bad.

There were notes on Jim, how he'd been chosen by Alex to be her savior. Mr. Smith noted that Jim had responded oddly at first. He'd seemed to have some ability to resist, even if it did lend itself to some very unusual behavior. There was a picture in the file of Jim's completely empty loft apartment. His conclusions were that perhaps Jim's Sentinel abilities had interfered with Alex's to a certain extent, even if eventually she'd been largely successful in her attempts to sway him.

Aberrant Beauty.

The file ended with a lengthy summary written by Mr. Smith. Apparently, Alex had a gift. Mr. Smith hadn't been sure if it had been related to her being a Sentinel or not, but whatever the case, Alex could twist minds. Only one at a time, so she tried to pick her victims well. And when last in Cascade, she'd chosen Jim.

To Jim, the words read like an absolution. It hadn't been him. It had been Alex all along. He was humiliated he'd been used that way, but much more than that, was the relieving realization that he hadn't betrayed Blair, not on purpose. She'd gotten in his head and fucked with his mind.

He suddenly found himself with an armful of Blair. "God, Jim, I'm sorry."
Jim let the force of Blair's hug drop them to the ground, delighted to have Blair's body resting on his. "Nothing to apologize for, Chief." He meant it, sincerely. He'd done nothing to help Blair come to terms with what had happened, to help them get through it. Jim had been so confused by his actions that all he'd wanted to do was to forget it.

"I should have trusted you."

Jim couldn't help it. He lifted his head and kissed Blair right on the lips and grinned at him. It felt like the weight of the world had been lifted off his shoulders. "And when was that? When I almost shot you with my gun, or kicked you out of the loft, or left you alone so Alex could kill you, or when you chose me to be your Sentinel and I refused you? Or maybe it was when I kissed her, and almost let her kill you again. Or when I abandoned you in the middle of the fucking jungle and went rutting after her. Not a whole lot of room for trust there."

"I should have known something was wrong."

Jim hugged Blair tightly. "You did. You came up with every excuse in the book for me. I don't deserve how hard you worked to find reasons for the shit I put you through." Seeing as Blair hadn't stopped him before, Jim kissed him again, this time a little more thoroughly.

When Blair let out a moan and opened his mouth, Jim exulted as he pushed his tongue inside, delightfully breathless as Blair wiggled against him.

"Jesus, you two, get a room or something."

Jim pulled back and turned his head to find Simon staring down at them. He grinned up at his boss. "Hey, Simon."

Simon let out a disgusted noise and shook his head. "Sandburg, don't we have another Sentinel to get free?"

Blair's eyes opened wide and he scrambled to sit up, accidentally touching Jim in all sorts of suggestive places as he did so. Jim couldn't stop grinning. As Blair stood, he reached down to help Jim up. Once Jim got a hold of Blair's hand, he hung on to it, handing the file to Simon.

As Simon started to read the file, Jim saw Hector standing against the wall, looking very dejected. Jim squeezed Blair's hand and let it go, walking over to the other Sentinel. "I owe you."

"He has chosen you, then?" There was a faint trace of hope in his voice, as if Blair might yet come to his senses.

Jim gave him as kind a look as he could. "He hasn't spoken the words, but he will. You knew it when you gave him the file, and I owe you for that."

"If you feel that you owe me something, then pay me back by treating him well."

"I will, but this is a bigger debt than that. I will help you find your Guide."

Hope flared in Hector's eyes. "How will you do that?"

"I don't know, but I will. I swear it to you. As one Sentinel to another." Jim hadn't even bonded with Blair, but he already knew the fulfillment waiting for him was something no Sentinel should be without.

Hector gave him a serious look, and then he smiled, showing Jim the same brilliance he'd shown
Blair. "I will hold you to that, Sentinel." He pulled Jim in for a quick hug and then pushed him back, his hands on Jim's shoulders. "Now, go bond with your Guide, and then we must attend to our last Sentinel. I do not believe an unbonded Guide will be safe around him. He is very troubled."

Jim had wanted to wait until he and Blair were alone to do the ritual, but he found himself trusting Hector. He gestured for Blair to join him and, in response, Blair and Simon both walked over. "Hector says the last Sentinel is bad news."

The look on Blair's face gave too much away and Jim growled, "What did he do to you?"

Blair put his hand on Jim's chest. "Chill, big guy. He scared the crap out of me, that's all." He pointed over his shoulder. "My wolf was with me, and so was that big guy, Sam. There wasn't much he could, you know, actually do."

Hector was no help at all. "You are still frightened of him."

Jim moved closer to him, hearing Blair's heart race, smelling the tang of fear. "You're right. I am. But seeing as I'm surrounded by all the big bad Sentinels, I'll be nice and safe. So, let's go. The kid's been locked up for months, it's no wonder he's crazy."

Hector shook his head. "It's not safe for you."

Blair blew out a long breath and put his hands up in surrender. "Fine, then I'll wait here."

"His instincts will drive him, Blair. He will come looking for you."

Blair's fear factor went up several notches; it was making Jim crazy. "What did he say to you?" Jim demanded. "Listen, I don't really want to talk about it. We can't keep him locked up, so what's the solution?"

"You must bond." Hector instructed. Blair's jaw dropped. "What?"

"If he is already troubled, an unbonded Guide will only make him worse. You will not be safe as long as you are unbonded."

"You're kidding me, right?" Blair stared at Hector and then at Jim. "Right?"

Jim felt his heart clench. "Don't you want to bond with me?"

Blair laced his fingers through Jim's. "Of course I do, but I was sort of, you know, hoping, that we might, you know, do this later."

Jim felt something large shove at his legs and he almost stumbled into Blair's arms. He staggered again when he heard his panther's voice in his head. Or not his voice, necessarily, but a very clear thought. Jim barked out a laugh. "He's telling me that he and the wolf already did their part a long time ago, and would we please do ours? They're tired of waiting." He grinned down at Blair.

Blair pursed his lips, ran a hand through his hair. Jim waited for his answer, even as he noticed that they had drawn quite a crowd. Latisha and Jason were there, Marilyn was holding Amelia who was looking on in interest. Simon was standing there with his hands on his hips, as if he were as impatient as his panther. Hector grinned. "In my village,
when a Guide chooses a Sentinel, the bonding is done before the tribe so all may rejoice."

Blair took them all in with a look, looking last at Jim. Jim held his breath. Finally, Blair said, his voice a little wobbly, "Jim, would you be my Sentinel?"

Jim couldn't stop the grin splitting his face as he nodded. "Oh, yeah." He could still remember the day he'd proposed to Carolyn, and it felt like a gray rainy day compared to this. "You better believe it."

Jason handed him a fresh scalpel. "Here."

Jim took it, his eyes meeting Jason's, his appetite for his Guide only growing from the contented look in Jason's eyes."

"Do you remember the words?" Hector asked.

Jim nodded. Meaning it more than anything he'd ever said, he vowed, "I pledge my life to thee, your enemy is my enemy, your friend, my friend."

Blair swallowed and cleared his throat, saying in return, "I pledge my life to thee, your enemy is my enemy, your friend, my friend."

He held up his hand and let Jim cut him, then Jim cut his own hand. With a sense that this was the point to which his entire life had been driving him, Jim clasped Blair's hand. The light that burst from their hands was almost blinding; it filled the room and shot down the halls, bouncing off the walls and ricocheting back in a kaleidoscope of colors.

Jim felt Blair seep into him, into every dark cranny in his soul, all the places he kept hidden, all the parts of himself that sickened and shamed him. His fear of rejection was slowly replaced by Blair's love and acceptance. All his shadows were replaced by joy, his hiding places flooded with light. He was known, absolutely and completely, and he was still loved.

Jim hurried to return the favor, sweeping through Blair's shadows, the panic attacks, the abandonment, and he picked up all the pieces and held them in his heart like a bouquet of the most wondrous flowers imaginable. The past was swept clean for both of them. From this day forward they'd be walking together.

Jim opened his eyes, felt the tears fall, and couldn't have cared less. He had nothing to hide, least of all his feelings for his Guide.

Blair was staring at him. "Oh, my God." He reached up to touch Jim's face as if he couldn't even believe he was real. "Oh, my God. That was--oh, my God."

Jim let out a shaky laugh. "Ditto, Chief." He looked around briefly and saw that there wasn't a dry eye in the place, even Simon's eyes were bright. The light from their hand clasping was only just now settling.

Hector's eyes were very wide. "I have never seen such a bonding." He grinned at Blair. "This will become one of those songs I was telling you about."

Blair grinned back, and then buried his face against Jim's chest.

Jim could relate. While he understood the importance of bonding in front of the tribe so they could see the commitment for what it was, all Jim wanted to do was get Blair alone so they could revel in this thing that had happened to them.
Simon's phone rang. "Banks." He listened for a few seconds and then smiled at Amelia. "They found your sister."

Amelia looked up at him, excited by the news. She was jumping up and down. "Where is she? Is she coming?"

"She's on her way to Cascade. We'll meet her there."

Hector pushed away from the wall. "Then Jim and I better go get John."

Jim nodded.

Blair looked affronted. "Wait a minute. Why just you two?"

"He may still react to you," Hector explained. "He has scented you now, and I think it will be easier for Jim and me to speak to him if you are not there."

Blair nodded reluctantly, even though a part of him was just as glad he wouldn't be talking to John yet. The guy had totally creeped him out.

Jim could feel Blair's anxiety and he narrowed his eyes at his Guide, searching his mind for more information, but all he could retrieve was his Guide's twin feelings of fear and relief, and a brief image of John. Instinctively, Jim knew he and Blair would need more time together to learn how to effectively read each other. "You stay here with Simon."

Blair nodded. "Be careful, Jim."

Not caring that he had an audience, Jim kissed Blair briefly on the lips and retrieved the keys. Then, with a nod toward Hector, the two of them headed down the hall.

Blair watched Jim walk away from him, aching at being separated so soon.

"Were you and Jim, you know, like that before?"

Blair looked up at Simon and touched his mouth, still feeling Jim's lips against his. "You mean, the touching?"

Simon nodded.

Blair searched his eyes for condemnation but saw none. "No, but I think it's been there a while. But both of us were too, I don't know, too pigheaded, and then too lost to do anything about it."

"Is it inevitable with every Sentinel/Guide pairing?" Simon shook his head, dismissing his own question. "Never mind. That can't be the case because of Amelia and her sister."

"Hector said that it's completely up to the Sentinel and Guide as to what they want their relationship to be. They can be together that way, or they can both be married to other people."

Simon pinched the bridge of his nose under his glasses. "So what happens now?"

"What do you mean? You mean between me and Jim?"

Simon rolled his eyes. "No, Sandburg, I think I can figure that one out on my own. I mean, with all of this. The Sentinels. The stuff you were telling me about before. The destiny stuff."
Blair looked down the hallways, at all the empty rooms and shrugged. "I don't know. We'll need to find his files and take them with us," he warned Simon. "We can't leave anything here for anyone to find."

Simon stretched out his neck, rolling his head from side to side. "I have two bodies outside."

"I know." After a pause, he suggested helpfully, "Maybe we could get Jim's panther to eat them."

Simon let out a pained snort. "He'd get indigestion."

Blair grinned at the thought. For some reason his mind drifted back to his early conversations with Mr. Smith, remembering the man tormenting him with visions of Jim's unsavory reactions to other Sentinels. But Mr. Smith had known perfectly well it hadn't been Jim's fault at all. He'd purposefully messed with Blair's mind, no doubt hoping it would keep him off-balance. Which it had.

For a moment, Blair wished he'd let the spirit animals chew on him a little longer. He craved Jim's presence and felt a jolt of pleasant surprise when he comprehended that Jim was sending the same thought back to him. It made him smile.

"What are you smiling at?"

Blair pointed at his head. "He can tell what I'm feeling." Realizing that there was really no way he could explain the sensation to Simon, Blair got back to the matter at hand. "Mr. Smith, the guy that brought me here, said that Sentinels were a dime a dozen if you knew where to look for them. Do you think he's right?"

"Did he happen to mention where all of these Sentinels are hiding themselves?"

Blair grimaced. "Jails, mental institutions, cabins in the middle of nowhere."

"Great." Simon said sarcastically.

"Simon, what do you think would have happened to Jim if he hadn't met me?"

Simon thought about it for a minute. "I think he'd have ended up in a mental institution. I was already half convinced he was going nuts." He looked severely disturbed by that thought.

"Jim's own dad thought he was a freak." Blair couldn't stand the thought of all those Sentinels shunned by the very people they were born to protect. "Our society has a lot to answer for."

Simon gave Blair a considering look. "The world's never been very good at accepting what it doesn't understand."

Blair sighed, sliding down the wall until he was sitting. "I know. Racial genocide, discrimination, witch hunts." He rubbed his palms on his thighs. "We never learn, do we?"

"Some of us do."

Blair shot him a look and a grim smile.

Simon went into one of the empty rooms and returned, carrying a chair. He set it down near to Blair and sat. "So, what are you going to do? Set up some sort of half-way house for Sentinels?"

Blair considered that idea. "I have to find them first."

"You already have some, and by the looks of them, most of them don't know a damn thing."
Someone has to teach them what it means to be a Sentinel."

Blair imagined such a place. With Hector and Jim's help, they could remake the world. All he needed was money and time. Two things that Blair had in very short supply. He let a sense of weariness sweep over him, only to be met by a fierce burst of love from Jim. Smiling, Blair looked at Simon. "Let's wait until they get back, then we'll find those files and see what we've got. In the meantime, Simon, let's come up with a story for those bodies."

Simon grimaced and the two of them started bouncing ideas around.

It was weird for Jim to be with someone who could hear and see and smell everything he could. He caught himself a dozen times about to impart some information to Hector, only to realize he didn't need to do it. So, they walked silently to John's room, following Jim's panther and Hector's snake.

When they arrived, Jim put his hand on the door, hearing a rapid heart beat in the room beyond. He opened the door and stepped inside carefully, followed by Hector. The kid, sitting amongst the ruin of his room, glared at them. "Where's the other guy?"

Seeing blood on him, Jim checked him over with this senses, saw that none of the wounds were serious. "What other guy?"

"The pretty one. The one I wanted to fuck. Where is he?" The kid grinned at them, letting out a laugh filled with sharp edges. He thrust his groin a couple of times in an unmistakable gesture.

Hector put an arm in front of Jim's chest to keep him from charging. Blair's apprehension about this guy was becoming all too clear. Hector spoke softly, but with full determination. "He is not for you."

"Then who's he for?" the young man asked in a belligerent tone. His nostrils flared and he moved closer to Jim. "I can smell him on you." He sniffed again. "I can smell him all over you."

Hector spoke again, shooting a look at Jim telling him loud and clear to keep his mouth shut. "That is because they belong together. Blair is Jim's Guide."

John's eyes were sparking with a wild anger as he took a step forward. "I'm still gonna fuck him. Gonna push him down on his hands and knees and spread his thighs and--"

Jim punched him, a beautiful upper cut that laid the kid out flat on his back. Only Hector's arms holding him back kept him from following the punch with a killing.

The kid got up from the floor where Jim's punch had sent him, laughing unpleasantly. He made a come-hither gesture with his fingers. "You want to take me on, fuckwad? Come on."

Suddenly Jim could sense Blair's worry, knew that Blair must be picking up on his distress. He did his best to send back a soothing response, telling Blair everything was fine, hoping his Guide would buy it. Blair would probably rip him a new one for trying to manipulate the bond this way.

Hector was still holding him, talking to him. "Jim, he is trying to make you angry. It's the only thing he knows."

Jim could believe that; the bastard was a master at it. All Jim knew was that if the kid touched Blair, Jim was going to feed him piece by piece to his panther.
Blair looked at his watch again. "Listen, Simon, I'm gonna go look for those files now."

Simon shook his head. "I don't think that's a good idea."

"I don't want to waste any more time. Sooner or later someone else is gonna show up here and I don't want those files found by anyone else." Blair was also being eaten alive by curiosity. He needed to see if there were other Sentinels identified, Sentinels he could go help.

"Then let me go with you."

Blair shook his head. "You need to stay here with them." He pointed into Latisha's room, where Latisha and Amelia were both sleeping. Even Jason looked like he was nodding off, but his eyes would open every now and then, and he'd look at Latisha as if she was the most amazing thing he'd ever seen.

Marilyn had left a few minutes ago to return the ambulance after Blair had reassured Jason that one of them would drive him wherever he needed to go. His actual destination, however, now that he was bonded with Latisha, hadn't yet been decided.

"Why do I need to stay with them, Sandburg?"

"Because--well, just because. If John wants to cause any trouble, I'd feel better if you were here with the kids."

"Which is the same reason why you shouldn't go wandering off on your own. Jim would have my hide if something happened to you."

Blair rolled his eyes heavenward, as if praying for strength. "Fine, I'll take them, okay?" He pointed at the wolf and panther.

Simon could hardly argue with them as protectors. He'd already seen what they were capable of; the grim remains were lying outside.

Blair pointed to his head, tapping his forehead with an index finger. "Besides, Jim's just sort of given me the mental 'all's clear'."

Simon scowled, but nodded. "You get into trouble, you let out a yell," he counseled with a warning finger.

"Nice and loud. I promise."

Simon shoed him off with a wave as if Blair exhausted him beyond measure and, grinning, Blair collected the two spirit animals and headed down to where he thought Mr. Smith's office was.

"Are you trying to tell me if Blair was your Guide, that you'd let someone talk about him this way?" Jim asked angrily.

Hector shook his head. "No, but because you are Blair's Sentinel, you must realize that violence would not be the way he would want you to respond."

"Fuck." Jim knew Hector was right, but he still wanted to kill the kid. He turned to where the kid had last been standing, only to find that he and Hector were the only ones in the room.

Blair was down the stairs and walking past a hallway of empty rooms when he felt Jim's distress. He
tried to zero in on it, to see if he could figure out what had Jim feeling that way, but he couldn't sense any specifics.

Wondering if he should head back up, Blair realized he could see a sign for Administration. Deciding he was too close to give up, Blair pushed through the door. It was only the work of a minute to figure out which office was Mr. Smith's.

Nothing was locked, which, for some reason, infuriated Blair. It was just another piece of proof that Mr. Smith cared nothing for these Sentinels, even their exposure. A surge of guilt consumed Blair and he promised himself that the minute he got home, he was destroying his dissertation and all of his notes. He couldn't believe he'd put his own Sentinel at risk like that. Blair opened the top drawer of the file cabinet.

Jim's distress grew sharper, and with it a sense of fear. For Blair. "Shit," Blair cursed, under his breath. He knew it was John. Somehow he'd gotten past Jim, and he'd be coming after him.

He tried to listen for footsteps but it was hard to hear past the pounding of his heart. Deciding it was stupid to stay down here alone, he moved quietly to the door leading back out into the hallway.

Before he could get the doorknob turned, the door slammed wide open and John had him shoved against a wall, his front to Blair's back. "Hey, pretty boy, miss me?"

Fear suffused Blair's body from the top of his head to the bottom of his feet so strongly it made him shudder.

John pressed his body into the wall and jammed his knee between Blair's legs. "Ready to bark like a dog?" He pushed in even closer until Blair could feel his breath on his neck, a hard cock pressing against his ass. "Woof, woof."

Jim rounded the corner and practically ran into Simon, Hector directly behind him. "Where is he?"

Even as he spoke he started trying to pinpoint Blair's location.

"Who?" Simon was immediately on guard.

"Blair, where is he?" Jim barked out again, trying to calm down enough to use his senses constructively.

"He went to check on that guy's files on the other Sentinels." He put up his hands in defense at Jim's glare. "Hey, he took his and your spirit guides with him. They'll protect him, right?"

Hector shook his head. "No, they won't attack another Sentinel."

"You told me he'd be safe if we bonded," Jim accused hotly. "If a Sentinel is attacking Blair, why won't my panther protect him?" He started moving to the stairwell, knowing his Guide was on the floor below, his senses finally locked onto him.

Hector shrugged, even as he moved with them to the stairs. "They can't. They won't."

Jim thought of Alex, of how things might have worked out differently if his panther could have protected Blair. As he ran down the stairs and pushed through the stairwell door, he turned to Hector. "Why hasn't my panther protected Blair before?" Not counting Alex, Blair had been in danger more times than Jim could count.

Hector sent him an inscrutable look. "Did you ever ask him to?"
Jim bit back a curse. Of course he hadn't asked the damn thing to protect Blair. He'd barely been able to stand having the cat around. All it meant was some new Sentinel weirdness he hadn't wanted to deal with. Sadness swamped him as he realized that most of the times Blair had been hurt could have been avoided if he'd just bothered to take his calling a little more seriously.

Suddenly, fear coursed through his body, and he knew it was from Blair. "He's got Blair." Jim began to run down the hall. He could feel John touching his Guide through his link.

"Jim," Hector called out after him. "He will be all right."

Jim didn't believe him. All he knew was that Blair was afraid and that bastard was touching him.

Anger began to replace the fear. Blair could hear the panther snarling and his wolf growling, but the fact that they weren't interfering made him guess that they wouldn't attack another Sentinel. Despite the fact that it left him unguarded, Blair was glad of that fact. They should be tied together, somehow. Sentinels and Guides. A family.

Meanwhile, through their link, he could tell that Jim was on his way, and Blair decided he did not want Jim to find him this way. First of all, it was humiliating, but second of all, and even more importantly, Jim would kill John.

Blair instinctively reached within, even though he had no idea what he was looking for. So when he found something, it took him by surprise. Jim's strength was waiting there for him—like a reservoir, his for the taking. So Blair took. He pushed back and spun around.

John grinned mirthlessly at him. "You want it face to face, fuck boy? I can do that."

Blair rolled his eyes. This guy was in desperate need of a bar of soap. "Don't touch me again," he warned.

John stepped in close again. "Who's gonna stop me?"

Blair smiled tightly at him. "Me."

John tried to step in closer but before he could, Blair put his hands on John's chest and shoved as hard as he could. His eyes widened when John went flying across the room, slamming into the far desk.

Jim pushed the door open, only to see John go flying. His eyebrows high, he turned to look at Blair, who was looking at his hands as if they were something completely unfamiliar. "Blair?"

Blair shot him an amazed grin. "Wow, man, did you see that?"

Hector barreled into the room, almost knocking Jim over, and Simon came in directly behind him.

Jim looked back at John, who was lying on the ground, groaning. "What the hell happened?"

Blair glanced at Hector. "Do you know? Is this what you meant when you said I'd be safer bonded?"

Hector nodded. "You can draw on each other's strength."

Blair moved to Jim's side, pressing close, a hand around Jim's waist. "I could feel it, Jim. All I did was draw on it, and it was like I was as strong as both of us combined. He went flying." Blair made a gesture through the air, mimicking John's flight.
Jim pulled Blair even closer until he was hugging him. "Jesus, Blair, I thought--" Jim didn't want to think about what had been going through his mind. Not that John had had Blair long, but it had been way too long for Jim.

"Yeah, me too, for a minute, but then the whole thing started to piss the shit out of me, and then there you were. Inside of me." Blair gazed up at Jim, a look of such love on his face it made Jim have to swallow past the lump in his throat.

Simon stomped over to the kid on the ground. "You all right?"

John sat up and grabbed his side. "Fuck." He glared at Blair. "Keep him the fuck away from me." He shared his glare with the room. "All of you, keep the fuck away from me."

Jim snarled at him. "Trust me, none of us want to be any closer to you than we have to be."

"Jim," Blair cajoled softly, "he's just a kid."

"Just a kid who had every intention of raping you, Blair."

John jumped to his feet and stalked toward Blair. "I didn't do anything to you, you fucker. You're the one who hit me. I'm gonna call the cops and have you arrested."

Jim, Hector and Simon all moved to put themselves between John and Blair. From behind him, Jim could hear an exasperated sigh and then he was shoved aside by his Guide. "John, I know you think we're the enemy here, but we're not. We can help you."

John lunged at Blair but before anyone else could react, Simon had him on the floor, and was cuffing him. "Congratulations, kid, you called the cops and here they are." He started reading him his rights.

John fought against the cuffs, cursing Simon. "What the fuck are you arresting me for? I didn't fuckin' do anything."

"Yeah, yeah, yeah, tell it to your attorney." Simon finished his recitation and stood, bringing John up with him.

Against Jim's wishes, Blair spoke to the bastard. "John. Please listen to me. We can help you. You need to trust me."

Despite the fact that he was in cuffs, the look in John's eyes made Jim nervous, and he protectively moved closer to Blair. "The only thing I want from you is your ass," the kid taunted. "And I'll get it, sooner or later." He shook his cuffed hands. "You think these will keep me away? Fuck that and fuck you."

Jim pulled Blair back behind him.

John laughed at him. "You think you can stop me? You can't protect his pretty ass from--" His words were interrupted by another punch, this one from Simon, and it knocked him out cold.

Simon shook his fist out. "Sorry, Sandburg, but I just didn't feel like listening to him anymore."

Blair moved to stand next to Jim. "Maybe if we found him his Guide, he could get better."


"He'd need someone strong, someone he could look up to." Blair glanced up at Simon, a speculative look in his eyes. "Why are you here, Simon? Did you feel some sort of call to come here?"
Simon snorted and put up a warding hand. "Don't even try, Sandburg. I came here following Jim, not to answer some damn call, other than the sick feeling I get every time one of you gets in trouble. I sure as hell didn't come here because of some call or to be someone's Guide, especially for some punk like this."

Blair let out a sigh. "Sorry, Simon. I just--" He shook his head.

Jim put his arm back around his Guide's shoulder. He could feel Blair's sadness and frustration. "He's a fool for not trusting you, Blair, but I think he's past fixing." He glanced around. "Even his spirit animal has flown the coop."

"So what do we do with him?" Blair asked.

Simon pinched the bridge of his nose. "I arrest him for attempted rape, for battery, for being a major pain in the ass, and he gets sent to jail."

Blair blew out a long breath. "This sucks, man." He glanced around the room, taking in Hector and Jim. "Five Sentinels, and two of them are, or in Alex's case, were, seriously bad news. Not the best of odds."

Jim agreed. Not the best of odds and, even worse, they'd both gone after Blair. Granted, up until Jason arrived, he was the only Guide around, and an unbonded one at that, but still, Jim didn't like it. He couldn't express how glad he was that somehow the bond gave Blair some extra oomph in dealing with bad guys. He wished he'd given Blair that power years ago.

Blair was suddenly moving away from him into an office. "I was just starting to look through these when I could feel something was wrong." He opened the first file cabinet drawer and peeked in.

Jim watched as Blair's brow furrowed in consternation and he moved to peer over his Guide's shoulder. Blair had pulled out a single file and was reading it. "Each one of these is a file on a Sentinel." He put the file back and displayed the drawer to Jim.

There must have been one hundred files in there. Jim closed the drawer and opened the next one, which was also full. With a feeling of dread, Jim opened up the last two, and then moved to the next file cabinet. There were six of them, four-drawer lateral file cabinets, two on each of the back three walls of the office. Each one was full.

Blair stared up at Jim. "Holy shit, Jim, there's hundreds of them."

Simon moved to join them and he reached in the current open drawer and pulled out several files. Opening the first one he grimaced, "Juvenile Hall, 16 years old." He closed it and put it behind the others, then opened the next, "May Institute for Autistic Children, 10 years old." Then, the next one, "Alachua General Pediatric Psychiatric Center, 13 years old." He put the files back in the drawer. "Shit." He shut the drawer.

Hector was looking through some other files, a seriously unhappy expression on his face. "I do not understand this country. What has happened that Sentinels are treated like this?" He gestured around the office. "How will any of them find their Guides when they are kept separated?"

Jim thought of John, wondering what the odds were that many of these would end up like him or Alex. Or worse--tortured with treatments, or over-medicated, left to fade away, abandoned by their families. It made him sick to his stomach.

Blair was reading another file. "Jim, we have to help them. They're all so young."
For the first time, Jim actually found himself grateful for his dad, who had simply told him to stop using his senses. Not in the most loving of ways, but Jim had suppressed them as instructed. It would have been just as easy for his dad to throw him in some mental institution and let him rot there. It suddenly made Jim very curious as to why his dad, in his own way, had believed that Jim had enhanced senses. He pulled out another file.

"Wait, some of these are closed cases." Blair looked at the pages in the file more carefully. "I guess he decided this one wasn't a Sentinel." Blair blew out a breath as he stared at all the file cabinets. "So they're not all Sentinels. I guess we'll have to go through them all to figure out which ones are."

Jim closed the file he was holding. "This one's already dead." The muscle in his jaw was clenched.

Blair bit his lip, a pensive look on his face.

Simon put a hand on his shoulder. "I'm afraid to ask, but what are you brewing in that brain of yours?"

Blair turned around and launched his spiel. "Maybe we could start a school or something, we could go talk to their families, explain the situation. If the kids are in trouble already, their families might be more than willing to hand them over to us. I know it would take money, a lot of money, but this is important."

Jim opened his mouth to speak but Blair just talked right over him. "I mean it, Jim. Just imagine what we could do with hundreds of Sentinels. We could channel them into law enforcement, search and rescue, the health fields. I mean, not that we'd force them to do anything they didn't want to do, hell, I'd be all for it if they wanted to be winemakers because everything's better with a good bottle of wine, but they're Sentinels, you know? They're born to protect so I'm guessing they'd be drawn to those fields where they could put that natural inclination to work."

Hector smiled at him. "I will help you, Blair."

Blair gave him a blinding smile, which Jim was immediately jealous of. He tried to speak again, but Blair kept talking. "Great, Hector. That would be so great. You can teach them, hell, you can teach me for that matter. There's so much I don't know." He made a gesture that took in the whole building. "I'm not sure where we could do it, but we could sort of have our own Xavier's School for Gifted Children."

Amelia's fox was suddenly winding its way around Blair's legs. Jim's panther was butting his head against his thigh, and his wolf had positioned himself so Blair's hand was resting on his head. The golden eagle flew into the room and landed on Blair's shoulder.

Jim heard a slithering, and Hector's snake glided into the room, moving to Blair and coiling up one of his legs, his head resting just above Blair's knee, his forked tongue flickering in and out.

Simon let out an astonished laugh. "I think the spirit guides like your idea, Sandburg."

Blair looked down at himself, as if he'd just now, at Simon's words, realized they were all over him. "Wow." He gazed at them for another second and then sent a beseeching look at Jim. "I know you hate this stuff, Jim, but you can see it's important, right? We can find someplace in Cascade so you can still be a cop, and I'll make the time to work with you, and we can train Megan to help you out when I'm busy, seeing as she already knows about you."

Jim finally put up his hand. "Can I say something?" A part of him had considered letting Blair talk until he was hoarse, but had reconsidered when he realized how long that might take.
Blair shut up and nodded. "Sure." He gestured grandly for Jim to talk.

Jim just stared at Blair for a moment, covered in spirit animals like some male mother nature, or maybe there was a father nature out there as well. Whatever it was, Blair was it. And Jim knew that, no matter how much he might like his life to stay the same, Blair was not made for the simple life. His destiny equaled Jim's and then far surpassed it. He felt a moment of intense pride that Blair was his Guide.

"Why not here? In this building?"

Blair looked at him in confusion. "What? What do you mean?"

"Why not here? We can fix things up, make the rooms a little nicer for the Sentinels, but everything we need is already here."

Simon nodded. "We'd have to apply to the city for a change of intent of use from a sanitarium to a school, but I don't think we'd have any problems with that." He frowned. "Except money, of course."

"I have money," Jim said.

Blair stared at him, then at Simon, then at Jim again. "What? You guys are agreeing? You're helping?"

Simon scowled at Blair. "You don't have to sound so surprised, Sandburg. What did you expect me to do? These are kids that are having their lives destroyed because no one believes in Sentinels. I'm supposed to go back to Cascade and ignore what you're doing here? Ignore the fact that you might be helping to create an entirely new society filled with people with skills like Jim and--" Simon scowled again but then gamely continued on, "and hearts like you?"

Blair stared some more and his eyes grew bright. "Man, Simon, I--I, I don't even know what to say."

Simon cleared his throat and waved Blair's gratitude away in embarrassment.

Blair looked down at the zoo and smiled at them. "You guys are getting heavy, can you get down?" They all obeyed and moved off him, but none of them went far. The wolf and panther lay down at his feet with a proprietary air about them.

His head was whirring with possibilities of creating a school. Simon could be the administrator; he'd be a natural at that. Plus he could teach cop stuff. Blair wondered if they could get anyone else at Major Crimes to join them. Hector could teach them about their Sentinel skills, helping to hone them, and then, hopefully, leading them through their bondings as their Guides arrived.

Because they would arrive. There'd be a constant gathering of Sentinels and the calls would go out. Blair could hardly wait to see it happen. And this place would be perfect. Simon was right, it had everything they needed. It just needed to be friendlied up so the Sentinels and Guides would like to live here.

Suddenly, his thoughts derailed and he looked up at Jim, stricken. "We can't do it here. I have to be with Jim." Even if it was Jim's idea that they do it here. He frowned. "And what did you mean when you said you had money?" Blair decided maybe it really was Jim's turn to talk.

Jim moved to Blair and, catching his arm, dragged him a few steps back to the large wood desk behind them. He sat on the edge, encouraging Blair to sit next to him. "We will be together, Blair. Simon's right and you're right. We can't let all those Sentinels suffer. The way I figure it, you and I
will be the ones who go to retrieve them. Simon and Hector can run the place while we're gone. All of us have stuff we can teach, and we'll find other teachers for the stuff we can't."

Blair stared up at Jim, dumbfounded.

Jim continued. "And I have money. When my mom died ten years ago, she left everything to Stephen and me, and it's a lot of money."

"How much is a lot?" Blair asked, his voice almost squeaking. Why hadn't he known this?


Blair desperately wished he and Jim were alone right now. But, they weren't. He found Jim's hand and held it tightly. "You'd give up everything for me? Your job, your home, you know, everything?"

Jim's fingers squeezed back and he leaned down and kissed Blair gently on the lips. "You are everything, Blair," he whispered softly. "I'm not giving anything up."

Blair threw his arms around his Sentinel and hugged him hard. "God, I love you."

"You'd give up everything for me? Your job, your home, you know, everything?"

Jim frowned at him. "I think I love you, too, but don't push your luck."

Blair smiled at him brightly. "Too late." Then a worrying thought crossed his mind and he pointed toward the administrative lobby area. "What do we do with ones like that?"

Simon answered that one. "Just like I said before, we let the systems in place deal with them."

"So, they'll go to jail? Only to end up on the streets again?"

"I don't have all the answers, Blair," Simon complained.

"I know, I know. It's just so frustrating." Blair stared at all the file cabinets. "So many."

Jim smiled down at him. "And I'll bet none of them have Guides." He shook his head. "It's a miracle you found me."

Blair wished again that they were alone. And then he yawned. Cavernously. "Man, I'm pooped. What time is it?"

Jim looked at his watch. "9:30 in the morning."

"I've been up all night. And I can't remember the last time I ate anything." Blair yawned again, suddenly almost too tired to stand, certainly too tired to eat.

Jim kissed him on the forehead. "Let's find you someplace to crash." He cocked his head to the side, listening. "There're people in the kitchen, preparing meals."

Simon frowned. "Do you think they deliver them to the rooms?"

Jim shook his head. "No. I don't think Mr. Smith would have allowed anyone access to their rooms. I'm guessing they prepare the meals and then Sam probably delivered them."

Hector nodded. "Yes. We got fed twice a day. And once a week we were moved so our rooms could
be cleaned."
"What day?" Jim asked.

"I believe it was Tuesday." Hector smiled wryly. "It was difficult to keep track of the days."

"Well, at least we don't need to worry about the cleaning service today," Simon said in relief. "That only leaves us with two dead bodies outside and three minors we can't account for, one of whom is in handcuffs."

As if he'd been waiting for his cue, John started to bellow from the other room. "Hey, who the fuck hit me? That's fuckin' police brutality. I'm gonna get your fuckin' badge for that. I got my fuckin' rights." There was the sound of some thrashing around. "Hey, where the fuck is everyone? I wanna make a phone call."

Simon winced and glared at the doorway that led to where John lay on the floor. "I really, really hate that kid."

"Join the club," Jim agreed darkly.

Blair felt bad about it, but he agreed as well. If he never saw John again, that would be fine with him.

Simon let out a sigh, and moved to the doorway. "We have to call the local cops, and pray to God that someone with an open mind shows up, otherwise we might all be spending the night in jail."

"Hey, I can fuckin' hear you, you assholes. Get these fuckin' cuffs off of me."

Blowing out a breath, Simon smiled grimly. "I guess that's my cue." He gestured at Blair while he looked at Jim. "I'll get rid of Mr. Personality here and then you find Sandburg a place to sleep. You'll have to talk to the cops with me."

Jim nodded. "I know. I killed both of those guys."

Blair hugged Jim tightly, sorry that he'd had to kill twice on his behalf. He knew Jim had done it before, but Blair regretted it every time. He sagged against Jim as his weariness consumed him, and smiled as his Sentinel held him firmly, offering his support.

"Does Simon need help with John?" Blair asked, hoping the answer was no, as he didn't want Jim to go anywhere.

"Hector went with him."

"Hmm." Blair allowed Jim to move him a little, until Jim sat down in the large leather desk chair, pulling Blair down onto his lap. Blair let out a happy sigh and snuggled closer. It took him about five seconds to fall asleep.

They got lucky--to a point. The sheriff who responded to their call was an old friend of Simon's, one that thought highly of Jim's captain. So they were cut a significant amount of slack--to a point.

What that meant was that Jim and Simon weren't being cuffed and crammed into the sheriff's car along with John. It didn't mean that the potential for imminent arrest wasn't hovering uncomfortably close.

The coroner's wagon was on its way to pick the bodies up, and while they waited, the sheriff, more or less patiently, was holding out for an explanation. Two explanations, actually. What was
responsible for the mauling of Mr. Smith, and what the hell were they doing there in the first place? The sheriff felt they were very reasonable questions, and he seemed prepared, for the moment, to stand there and hear them out.

Simon did his best. Jim could tell that Blair had discussed possible scenarios with Simon, because all of Simon's babbling had Blair written all over it. But--and Jim knew this from his own excruciating experience--those excuses never went over as well as when Blair was the one doing the actual babbling. Jim decided to pitch in and now it was all turning into a bad Saturday Night Live skit with some comedian going "Yeah, that's the ticket."

Jim decided he needed to go get his Guide. He'd come up with something so rich and complicated that the sheriff would leave in self-defense. And just as he had that thought, Blair stumbled out the front door, yawning and rubbing his eyes. He eyed the three of them talking on the front circular drive and moved to join them. "Hey."

Jim smiled at him, wishing he could give him a kiss, or better yet, was seeing Blair all sleepy-eyed and mussed in their own bed. "You didn't sleep long."

Blair made some whirring motion around his head with both hands, stirring a few of his curls. "Couldn't stop thinking." He held out his hand to the sheriff. "Blair Sandburg."

Amos took his hand and gave it a shake. "Sheriff Amos Taray." He put his hands in his pants pockets and gave Blair a telling look. "Maybe you can tell me what brings you folks out this way."

Blair pursed his lips and then gave Jim and Simon a look. "What, uh, what did they tell you?" He gave the sheriff a winning smile, which did not get a smile in return. Blair's smile turned a little nervous.

"Maybe you could just tell me yourself without any coaching from the peanut gallery." There was a very subtle 'or else' underneath that calm suggestion.

"Sure." Blair bounced up on his toes and back down. He thought for a minute, and Jim could see every cog and wheel burning rubber in his Guide's brain. Coming up with ideas, rejecting them, revising them, even being slightly amused by them, if the small smile on Blair's face was any indication.

Finally, Blair blew out a breath and turned to Jim. "We need to tell him the truth."

Jim's eyebrows rose high. "What?"

"No, I mean it. If we're serious about buying this building and turning it into a school he needs to know. He needs to be on our side, supporting us, or it'll never work."

Jim exchanged a nervous look with Simon, who was rubbing the bottom half of his face with his hand, scraping his beard. "Sandburg, I don't know--"

"Simon. There's no way we can do this without someone official knowing. I know it's a risk, but we need to be proactive and talk to Jack Kelso and other folks we know to get connections going with the CIA and the FBI and the armed forces, and that's just to start. Think about it. If they know we're doing this, they can spend their energy recruiting instead of experimenting and kidnapping. That way we won't have to worry about the Bracketts of the world."

Jim hadn't really thought that far, but he supposed Blair was right. There was no way they could keep this a secret, especially as Blair needed to finish his dissertation now more than ever, to lend credibility to the whole state of affairs. "Okay, Chief. You're the boss. Have at it."
Blair flashed him a disgruntled look as if Jim had just thrown him to the wolves. Then he smiled widely in a way that made Jim nervous. "Don't go far, Jim, I'll need you for demonstrations."

Jim didn't want to be the sideshow. "Why don't you use Hector?"

"I'll use both of you. Why don't you go round him up while I start the spiel? I'll take the Sheriff to Mr. Smith's office, let him see what we're up against."

Jim scowled but nodded. He guessed he might as well get used to this, especially if they were going to take this show out on the road. Leaving Blair to his explanations, Jim headed for the building to track down Hector.

It took them about two hours, but by the time they were done they had a convert on their hands and a staunch supporter. Jim was convinced it was Amelia who made the difference. There was no way anyone could believe she was part of a scam. Well, Amelia and the spirit guides. Blair had touched the sheriff's eyes, allowing him to see the animals. They seemed quite taken with Amos, lying in the grass between him and Blair.

The Sentinel demonstrations helped as well. Sentinel skills were hard to fake. Amos could hardly call them liars when Jim, Amelia, Hector, and Latisha could hear what he was whispering hundreds of yards away, tell him what he'd been doing all morning based on his smells, and pick out a lie every time he uttered one.

"I'll be dipped in shit," he said, staring at them all wonderingly. He grinned. "I reckon I could use a couple like you on my force."

Blair let out a laugh. "You'll have to wait a while for that. We don't exactly have any ready candidates. But," he added with a naughty grin, "we'll put you at the top of the waiting list."

"How come this guy only had five Sentinels here? If he had all those possible Sentinels, how come the place isn't burstin' at the seams with them?"

Blair shrugged. "I don't know. I need to read his files to figure out what he was up to. Maybe he was just getting started on the collecting part of his plan. He's clearly been doing research for a long time. Maybe once he had these five he realized it wasn't going to be as easy as he'd thought to control them, which is why he came after me."

Amos continued his questioning. "When do you think you'll be moving in?"

Simon shrugged. "We've got a lot of work to do before that happens, starting with purchasing the building and getting it approved for a school."

Amos waved a hand at him, as if it was the easiest thing in the world. "I play darts with the head of the city planning board, and his wife's a realtor. Things might be easier if you use a local attorney. I can make a couple phone calls."

"That would be a help," Simon admitted gratefully.

Jim was seized with a moment of panic, questioning his sanity, and the road they were talking about embarking on. He suddenly realized that he had three Sentinels staring at him, no doubt hearing his spiked heart rate. Jim had a brief flash of what life for Blair must be like all the time. Life in a fish bowl. Jim couldn't believe he'd stood it for so long. He'd been dealing with it for a couple of hours and he hated it already.
"You all right, Jim?" Blair asked worriedly.

And Jim knew right then, if he took this path, nothing would ever be the same. No bullshitting, no hiding, no repressing. He'd be surrounded by Sentinels who would be able to tell if he was freaked or lying, and his Guide would be able to feel it through their bond.

He felt a huge resistance start to grow in him, but then he looked at Blair and it all blew away like scattered leaves. He might have to live life much more exposed than he'd ever willingly choose, but he'd do it being loved and respected, and--he could feel it from Blair like a blazing sun--absolutely adored. It was a very heady feeling and one that Jim thought he could get used to. He grinned at Blair. "I'm fine."

Blair gave him another look and then grinned back.

Blair shut the door of the loft closed behind the two of them and shot Jim an edgy look. This was the first time they'd been alone since they'd bonded. "This feels weird, man."

Jim cocked his head at Blair. "What do you mean?"

"Just that, well, I don't know, like this would have been easier if we'd gone to a hotel or something."

"What the hell are you going on about?" Jim's eyes were twinkling, so Blair didn't take offense.

"Because this is where we've lived, you and me, for the last three years. Just two guys, roommates, dirty laundry, cooking supper, watching basketball." Blair shrugged helplessly, knowing he wasn't saying this well. "It's like everything's completely the same when it's actually completely different. You know?"

Jim moved to stand in front of Blair and ran a finger through his thick curls. "So you'd feel more comfortable in a new setting? Like a sheik's tent in a Bedouin desert? Or some ancient temple where you could be laid out like a sacrificial offering to the temple priest? Maybe some acolytes would have stripped you and bathed you, oiled you down so your skin would be shining in the moonlight."

Blair's jaw dropped and he could feel his cock start to harden; the images being painted a hot button direct to his libido. He didn't know why he should be surprised Jim would know him well enough to so thoroughly turn him on with words, but he was. "Jesus, Jim." He saw Jim's eyes follow his hand as he shifted himself to try to relieve some of the pressure.

"That for me?"

Jim was turning into a sex god right in front of his eyes. Blair thought it was the hottest thing he'd ever seen, especially because he could feel Jim through their bond, and knew Jim was equally hot for him. Blair couldn't imagine how he'd ever felt comfortable having sex before when he couldn't sense this surety. This was the only way to do it. Sure. Safe. Loved beyond doubt.

Deciding he'd stood there like a virgin schoolboy for too long already, Blair smiled up at Jim, touching himself again, brazenly this time, feeling Jim's passion flare in response. Oh, yeah, Blair thought, this is gonna be great. And fast, really fast, because Blair was pretty sure he could get off just feeling what Jim was feeling. Once there was actual touching involved, Blair fully expected to go off like a cannon.

Willing to risk it, Blair stood on his toes and pressed his lips to Jim's. The electricity zinged through him until every hair on his body stood on end and his cock jerked, ready to lose its load already. He took a step back, out of the reach of Jim's arms. "Okay, you know this is gonna be over in about five
seconds, right?"

"Yeah, but then we can do it again," Jim said with a lascivious smile.

Blair grinned back. "I like the way you think." He held up a hand as Jim made as if to kiss him. "But, for our first time, even if it is going to be the shortest honeymoon on record, I'd like to be naked in bed, not standing right inside our front door. Okay?"

"Works for me, Chief." Jim started to unbutton his shirt.

Blair shut his eyes, waving his hands in the air. "No, no, no. Strip in front of me and I'll be done. Over. Kaput." He pointed in the air. "Go upstairs, do it up there. I'll be there in a minute." Blair dared to open one eye, squinting. Jim had his shirt unbuttoned but still on, hanging open to reveal his pecs and six-pack.

He squeezed his eyes shut again, overcome with lust. Then, a wave of insecurity started inching out the lust. "You, uh, you do realize that I'm not exactly, you know, built. Right?" Blair knew his attributes, and knew he was attractive, but Jim was a working piece of art.

He felt lips on his, giving him a quick but heartfelt smooch. "You are the most beautiful thing I've ever seen." Then the lips were gone.

Blair spent a moment relishing Jim's reassurance, listening as Jim headed upstairs. He heard the sound of a zipper being unzipped and pants dropping to the floor. Blair had to grab himself to keep from coming right then and there, the vision of Jim naked just up the stairs almost sufficient to get the job done. He was worse than a teenager. Grinning, Blair started taking his own clothes off.

Five minutes later he was heading upstairs with some bottled water for them both and a selection of dry and wet towels. He couldn't imagine a Sentinel would enjoy the sensation of semen drying on his skin. When he got to the top of the stairs, he came to a complete stop at the sight waiting for him.

Jim was stretched out on the bed, all naked, yards and yards of skin, and a hard, weeping cock bobbing, trying to get Blair's attention. It was working. Blair could feel his saliva flowing wanting to get a taste. "Wow," was all he could actually get his mouth to say.

"Wow, back." Jim was looking at him as if he was a Sentinel's wet dream. Or at least this particular Sentinel. Blair placed the water bottles on the left bedside table and tucked the towels on the bottom shelf.

He sat on the side of the bed, just looking at Jim. "I could come just from looking at you, you know."

Jim's cock bobbed again, leaking furiously. It gave Blair a heady feeling to know he had this much power over Jim. After they got through this first time, they were going to have some serious fun.

Suddenly he had to touch. Had to kiss. Had to feel all that skin against his. He launched himself at Jim, felt Jim's arms raise to catch him, until he was laying on top of Jim, skin to skin, cock to cock, lips to lips.

Jim's lips were hot, his tongue was hot, his skin was hot, his cock was burning, a brush fire burning everything up in its path. Blair sincerely hoped, even as he gladly gave himself up to the blaze, that they learned how to control their connection, or they'd never make it past the first sixty seconds.

Jim's groans made Blair's balls tighten and he stopped struggling against the inevitable. He could sense Jim's impending orgasm, too, and Blair hoped he'd live to tell the tale as he yielded to the sensation of a double orgasm.
Somehow, in the midst of the onslaught, Blair kept kissing Jim. He didn't ever plan to stop kissing Jim, biting his lips, sucking on his tongue, gasping into his mouth, even as they both came.

And Jim kept kissing him, wet, sloppy, nasty kisses that were probably going to be enough to get him hard again, and if Blair hadn't needed to actually breathe, if the air he was pulling in through his nostrils was sufficient to help his body survive the aftermath of a mind-blowing orgasm, Blair would have kept on kissing and being kissed.

But the need for air became pressing enough for him to pull back, just enough to gulp in a deep breath. He opened his eyes and looked down at Jim, who was staring up at him through dark impassioned eyes, pupils blown black like some drug junkie.

And Blair couldn't help but smile, because that's what they both were, addicted to each other, and Blair could cheerfully live with that. "Man, if I'd known that was what I was missing, I'd have been in your bed the first night I stayed here," Blair said, with a shaky laugh.

Jim pulled him back down for another sloppy kiss, which, as answers go, suited Blair just fine. He felt his cock courageously try to give things another go, but Blair wanted to slow things down, maybe actually get to do some exploring and leisurely touching.

Realistically, Blair doubted it was going to happen that way quite yet. He expected it might take a few more explosions of sex before they got to a point where kissing wasn't all it took to make them both come in their pants.

Blair let out a happy sigh and lay his head down on Jim's shoulder, enjoying the broad sweep of Jim's hands up and down his back. He should probably reach down to get one of the wet towels so he could clean them off, but that meant he'd need to move, and that was a terrible idea. He sighed again, even happier.

A few minutes later, as Jim started to twitch, Blair decided he couldn't postpone moving any longer. He rolled off Jim and, once at the edge of the bed, grabbed for the towels. He sat up and took the opportunity to give his new lifemate a long and admiring look. "Man, you are gorgeous." And mine, he said to himself.

"And yours," Jim said, as if in agreement.

"Mine, mine, mine," Blair sing-songed, as he cleaned off his and Jim's bellies.

"Hey, that goes both ways, Chief."

"Oh, you better believe it." He wiped Jim off with a dry towel. "Yours, yours, yours." He gave Jim a brilliant smile. "Mine, mine, mine." He let out a laugh. "Still trying to convince myself this is real. I might be saying that a lot."

"Say it all you want. I'll even get it tattooed on my ass if you want me to."

"Man, I love you, you know that, don't you?"

Jim nodded and touched his chest, over his heart. "I can feel it." He gave Blair a look of wonder. "I know it. Like I know my own name."

Blair understood how Jim felt. Knowing you were loved and knowing you were loved were as different as night and day. He sighed again. "Hey, it was pretty nice of Simon to let everyone stay at his house."
They'd offered to split up the guests and either host Jason and Latisa, or Hector and Amelia, but Simon had taken them all.

"Hector made him do it. He said you and I needed to be alone." Jim grimaced. "Might have been a bit of mood breaker to have a handful of Sentinels in the house."

Blair snorted. "Welcome to my life." He kissed Jim to take any sting out of the words. "Simon didn't mind, did he?"

Jim shook his head. "No. I don't know what happened to him down there, but he's totally into this whole Sentinel thing now."

Blair bit his lip. "You don't think I did something to him, do you? I mean I touched his eyes so he could see the spirit animals but maybe I did something else without meaning to."

Jim pulled him down for a hug. "All you did was open his eyes. And my eyes, and Latisha's and Jason's and all the other people who are lucky enough to come into contact with you. You, Chief, are a force to be reckoned with." He let out a wry laugh. "I don't know how I resisted you for so long."

"It's because you are an equal force to be reckoned with." Blair lay down, his head resting in the hollow of Jim's shoulder. "Hey, I was thinking."

"Oh, oh. Should I run for the hills now?"

"Ha ha. Seriously." He tried to pinch Jim, but his Sentinel's senses must have tipped him off because he pulled away and then rolled over so he was laying half on top of Blair.

"Go for it, Darwin, I'm all ears."

Blair could feel Jim's cock starting to poke a hole in his thigh and he grinned up at his Sentinel. "All evidence to the contrary."

Jim rolled his eyes. "Talk fast or I'm gonna think up something else we could be doing."

Blair kept grinning, unrepentantly. "And you think that's gonna get me to talk?" He pushed up against Jim's cock, enjoying the grunt and half-closed eyes he elicited from his Sentinel. At Jim's glare, he said, with a laugh, "Okay, okay. I just thought of someone else we could call. I mean, besides Jack Kelso."

"How are you figuring Jack is going to be able to help? He's not even with the CIA anymore. In fact, he's somewhat persona non grata."

"I know, but he'll know who we should call, someone we can trust."

"So who else are you thinking of?"

"An old friend of mine named Daniel Jackson. Last time I talked to him he was working with the Air Force, which if you knew him, you wouldn't believe was possible, I mean, it'd be like me working with the Air Force--"

Jim kissed him.

Blair kissed him back.

A few minutes later, Jim pulled back and smiled down at Blair, a very pleased look on his face. "You were saying?"
"What?" Blair wasn't sure he even remembered his name.

"Someone named Daniel Jackson?"

"Oh, right. Right." Blair tried to focus. "Yeah, Daniel. He's a great guy, and he'll probably have some idea of someone we could call."

"So that would give us the CIA and the Air Force. I think Simon's got a contact at the FBI and I still have Army contacts."

"Great. We can start there. Although, I think we should wait to see if we can even get any Sentinels. I have no idea if any of them will be willing to come with us, or how we'll get them out of jail or mental institutions. I expect Mr. Smith didn't exactly use legal channels."

"We'll work it out, Blair. After all, you're the one who said this was all about destiny, about primal forces, right?"

Blair smiled at him, pleased Jim had remembered, and grateful to be reminded that they had something very powerful, however intangible, on their side. And given how the power had grown with just five Sentinels, Blair couldn't imagine what might happen with a whole school of them. A journey of faith. He could do that. He leaned up and kissed Jim, sending a burst of love through their bond.

Jim kissed him briefly, but then pulled him as close as he could, holding him tightly. Blair could feel Jim's love pouring through the bond right back at him. Blair just let himself be held, allowing the sensation to surround him, uplift him, remake him.

Finally Jim let him go, and he could see Jim blink away some moisture from his eyes, knowing he was doing the same. It was going to take some time to get used to this so it didn't turn them into either sex maniacs or emotional marshmallows.

Jim lay down, pulling Blair down until his head was resting on Jim's chest. "The first thing I have to do is find Hector his Guide," Jim said, his voice a little worried.

Blair was a little concerned about that as well. With John still down in Oregon there were only four Sentinels now, only two if they had to be unbonded; not enough to call any more Guides. They needed to find more Sentinels as soon as they could. Both he and Jim wanted Hector to have a lifemate, especially as it was because of him that they were together.

"We'll find him one, Jim. We'll find them all one." Blair kissed Jim's chest, his chin, his cheeks, and then his lips. He was determined. Now that he knew what was waiting for them, Blair wasn't going to let any Sentinel live a life of loneliness. Not on his watch.

He kept kissing Jim and, for the time being, the talking was through and the heat was growing again. Blair pulled Jim until he was lying on him and surrendered to the fire once again.

Amos called the next morning to say that John's parents, who apparently had more money than sense, had gotten him released on bail.

Nathan was fucked. Completely and utterly fucked. If there was a poster child epitomizing Murphy's Law, he would be it.

Ten minutes ago he'd just been a recent Ph.D. graduate on a celebratory road trip, asking for
directions because he'd gotten a little lost. Granted, it had been a rather odd road trip with true Twilight Zone potential, but it hadn't fit the criteria for the You-Are-Completely-Fucked-Show.

But now, he was in the wrong place at the wrong time, the wrong race, the wrong age, and wearing the wrong colors. The only good thing about his being part Asian was that maybe only half of the gang members shooting up the neighborhood would be aiming for him. Somehow, he didn't find that thought very reassuring.

He felt something dripping into his eye, and when he wiped his forehead his hand came back red. Grimacing, he thought of the dead cashier, and how it had only been luck--a grinning maniacal sort of luck which had really only been saving him for something worse--that it hadn't been him dead on the floor with his face half blown off.

And now he was here, in some God-forsaken alley, waiting to die.

He'd tried to get away, had headed down street after street, completely turned around, like a dog chasing his own tail. His sense of direction had always been a bit of a joke, but he wasn't laughing now. He'd run down the same streets so many times, he was starting to recognize individual gang members, with their happy trigger fingers and feral looks in their eyes.

And now a bunch of them were looking for him. They'd tried to shoot him, and he could still feel the bullets whizzing by him as he put his years of track to use. Unfortunately, his running had brought him here, to a dead-end, and his killers were right behind him.

They were taking their time coming around the last corner, taunting him, knowing they had him trapped. "Hey asshole," one of them yelled, "you in the mood to be fucked? Maybe we'll fuck you before we kill you."

Nathan's blood ran cold. He hadn't even thought of that. Suddenly dying didn't seem like the worse thing that could happen to him.

They turned the corner and there were six of them. Too many for him to fight, even if they weren't armed, but he was going to give it his best shot. He stood there, hands fisted, heart pounding, waiting.

One of them, a remarkably handsome young man with tattoos up and down both arms, grinned nastily at him. "You're not as pretty as the other one, but you'll do for now until I find him." He licked his lips and touched his crotch.

Nathan felt sick to his stomach. And as much as the other five gang members scared the shit out of him, the fact that this kid was threatening him felt so wrong it was as if the fabric of the universe was warped where he stood.

Something moved out of the corner of his eye and he turned to see the stag standing there--the stag that had been moving in and out of his peripheral vision for two damn weeks. Apparently, it had finally decided, maybe as some sort of macabre death gift, to allow Nathan to see him properly.

Nathan couldn't help but be glad he'd been granted this last wish. Even through his gut-wrenching fear, all Nathan could think was how beautiful it was. The spread of his antlers was so large, Nathan couldn't imagine how he held his head up, but he did. Proudly.

Suddenly there was a screech of tires and Nathan heard bullets start to fly. Two of the gang members menacing him went down, their bodies jerking, blood and worse splattering on the sidewalk as their dead bodies fell to the ground. The car was coming closer and Nathan really didn't want to die.
For no reason that he could think of, he looked up at the young kid, the one threatening to rape him, and he begged him, "Help me, please."

A strange look passed over the kid's face and, for a second, he turned his head and looked right at Nathan's stag. Then, as the car came into sight, as the other three gang members started firing back, and as bullets started whining into the alley, shattering bricks and setting up deafening ricochets, the kid leapt at him, knocking him to the ground, covering him with his body.

For a horrifying second, Nathan thought the kid was going to try to rape him, but then he felt the impact of bullets hit the body on top of his. Nathan heard him cry out in pain, and he felt his body grow still and die, and he understood that the kid had saved his life.

As he felt the kid's blood pooling around him, Nathan started to cry.

Jim and Blair were driving Simon home. He'd loaned his car to Jason so he could go home, give his notice, and get his belongings packed up. Latisha had gone with him, the two of them not willing to be parted. It did Simon's heart good to watch them together.

He'd been worried that Jason, once bonded, would be sexually attracted to Latisha. As far as Simon was concerned, she was too young for that. The streetwise part of him knew that Latisha was no virgin, probably hadn't been for far too long, but he didn't care. She was young and alone, and Simon wasn't going to stand by and let anyone take advantage of her.

Not that Jason would. Simon had seen that the instant they'd bonded. And anyone who saw them together could see that they adored each other. But it was still reassuring to Simon that Jason was treating Latisha like a little sister. Maybe later things would change but, right now, their current relationship suited Simon just fine.

They'd all just been treated to Amelia's bonding with her sister, and Simon knew, as they drove along, that all three of them had stupid grins on their faces. He didn't think he'd ever get tired of watching that. It was the most amazing thing he'd ever seen or felt. Like two puzzle pieces of the universe clicking together, making the world a little bit more whole.

It almost made him want his own Sentinel. Almost. Besides, if things worked out the way they wanted, he might have hundreds of them and probably be sick to death of them in no time.

His radio suddenly squawked into life. "Reports of multiple gun-fire at Waterwheel and Huntington. Suspected gang activity."

Simon grabbed for the mike. "This is Banks. I'm with Detective Ellison and near that location. We're on it." He slapped his mars light onto the top of his car and hit the siren. Stomping on the gas, he floored it.

They weren't the first cop car to arrive, and probably wouldn't be the last. The shooting seemed to be over, and Simon could hear the sirens of arriving ambulances. There were several gang members being shoved against walls by cops, and their surly cursing filled the air.

Jim reached for Blair and pulled him close. "Stay near."

Simon was glad to hear Jim's warning. He was tempted to get on Blair's other side. The place looked like a war zone, bodies everywhere. They'd managed to avert a major gang incident like this a few times, but things had been heating up until a blow up like this had been inevitable.

Plus, John was still on the loose having skipped bail, and Simon and Jim were both sure that he'd be
heading for Cascade in search of Blair. He was probably here already, biding his time. Despite the fact that Blair had Jim's strength to pull on, Simon would just as soon keep John as far away from Blair as possible.

Suddenly he saw Jim's panther. "Jim, look." He pointed the black cat out, barely visible in the gloom of the evening. His eyes widened. "And look." A magnificent stag stood on the corner, five dead gang members at his feet.

"Someone's crying." Jim stepped over the dead bodies and headed into the alleyway.

"Jesus, it's John," Simon said roughly. The tattoos were visible, even at this distance, strangely highlighted by the one single bulb valiantly doing its best to light up a few square feet of alley.

"No," Jim contradicted. "He's not the one crying."

When they got closer, Simon winced as he saw the bullet holes riddling John's body. John wouldn't be doing anything to anyone. Jim and Simon pulled his body to the side, and they found another man, covered in blood, sobbing his heart out.

Simon pulled his gun as Jim and Blair crouched down next to him. "Are you hurt?" Blair asked soothingly.

"No," he sobbed out. "He, he s-s-saved me." The crying started up again.

Simon's jaw dropped. "He did?" He looked down at John, thinking what an awful waste it all was, wondering if they'd gotten to him before Mr. Smith if they could have made a difference.

The young man nodded. "I asked him to h-h-help me, and he threw himself on me and the b-bullets hit him." He made a heroic effort to pull himself together. "S-s-sorry. I d-don't usually c-c-cry like this." He punctuated his last word with a surprisingly loud hiccup.

Simon watched Blair bite back a smile. Blair glanced at the stag. "He belong to you?"

The young man nodded again. "Y-you can s-see him? No one can ever s-see him." He hiccupped again and wiped his eyes with the heels of his hands.

Blair grimaced as the young man's actions spread blood all over his face. He stripped out of his outer shirt and began to wipe his face off. "Here, let me. Your hands are all bloody."

Simon let out an exasperated sigh. "Sandburg, will you stop mothering him. I don't even know yet if he's a part of this."

Blair stared up at him, his typical Simon-you-shouldn't-be-so-suspicious-of-everyone look on his face. "You mean the gang fight?" At Simon's nod and annoyed sigh, Blair continued to tenderly wipe off the man's face. "Are you? Are you a part of this?"

A few tears welled up in the young man's eyes again. "N-no." He drew a deep shaky breath. "I was just asking for d-directions and it started." Glancing up at Simon, a tear rolled down his cheek. "They k-killed the clerk, blew his head off." A sob burst out. "Oh, God." He made to touch his face again, but Blair stopped him, now wiping at his hands.

"What were you doing down here in this neighborhood, anyway?" Simon asked, still on interrogation mode, perfectly happy, despite Blair's look, to be as suspicious as he wanted to be.

Blair interrupted any answer he might have made. "What's your name?" he asked softly.
"N-Nathan."

Blair's eyebrows went up.

Nathan let out a watery chuckle. "I know. My grandfather was Jewish, I'm named after him. I'm only part Japanese."

Simon decided he must have been born in this country because there wasn't a trace of an accent. His hair was jet-black, straight and cut short. Even in the darkness of the alley, Simon could tell his eyes were black as well and, even with a dirty, tear-streaked face, he was a good-looking guy.

Blair interrupted his thoughts. "I'm Blair," he introduced himself. "And this is Jim," he pointed at Jim. "And the guy with the gun and the attitude is Simon."

Nathan smiled nervously at all three of them, seeming especially cautious of Simon.

That worked for Simon. "I still want to know what he was doing down here in the middle of the night," he insisted.

Nathan drew his legs up and hugged them wearily. "All I know is that after I graduated, I d-decided to treat myself to a road trip. I've never done it, and I promised myself when I got my Ph.D. that I was going to do it. So, I got in my c-car and started driving. Then, about half way across the country, I started seeing him." He jerked his thumb over his shoulder at the stag, which just seemed to be lounging around.

"So, I d-decided to follow it. I mean, who wouldn't, right? I was raised on Brothers Grimm and Hans Christian Anderson, and here was my m-magic stag who would lead me to riches and destiny, right?" He swallowed hard and sniffed, letting out a mocking laugh. "Jesus. Some destiny, getting raped and shot in an alley." He turned to glare at the stag. "You weren't much help, either."

Simon wondered if the stag would have intervened if it came right down to it. He wouldn't have attacked John, but he might have gone after the other five. Then, again, maybe not. Blair's wolf hadn't done him much good in the past. He was glad Blair was the one who had to figure all this shit out.

"Go on," Blair encouraged. He tossed the shirt aside, obviously concluding he was fighting a losing battle. Simon was sure only a fire hose would get all the blood off of Nathan.

"I got this inexplicable urge to go to Oregon, even though I sort of wanted to go to California, but I g-go to Oregon anyway. When I got there I kept feeling the urge to go further north, so I kept going. Then, once I got here, my stupid c-car broke down, and I started to walk, paying more attention looking for him--" again the thumb jerked over his shoulder, "than where I was going, and finally I realized I was completely lost and needed to find a place to stay for the night. I went in to ask directions to someplace close by when all h-hell broke loose." He finished his story with a rush of words, still punctuated by an occasional hiccup.

Simon put his gun away. "Why would he be drawn here?" he asked Blair. "There aren't five Sentinels in Cascade."

Blair shrugged. "I don't know. Maybe there are. Maybe there's one here we don't know about, or maybe the pull was strong enough before to connect him with his Sentinel, so he kept feeling it even when there weren't five together anymore."

Simon prodded John with his shoe. "Do you think he was here for John?" he asked guardedly, thinking that would really suck.
"I don't think so, Simon," Jim said, a smile in his voice.

The tone in his voice made Blair and Simon look at Jim, see the grin on his face, and then follow Jim's gaze to look at Nathan's stag. Hector's snake was coiled around the stag's hooves, emitting a very self-satisfied air.

Nathan was staring at his stag as well. "What are you guys talking about? And who does the snake belong to?" He looked around, his eyes growing even wider, "And who does the panther belong to? And the wolf?" His last question ended on a squeak. Then, he bit his lip and looked at Blair, wonder starting to replace the fear in his eyes. "He is a magic stag, isn't he? I thought I was only k-kidding, but I was right, right?"

Blair nodded, smiling. "Yes, you were right."

Nathan's laugh was shaky again. "Are we talking riches here?"

Blair shook his head, laughing back. "No, but man, we are totally talking destiny."

Jim held down a hand to help Nathan up. "Come on. I know someone who's been waiting to meet you."

Simon felt an uncharacteristic pressure in his chest, and he was pretty sure it was joy. He thought he was going to like living a life that was filled with miracles.

Nathan stood up and looked down at himself with chagrin. "Man, I'm a mess."

"That's right, and I'll be damned if I'll let you get in my car that way," Simon grumped. Just because Nathan was the most recent miracle, there was no reason to let him mess up his car. He'd just gotten the damn thing cleaned.

"Just get out the blanket that's in your truck and he can sit on that," Blair instructed.

"That's my picnic blanket, Sandburg, not a rag."

Sandburg made a yak-yak gesture with his hands and when he got to Simon's car he held out his hands for the keys. Simon reluctantly handed them over, knowing he was completely Blair-whipped.

"By the way, Nathan, what's your Ph.D. in?" Blair asked as he opened the trunk and pulled out Simon's favorite picnic blanket. Simon would find a way to make Blair pay for this later.

"Special Ed." When Jim, Blair and Simon all started to laugh, Nathan looked confused. "Did I say something funny?"

Blair patted him on the shoulder. "That, my friend, is the sound of magic and destinies colliding."

"So that's a good thing?" Nathan asked, his body practically quivering with the need for it to be a good thing.

Blair gave Nathan a hug. "The very best of things. Let's just say that there're a few very special kids who could use your help."

Simon let out an aggravated sigh; with that hug now Blair had blood all over him, and as he was holding the blanket at the time, the blanket was a mess, too. Simon tried to feel irritated, but all he could think about was that he was pretty sure he'd get to see another bonding before the night was through, and they now had a teacher for all the troubled kids they were going to start rounding up,
John had somehow found his soul and managed to redeem himself, and Simon had a firm grasp on his own destiny with a couple of men he respected more than most. It was hard to feel too crabby, even about getting blood on his seats, when he had all that going for him.

He ushered everyone into the car and, after bitching at Blair and Nathan, and then at Jim for good measure, he took a moment to smile broadly at the world in general, before he got in and started the car.

The End

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