Call of the Sentinels - Part 1

by BabblingBrook

Summary

Kidnapped and isolated Arthur Pendragon escapes from his prison changed. Luckily he is found by the only two people in the state than know what he is going through. He finds their help invaluable as he returns to campus life and searches for his Guide.

On the other side of the world, African trained Sentinel Xander Harris has a dream of coming evil and is given the task of gathering the troupes to save the world tribe while he finds and rescues new Slayers and navigates the secrets of how both callings are related.

Notes

This is my first multiple fandom crossover fic that I have completed enough to post. Yeah me! The kick start for this was NaNoWrMo 2015. I could not come up with an original story that would flow from my fingers like I knew I would need to make the 50,000 words. I didn't want to start when I knew I was doomed for failure. Then I turned to an outline I had made for a Merlin/Sentinel crossover. Why Merlin/Sentinel you may ask... because at the time I had never seen the two fandoms crossed in my years of searching for and reading Sentinel crossover stories.
A bit about time lines:
With putting several fandoms together, there comes the issue of when in the fandom you are starting. I'm setting this 2005ish – give or take – a year. I thought that I could match the original airing time frames of the shows with 2005. Alas, I didn’t manage to do that with NCIS. If I had, it would have been during the second or third season. I started writing the characters more in the seven to nine rang because that had the character relationships development to the level I wanted to start off with – plus I just forgot and put Ziva in with Vance as the director. So...
- Merlin is an AU set in modern times.
- The Sentinel after the series
- Buffy after the series
- Mag-7 ATF has no set time frame
- SG-1 set before Hammond leaves and Jack is still on the team
- NCIS season 7-9; have not made references to any cases
- Criminal Minds after Haley was killed
- Harry Potter after the books (HP magical world mentioned part 1, characters in part 2)
- Sherlock has to be shifted back a few years from original air date (didn't make it into part 1)

With the stage set, let's begin...
Kidnapping

In the wilderness of Yellowstone

Arthur Pendragon and friends were out camping and hiking in Yellowstone on their summer break. They had made a long trek into the more untraveled areas of the park and been rewarded with natural wonders, from geysers and hot springs to high mountain plateaus and spectacular views. They checked in with the ranger station every evening using the satellite phone Arthur's father insisted they take with them. Now they were headed out to the more traveled area of the park. This was the last night they would spend around the campfire and under the stars.

Arthur sat on the portable stool and stirred the pot hanging over the dancing flames. Lance and Gawain were putting the finishing touches on setting up the camp. They had become very efficient at both set up and tear down during their two week exploration. It was a choreographed dance as they moved around the small area.

The stew was done, and Arthur ladled it into three bowls. Lance and Gawain retrieved theirs before sitting on the ground around the fire.

"Hard to believe school starts again in three weeks," Lance said.

"You don't fool me," Gawain said between blowing on his bowl. "You want to get back to see Gwen."

Arthur ate and watched his friends rib each other. The trip had been good – a nice get away from his father and his vision of what he wanted his son to be. All his life, Arthur had tried to be the son his father wanted. He went to the school his father chose, socialized with the children of his father's partners, participated in sports to please his father, and chose his major of studying business with an emphasis on law to help with the business conglomerate his father had built up.

Arthur thought that was what he wanted. He was practically raised in his father's office, but he was not sure that was what he wanted to do any more. Spending a few years away from home on his own at college had opened his eyes to other possibilities. He had a growing urge to take his own path and make his own mistakes without Uther looking over his shoulder. He did not know what he wanted to do, but he had a bit more time to figure it out.

They were just finishing up when there was a noise in the trees. They all froze then looked toward the darkened woods. Something clinked as it landed among them. Their attention jumped to the sound to find a canister that was quickly releasing a thick foggy gas with a hiss.

Arthur knew he needed to get away from the gas, but sleep overtook him before he could get his body to react.

In the wilderness of Yellowstone

Lance sat beside Gawain out of the way as police processed the "scene of the kidnapping." They had both already given their statements but had been asked to stay until they were done. Like they were going anywhere unless someone gave them a lift back to their car.

The police were taking pictures and bagging evidence from the campsite. A few others were looking in the immediate area, but Lance had heard one comment about waiting until morning for better light
and less chance on missing something. A search dog had been brought in and followed a trail away from the camp and towards the road. Lance had not heard anything from where that lead. Although, he had heard someone talking about contacting Arthur's father. Good luck to whoever got that job. Uther would be in their way bellowing and demanding results soon enough.

“It's three in the morning,” Gawain gripped and rubbed at his eyes.

Lance nodded. At their best guess, they had been out over an hour. When they did get their wits about them and realized Arthur was gone, they contacted the ranger station using Lance's cell phone since whoever took Arthur smashed the satellite one. He had to wander out a bit to get a stronger signal before calling. That was a little after eleven.

A blond haired female officer pulled Lance from his thoughts.

“You boys look tired. I cleared it with the others to take ya to the station where you can grab a bit of shuteye,” she said.

“Bless you,” Gawain gushed.

“Sounds good,” Lance commented.

The two trudged along behind her to the road and waiting truck.

In the Yellowstone police station

The sheriff heard Uther Pendragon before he saw him. The well known businessman was huffing and puffing demands in a manner to cause maximum disruption and attention. Which was odd since one of his demands seemed to be he wanted it kept quiet.

“Are you even close? I want my men on it.” Mr. Pendragon demanded as he got into the face of one of the unlucky sergeants to be in his path.

The sheriff stepped between them with a polite smile.

“Mr. Pendragon, I'm Sheriff Davis. Why don't we discuss this in my office.”

Where there is more privacy was left unsaid, but Pendragon seemed to catch it as he looked around the bullpen and took in all the looks they were getting. Davis was glad that the feds would be here soon and they could deal with Mr. Self-important here.

In Uther's study

Uther stomped through the house after spending a day arguing with federal agents. They had a video recording of a car leaving the park after the kidnapping. The possibility of the kidnapper taking Arthur over state lines was high, they said, and therefore fell under FBI jurisdiction. Uther didn't care as long as Arthur was found, the kidnapper punished, and everything was kept quiet. He didn't want to give the competition or stock market any reason to see him as vulnerable.

He sat at his desk to get some work down. There was an e-mail with the subject of “I know where he is” waiting for him. Uther clicked to open it and read:
Uther,

You and your company cost me my family. Your business practices ruin the lives of millions every day. And now, they have cost you your family. Click the link below if you want to see him one last time.

Uther hesitated for a moment before clicking the link. The web browser opened to a page where a video was loading. It took a few seconds before he could see his son laid out on a small bed. He could make out Arthur's chest moving up and down as proof that he was alive. A sun beam moved down Arthur's body as Uther watched with more relief than he thought he was capable of. Its movement assured Uther that he was not watching a looped clip. He searched the limited view for any other clues to where Arthur was being kept.

In a cabin in the woods

Arthur slowly opened his eyes and groaned. He did not recognize where he was. He blinked a few more times hoping that it would come back to him. It appeared to be a log-cabin. But they were camping in tents. Arthur scrunches his nose in confusion. His thoughts felt like they were struggling to surface.

"Something's not right," he thought. "Is this what being roofied feels like?" he choked out.

Slowly he sat up. He rested his elbows on his knees while rubbing at his face.

"Camping, Yellowstone, Lance and Gawain," he muttered. "Last night... dinner... attach and gas," he said more clearly.

Arthur looked up and around again with a new perspective. It was a one room cabin. A sink with a hand pump was in a cabinet on one wall. At least he wouldn't die of thirst. There was a box with what looked like canned goods beside the sink along with a propane camp stove and pot. In a corner was a five gallon bucket with a board on top. Arthur wondered what that was for momentarily before realizing it was a quick and dirty toilet.

Arthur cautiously stood. Once he was sure of his balance, he walked to the door and tried to open it. It was locked. Arthur examined the door frame. The hinges were on the right, but looked different from those in his house. Those could be easily removed with the right tools of a hammer and a punch or nail. These pins seemed to be secured on both ends.

He looked around the room for another exit. There was the open window, but there were bars over it. He walked to it. He grabbed the bars and gave them a shake. They seemed solid on first inspection.

By now Arthur's head was throbbing and his thinking sluggish. He would figure it out later. He laid back down and went to sleep.
Discoveries

Chapter Summary

Arthur is trapped in a cabin. Xander has a dream. The authority’s capture the kidnapper.

In the cabin in the woods

Arthur woke again feeling like he would be sick, yet he felt hungry. A look out the closest window showed the shadows getting longer. The sound of the wildlife told him night was approaching. One did not spend two weeks camping and not learn the difference in patterns at morning and dusk. He did not have much light left to see by unless his kidnapper left him a lantern or flashlight.

First priority was to examine the boxes on the cabinet. They contained food, just as Arthur suspected. Behind the camp stove was a lantern. He picked it up and gave it a shake. It felt full, so it should last him several hours. He dug around until he found a small box of matches. He made sure everything was properly set on the lantern. He pulled a wooden match from the box and closed it. He brushed the match head along the side. It did not catch. He tried a second time. The familiar snick of the match head igniting was a welcome sound. He carefully moved it to the lantern wick and was rewarded with a warm glow.

He shook out the match and placed it on the metal sink edge in case it was not out. He adjusted the brightness and started taking inventory of the supplies left for him. There was a box of noodles, dried fruit, bags of nuts, canned meat, and canned vegetables. There was enough food for five days easily. He could probably make it last longer with proper rationing. Did that mean the kidnapper would be back in five days or he would have what he wanted in that time? Did that mean he would be freed by then? Arthur forced his mind from those thoughts and back on the here and now.

He turned his attention to the sink. There was a pitcher with water in it setting by the hand pump. It confused him at first until he remembered that if a hand pump had not been recently used it had to be primed by pouring water into the hand pump so the proper vacuum would be formed to pull water from farther down. He added the water and started pumping. There were gurgles and sputters from the piping. He pumped and pumped until the water flowed freely in gushing waves. He refilled the pitcher then stretched to grab the pan and fill. With that done, he drank the cold water directly from the spout and splashed handful after handful on his face.

Dinner was next on the agenda. Since he had not eaten in at least twenty four hours, Arthur opted for a soup. He found a can opener in the box. He opened a can of beef and of mixed vegetables to add to his pot of water. He used his previously lit matchstick and the lantern to light the stove. He didn't want to waste any matches if he didn't have to. He set the pan on to warm.

He looked around the darkening room while waiting. A red blinking light caught his attention immediately. He grabbed the light and walked over. There was a camera mounted on the wall. It probably only got a view of the bed, but it did not change the fact that he was being watched. His initial reaction was to tear it down. What would be the consequences of that? Would that lead to action on the captor's part or inaction? Would that doom Arthur to live out his last days in this cabin? Arthur forced himself to hold off for a day or two before doing anything. He returned to check on his soup and locate the utensils he had seen earlier.
Arthur moved to the bed with his pot of soup. He carefully spooned a bite to his mouth. His eyes drifted to the window and to the shadowed trees beyond. He took another spoonful. There were a lot of conifers. Some deciduous trees reaching out around them. Another spoonful. He could hear movement out there. He paused and focused on the sound. The movement through forest debris continued. The footsteps were close together and sounded more like rooting through dead leaves. Probably a skunk or opossum or other such nocturnal creature. Arthur focused back on eating the rest of his food.

Once done, he took the pan to the sink and pumped fresh water into it to rinse and refilled it to drink from later. His next stop was the bucket. He removed the wood board. Thankfully the bucket was empty. Arthur relieved himself and replaced the board. With nothing else to do that would not use his limited resources, Arthur went to bed and turned the lamp off.

**Somewhere in Africa**

Xander Harris found himself standing in the middle of an African plane. Trees dotted the landscape. There were no animals in sight. Xander turned slowly around the blue tinted world. Xander brought his hand up to shade his eyes. He paused and touched his damaged eye. It was not damaged. He knew he was dreaming now. A sound from his left drew his attention.

“Hey, Harley,” Xander greeted the hyena standing next to him.

The hyena body blurred, became taller, and morphed into a duplicate of Xander dressed in tribal wear. Hyena-Xander pointed out across the plane.

“Danger growing closer,” Hyena-Xander said.

Xander looked to where his double was pointing and squinted his eyes but did not see anything. He, however, was not going to wright the warning off. Years living on a hellmouth and working with slayers taught him to never do that. He figure that went double when it was his spirit guide telling him. Then he felt it. Evil emanating from the direction. It was faint. Xander did not know if that was because it was still weak or really far away. Xander looked around for any indication of direction, but there were no shadows or visible sun for a clue.

“If there was, would it translate into the real world?” he muttered to himself. “I feel it,” he told his guide.

A shiver ran down him from head to toe. It was not good, whatever it was.

“Find the others,” Hyena-Xander commanded.

Shapes emerged on the horizon moving swiftly toward them. They grew closer faster than they ever would in the waking world. The first he could make out was a large black cat paired with a wolf.

Xander sat up fully awake. He blinked and looked around. He was awake and in the hut he had lived in for the past few months. He threw the light blanket off him and pushed his way through the door. The fire in the center of the village was soft glowing embers. In the eastern sky, he could just see the lightening of the horizon. Xander sat down by the fire pit and let his eyes focus on the embers while his mind went back to his... vision?

Amuk, village shaman and Xander's mentor, sat down beside him.
“You are troubled,” Amuk said.

“I think I just had a vision or walked on the spirit plane or....” Xander trialed off.

Amuk rested a fatherly hand on Xander's shoulder.

“Tell me of it,” Amuk gently commanded.

The words flowed out of Xander's mouth once he started. He told of all his observations and things he sensed in the other place. Amuk grunted and hummed through the tale.

“It's good I have finished your training,” Amuk said, surprising Xander. “You have good control of your senses. You will be fine until you find a guide of your people to partner with you.”

“But... I feel there is more to learn,” Xander fumbled to get out.

Amuk smiled indulgently at Xander.

“There is always more to learn, but not all from the same teacher,” Amuk said. “You have been given a quest by your spirit guide. You can turn you back on it and walk away from your gifts and calling or you can see where it will lead you.”

Xander sighed.

“I could never say no when I could help even in small ways,” Xander admitted and resigned himself to the quest and new way of life.

“That is why you make an excellent watchman,” Amuk replied. “I'll make sure Fuma is ready to follow you to the large city to be trained with her sisters.”

Xander nodded his head in understanding.

“Once you find your Guide, it will be watchman, guide, and slayer as it has always meant to be,” Amuk said before walking away.

Xander ran the parting words through his mind once more. Watchman, guide, and slayer working together as a unit? He implied that it was that way before. Xander had never come across anything like that, granted research was not his favorite task. Asking Amuk would be pointless. He knew Amuk would not share any more on the topic. That would not keep him from questioning Giles when they got back to England.

In the cabin in the woods

Arthur woke with the birds. He stretched. He already felt better than he did last night. Whatever the kidnapper used to knock him out must have worked its way out of his system. The sun was not up yet, and Arthur decided to wait for it laying in bed. He avoided looking at the camera and stared up at the ceiling in the per-morning light. Surprisingly he could make out a few details in the roof. There was a large knothole above him that reminded him of a bowling ball.

“Must be lighter than I thought,” he muttered.

He wondered what was going on out there. His father would surely know by now.

“Are Lance and Gawain all right?”
He felt bad for not thinking about them before. He did not know if they were kidnapped too and just not with him or if they were left at the camp. He didn’t know how many kidnappers there were, what they want, why they kidnap him, did they know who he was or was he just picked at random? Is it some weird cult that kidnap campers, isolate them, and then indoctrinate them into their group after isolating and starving them?

Admittedly, the last was a bit far fetched and sounded more like something Errent would come up with.

Arthur hated not knowing. He knew he would go insane if he did not get out of here. He turned his thoughts to what he knew he had and how it could be used to get him out of this place. Once out, he at least had a chance to find civilization.

He did a quick check of his pockets. They had been emptied, so he did not have his trusty pocket knife. That at least had a screwdriver on it. Maybe he could get the bars off if he had it. He had not taken a close look at the bars yesterday. Maybe he could come up with a way to get them off the window.

His belly rumbled. A handful of fruit and nuts sounded like a good breakfast. The sun was up enough now that he had a dim light to see by. He walked over to the box of supplies and pulled out the bag of dried fruit. He opened the bag and almost gagged. They smelled bad. Not bad as rotten, but bad as chemicals. Arthur quickly resealed the bag and set it away from everything else. He more cautiously opened the bag of nuts. No gagging smell. He held the bag to his face and took a tentative sniff. There was the richness of peanuts. The sharp earthy note of walnuts. The mellowness of pecans. The mildness of cashews was barely discernible but there. The woodiness of Brazil nuts. It was all reassuring nut smells. There were no chemical odors, or fungus, or anything that should not be there.

Reassured, Arthur took a handful and resealed the bag. He slowly munched on the nuts as he studied the room with fresh eyes and a goal to escape.

In a national news room

“The latest viral internet video shows what appears to be a bedraggled Arthur Pendragon on a bed in what looks like a log cabin. The voice over admits to kidnapping the Pendragon heir in retribution for atrocity by PenChem, one of the companies of the Pendragon Group. We are still trying to confirm the validity of the claims. Is it true or a big hoax.”

In the cabin in the woods

It had been four days since Arthur woke in the cabin. He had a plan today. He got up and made a breakfast of noodles. He was saving the nuts for when he escaped. He ate and cleaned up before pacing around the room. He made sure he passed in front of the camera for whoever was watching and looked agitated, which was not hard. All he had to do was think about what was going on and all the things he did not know. It was all out of his control. He did not even know why!

Arthur stopped and turned to the camera. He did not know if it had sound or not but he was not going to mess up his planned “violent breakdown” not seem real.

“What do you want?” he yelled at the camera. “Why am I here? Are you ever going to show your
face?” He glared at the camera and crossed his arms over this chest. “I'm going insane in here! I want out! I want to go home! Answer me!”

Arthur aggressively paced some more and muttered under his breath. He paused in front of the cabinet. He grabbed up the pan. He marched toward the camera.

“I'm tired of you watching me!” he exclaimed.

He raised the pot and brought it down hard on the camera. There was a crack sound. He did it again and again and again. The camera cracked and creaked under the blows. The red light flickered and went out. The pieces of the camera dangled from the wiring in the wall. Other smaller parts were scattered on the floor. Arthur found himself breathing hard and not acting like he had planned. All his fear and frustration had come out as he beat the item that represented his unseen captor.

He raised the pot to examine it. It was dented but still usable.

“On to step two,” he muttered.

He moved to one of the lower windows and examined the bars as well as he could. The bars were one unit, six inches apart, and secured to the outside of the window frame. He reached between the bars to feel what was securing it to a wall He breathed a sigh of relief when it turned out to be screws and not bolts. A plus was they were flat head screws and not Phillips. That would make it easier to use the knife from the camping utensil set as a screwdriver. He pulled the knife out of his pocket. He examined it.

It was going to be tricky to get his arms through the bars, bend his wrists at the needed angles, and use the knife without dropping it. He wanted a way to secure it. He could us the string from his hoody. Unfortunately there was no hole to tie it to. He would have to pick a spot along the body and hope it would not slip out of the tether. Arthur experimented with several knots and locations. After each one, he would let the knife fall and dangle before pulling it up. Several times the knife slipped right through the string looped around it. It took most of the morning before he was satisfied it was secure from being lost out the window.

Arthur looked at the window. He could start on it now, but figured he should have lunch first before beginning. He heated up a meal of meat and vegetables and ate before giving himself over to his afternoon task.

As he stirred the heating food, he assessed what was left of the provisions. The cans would be bulky to carry. So would the camp stove, but it held more promise of being useful. Was it worth hauling around? He might find a town within the first day. On the other hand, he might be out there for days. He might also be spotted by who put him here and have to run for his life. What was he willing to waist energy carrying?

The pot. It would come in handy without the stove. He could always build a fire pit and cook over. Matches were a must. The nuts and noodles. He could put them all in the pillow case to carry. Should probably take a blanket. It had been fairly cool at night and it would be needed. That would make a decent load to haul around through unfamiliar woods.

It was the end of July, maybe the beginning of August by now. He should be able to find some edible items out there. Maybe he could catch a fish if there was a creek. He had enough experience ruffing it, he would survive especially if he got out of the cabin while he still has food.

The food was done and consumed quickly so Arthur could get back to gaining his freedom.
Arthur located a screw with his fingers then carefully eased his hands through the bars and into position. The knife held firmly in one hand and the string tied around his wrist. He tried the tip of the knife first, but it was too pointed to provide the needed leverage. He rotated it so the saturated edge lined up with the screw head slit. He was doing this a lot by feel since he could barely see the bump of the screw. After several tries he got it firmly secured and put pressure on the ends to loosen the screw. It did not move at first. He applied more pressure and a little more until it suddenly turned. The knife slipped out of the slit when the screw broke free. He awkwardly fumbled with the knife before securing it firmly in his grip and started working on the screw again. Slowly it backed out of the wood frame. Once he could get a grip on it, he used his fingers to work the screw the rest of the way out instead of risking the only tool he had to break the fastening loose.

Several hours latter, Arthur had all the screws at the bottom out and several along each side. He figured he could use brute force move the bars enough to get out. Outside the window, the shadows were already lengthening. He knew it was best not to head out now despite his desire to be free. He would eat another meal of canned goods and finish off the rest in the morning before setting out. A full belly and as many calories as he could consume to tied him over.

Arthur had a fitful sleep and rose just as the birds began to sound the early hour before sunrise. He did not need the lantern at this point to see. There seemed to be enough light. He prepared breakfast in the pot and bolted the food down. It was not the best thing to do, but he was twitching to get out of the cabin and into the woods before he was discovered. He washed up the pot and drank as much water as he could stomach. He re-filled the pitcher with fresh water to take with him.

He jerked the pillowcase off and started putting the planned items in it. He sat it by the window and returned for the pitcher of water. Standing before the window, he pushed the bottom of the bars as hard as he could. His muscles strained with the force, but he could feel the screws slowly giving under the pressure. The lower edge inched farther away from the wall until there was a crack. The bars gave way. Arthur hung on tightly to them so it would not fall on him if it was totally free. He eased the bottom back and let go. The left side pivoted downward and swung from one lone point on the right side.

Arthur stuck his head out the window to admire his work. There was one screw in the upper corner that stubbornly clung to the frame. He twisted the bars back and forth until it was free. He tossed the bars to the ground and smiled. He could leave. Nothing had felt so good in his entire life.

Small chuckles rose up and passed Arthur's lips. He blinked several times before biting his lip and gathering his wits.

"Can't stop now," he whispered to himself.

He grabbed the bag. He hefted it up and out the window. He let it dangle then leaned out the window to set it on the ground out of his way. The pitcher he placed on the bed beside the window. Arthur heaved himself onto the ledge and contorted his legs around to hang on the outside. He froze at a sound in the distance. He stopped and focused on it. He homed in on the sound and intently watched the trees there.

A deer stepped out and made its way across the small clearing before disappearing into the woods again.

Arthur strained to listen for any other signs of human life. When he was assured that only the woodland creatures were around, he grabbed the pitcher and slid out of his prison. He swung the pillowcase over his shoulder and headed away from the cabin.
In a FBI interrogation room

A man with his hands cuffed behind his back was escorted by two, dark suit wearing, FBI agents through the door of the interrogation room and placed in the chair. They withdrew to the corners of he room and stood quietly with their hands clasped in front of them. The man smiled at the mirrored window.

Agent Benton watched from the other side. His other team members beside him.

“Don't think he's sane,” Libby said breaking the silence.

“Nope,” Thomas said popping the 'p.' “It seemed to be too easy to catch him.”

Benton agreed. The cyber unit tracked the video back to Balin Savage with minimal problem, but they assured him that with Balin's credentials, it should have been harder. That lead Benton to believe that Balin wanted to be caught. What was his game? He had alluded to a personal loss that he tied to PenChem. His twin brother Balan had worked for PenChem and died several years ago. Balin had very vocally blamed it on PenChem. No evidence was found by the investigators to substantiate Balin's claim. No charges were brought against PenChem or the Pendragon family. That did not stop Balin from making a nuisance of himself until a restraining order had been issued against him. He was jailed several times for not following the order until he vanished. They were still digging to find where he was since then.

Benton picked up the case folder and headed out the door and into the interrogation room. He sat down across from Balin and opened the folder. He did not need it for reference at this point. It was more of a prop. He waited. Balin waited and smiled. It looked plastic and frozen – very reminiscent of the Joker. Probably mad as a hatter to boot.

“I'll make this easy on you, feddy,” Balin said. Then he sang, “In the hills of a western state the young princeling waits. He waits by day, and he waits by night for his love to come and find him. If the love's not clever enough, and if the love's not daring enough. She'll come to late and find him dead in the shadow of Old Baldy.”

Benton revised his earlier thought. Balin was not the Joker; he fancied himself the Riddler.
Cascade Major Crime Unit

Jim Ellison and Blair Sandburg sat at the conference table with the rest of their unit. On the TV the reporter was talking about the Pendragon kidnapping's newest update. A suspect had been taken into custody and questioned, but the missing young man had not been recovered yet. Blair followed the story with interest until Simon Banks entered the room followed by a young IT member. He shut the door behind him. Simon scooped the remote off the table and muted the TV. The IT staff pulled out his laptop and started hooking it up to the TV monitor. The room went quiet as all attention focused on Simon.

“As you all know, the FBI have taken Balin Savage into custody for the kidnapping of Arthur Pendragon. During questioning, he admitted to taking the boy and why. However he gave the FBI a riddle to the boy's location. They have sent the recording of the riddle out to multiple agencies in hopes that someone can decipher the riddle.”

Simon nodded to the IT tech and the screen was filled with the image of an interrogation room. The two men were just sitting there until the kidnapper spoke.

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The clip froze a few seconds after the last word.

Simon drew the attention to himself again by pacing the room.

“I shouldn't have to tell any of you that this is highly classified information and if any of you yahoos utter a word about it outside these walls or in the presence of any non-involved person, I will personally hand your ass over the the feds for messing up their case.”

Simon looked each of them in the eye as he made his way around the room. He made doubly sure the tech kid got the message too. He missed his cigar at times like this. Dam no smoking bans.

“What's the perp's history?” Joe asked.

Simon started to answer when Jim looked up from his contemplative look.

“Would you play it again?” Jim asked.

All eyes turned to Jim. Jim gave his head a small shake and waved an upright index finger in thought.

“There's something familiar about the tune,” Jim explained.
Blair was instantly more attentive to his partner and sentinel. At Simon's nod the tech played it again. Jim's faced took on an intense concentration.

“Again,” Jim said when it finished.

The entire room watched Jim and witnessed when he put the pieces together.

“It's a folk song.” Jim said. “Heard it as a kid. About a minor trapped on a mountainside by a rock slide and rescued by his sweetheart who dug him out.”

“Isn't Old Baldy the local name of one of the peaks out there?” the tech offered.

Jim snapped his fingers and pointed to the tech.

“You're right. The one that's a garnet dome with no trees growing on it,” Jim said.

“Sound's like a possible lead,” Simon said. “Jim, Blair, you two go check it out as a possible lead. See me before you set out. The rest of you back to work. The cases aren't going to solve themselves.”

In the forest outside Cascade

Jim pulled his truck into the small parking lot for hikers and campers. Blair was already unbuckling his belt before Jim had put the truck into park.

“Slow down, Chief,” Jim said. “We can't help if you injure yourself.”

Blair paused and took a deep breath. He let it out slowly.

“You're right,” Blair admitted. “It's just... the idea of him out there in who knows what kind of conditions...” Blair trailed off.

Jim rested his hand on Blair's shoulder and gave it a squeeze.

“I know,” Jim softly said. “If he's out there, we'll find him.”

Jim tapped his ear and nose.

“Yeah,” Blair admitted. “We've gotten a lot better over the years.”

Which was true. After the thesis debacle, Blair took Simon up on his offer and joined the force where he became Jim's full time partner. He still missed his anthropology studies, but he had put his training to good use on the job. He had become a decent profiler with some additional training.

Jim saw and treated him more as an equal, a true partner – not some kid who was useful at times and ignored when he was not convenient. Sure Jim still had his self centered, blind to all other moments, but not as often. And he was quicker to realize when he was being a giant dickhead and take a step back – at least with Blair. On the flip side, Blair had learned how to better present things to Jim and how to keep Jim from steamrolling over him. Blair often thought it was because he now had an understandable permanent place in Jim's world instead of a quasi made up position.

One things Blair learned about Jim was he craved normalcy, regularity, and stability. Blair, as a ride along, had been neither of those. He represented the powers of the sentinel which emphasized how
not normal Jim was, and Blair's ride along status could be pulled at any moment ripping him from Jim's life. Both factors meant that Jim, consciously or not, kept Blair at arm's distance. He fought Blair at every turn if only in small ways. It kept him from really accepting his abilities. The more the mystic side wormed its way in; the greater deviation from normal Jim felt; the more he tried to control and push thing into Jim's world view.

Since becoming partners, they had found a groove. Jim relaxed as their partnership grew and the permanency was apparent. His trust in Blair grew, and he slowly opened up to Blair and became more open to discussing Sentinel things as long as they avoided the mystic. They were good as a team, as friends, as Sentinel and Guide.

“Yeah,” Jim agreed. “Let's go find the missing Pendragon.”

Jim got out of the truck and pulled the camping pack from the back. They planed a trip for this weekend and had everything packed back at the loft. They did not know how long they would be out searching so thought it would be best to camp to save time.

Blair got his own pack and secured it over his shoulders. When satisfied, he smiled at Jim and said, “Lead the way.”

Jim turned and headed along the path that lead into the woods and Old Baldy.

In an unknown woods

Arthur stumbled over a root and caught himself on a dangling dry branch. The branch snapped so loud that it caused him to cringe. There was a fast heartbeat off to his right up in the trees. Arthur shook his head and closed his eyes. He slowly breathed in and focused on the smell of the woods. His hands squeezed the branch until the bark and nobs dug painfully into his hand.

“I know I didn't eat any hallucinogenic plants,” he muttered.

He opened his eyes and released the branch. I assessed the damage and only found redness; no cuts like he expected with the pain. He breathed again and things seemed to stabilize. Another breath and it smelled like water. Arthur tilted his head and listened in the direction he thought the water was. The trickle of a stream or creek was just audible. He headed toward it. He had finished off the pitcher of water this morning and needed more.

He had been walking for a day in search of other people. He had found the trail used to bring him the the cabin by a four wheeler. He had followed roughly from a distance at first. Arthur figured it was best not to be seen by anyone since he did not know a thing about his kidnappers, not even what they looked like. He had come too far to walk right up to them and get captured again. He figured his best bet was find a town before talking to anyone. By afternoon, he had set off through the woods in the direction the trail had been going but a good distance away. As long as he kept the mountains to his back, he should not double back on himself.

Arthur found a river that was seven feet across. It looked clear with a rocky bottom. He could see fish darting around and that was the deciding factor to call it a day despite it only being mid afternoon. He would set up camp here, catch a fish or two, have something to eat and drink, and sleep.
In the forest outside Cascade

Jim and Blair followed the trail into the woods. Blair had the DNR trail map of the area out and trying to study it while walking. Jim automatically reached out and steered Blair around obstetrical.

“There are several trails through here,” Blair said. He tapped the map with his finger. “There's only one that leads to Granite Fist. It should branch off up a head.”

“You sure about that, Chief?” Jim teased.

“As sure as I ever am in these situations,” Blair countered.

“So we should leave the navigating up to me,” Jim said.

“Harde har har,” Blair said and elbowed Jim.

Jim plucked the map from Blair's hand and double checked their position and the trails.

“Should be half a mile,” Jim commented and gave the map back.

Jim set a quicker pace but one he knew Blair could comfortably follow for a few miles before needing a break. They were at the new path in no time. It was a well worn path because many people visited Granite Fist, AKA Old Baldy, because of the view across the woods and into the city was spectacular. Artists would set up and paint the landscape. Couples would go there for a romantic picnic. Rock climbers like the challenge of scaling the face of it.

“It doesn't make since that he would keep Arthur close to such a popular destination,” Blair said echoing where Jim's thought were taking him.

“He said the shadow,” Jim slowly and thoughtfully said. “The mountain casts a long shadow in the morning.”

“Yeah, probably hundreds of acres,” Blair added following the logical progression. “That would cover the park and private property.” Blair scrunched his face. “Maybe we should call back to the office and have them pull records on cabins in the area.”

“One step ahead of you,” Jim said with a shit eater grin and pulled his phone from his pocket. “Simon send me the list before we left the loft.”

Blair slugged Jim in the arm on general principle.

“And you didn't tell me,” Blair griped. “So where is our first stop.”

“The closest one is only a few miles off the path,” Jim said. “Don't think it will be the one, but...”

Blair jumped in, “But if we don't check it out it will probably be the one.”

Jim grunted his agreement.

“Well, let's get it out of the way,” Blair said.

They found the first cabin.

“No heart beats,” Jim said as they approached it.
“I don't see any obvious tracks,” Blair said. “Last rain was just before the kidnapping, so we there should be tracks. I did my own research.”

Jim scanned the path before them and around them.

“Only animal tracks,” Jim confirmed.

They walked up to the plat board cabin.

“The one in the video clips was a log cabin,” Blair stated.

Despite knowing there was no one alive in the building, they fall back on their training. Jim moved to the door first while Blair stood to one side. Jim opened the door and stepped in. His eyes swept the room and found nothing of interest. Jim stepped further into the room. Blair two steps behind him. They split up and did a quick sweep of the cabin and found nothing.

“Next,” Blair announced satisfied this was not where they were looking for.

They walked out of the cabin, and Jim froze.

“Jim,” Blair softly questioned, “everything alright?”

Jim shakes himself and looks grim.

“Another Sentinel,” he answers.

Blair's body shivered from head to toe once at the news before he reasserted control.

“In that direction,” Jim said pointing away from the mountains beside them.

“Let me guess the direction of the next cabin?” Blair said.

Jim let his hand drop back to his side and tilted his head as he did when he pushed his senses out to their limits. After several minutes, Jim shook his head to clear it and placed his hand on Blair's shoulder to ground and use as reference.

“Well,” Blair said at a low level volume they had agreed on in such circumstances, “this could be an interesting turn of events.”

By the time Blair uttered the sentience, Jim was readjusted and ready to continue.

“The next cabin it closer and farther north than the Sentinel,” Jim said. “I can't find him, too far away. He doesn't feel like Alex did, whatever that means.” Jim cursed the voodoo under his breath.

This time Blair placed his hand on Jim's shoulder to offer calming reassurance.

“Unfortunately there is a lot we don't know. I don't like the prospect of running into another Sentinel any better than you do,” Blair admitted. “Let's get to the other cabin so we can check it off our list.

They walked for over an hour when they crossed a trail headed to the next cabin.

“Four wheeler tracks,” Blair commented. “Looks like it was traveled several times by one or a few times by several verticals.”
“One, they all have the same chunk out of one of the treads.

Blair slipped off his backpack so he could pull out his crime scene camera. He started taking pictures in case this was the kidnapper’s trail. Jim made notes in his notebook and jotted down the GPS location from his phone. Once they had all the documentation they needed, Blair put his pack back on and they followed the trail north.

Jim kept sniffing to their left as they walked.

“What do you smell?” Blair asked after ten minutes of watching this.

“A male, unwashed, on foot traveled off the path headed away from the cabin. Probably yesterday from the strength of the sent trail,” Jim answered. “Good chance it’s our Sentinel.”

“Next question – is he the kidnapped, a kidnapper, or someone not involved with the case,” Blair said.

They walked on until the entered a small clearing with a log cabin. They stopped both knowing instinctively that this was the place. Blair lifted the camera from his chest and started taking pictures.

“No heartbeat,” Jim said.

“Empty or dead?” Blair hesitated in asking.

“No smell of death,” Jim assured.

They slowly moved closer to the building. They could see the large padlock on the door long before they got close. Blair took pictures of the lock and door. Jim hand gripped his shoulder and drew him away.

“It's booby-trapped,” Jim said. He pointed out the well hidden trigger wire. Jim sniffed again. “Explosives.”

“If the love's not clever enough,” Blair quoted from the riddle.

He made sure to get good pictures of the wire while Jim looked in the barred window beside the door.

“Why isn't there any glass in the windows?” Blair asked.

Jim shrugged and ran a finger over the ledge.

“They did at one time. The frames are still there, but the glass is gone.”

“Weird,” Blair muttered. “Think nailing windows closed would be easier than putting bars over everything.”

“Glass can be broken and used as a weapon,” Jim pointed out. “Plus it would get hot in there during the day with no airflow.”

Jim looked through the bars to the interior.

“The bars are missing on a back window,” Jim said.

They set off around the back of the house. They found the bars on the ground and faint footprints in the dirt. Jim pointed out thing, and Blair took pictures to document the scene before they move in.
Blair snapped more pictures of the inside through the window.

Jim was examining one of the screws closely.

“Used something that wasn't smooth as a screwdriver. It left marks. My guess is a serrated kitchen knife.”

Jim put the screw in an evidence bag and labeled it before securing it in his jacket pocket.

“Ready to go in?” Blair asked.

Jim nodded. He helped Blair crawl in trough the window before following. Jim immediately wrinkles up his nose and glances to the corner where the five gallon bucket sat. Blair could guess what was in it and was not going to look. Blair snapped pictures while Jim walked around.

“The bed matches the one in the video, and the camera angle would have been right,” Jim said and pointed out the smashed camera on one wall.

“Missing the blanket,” Blair countered. “Probably took it with him.”

“According to the case file, Arthur is an experienced camper,” Jim pointed out.

“He had been camping in Yellowstone for several weeks before,” Blair said thoughtfully. “Follow that with close to a week of total isolation.” Blair nodded to the empty cans and the door. “I don't think the kidnapper ever planned on coming back.”

Jim had moved to the cabinet and found the bag of dried fruit.

“That's odd,” Blair said seeing what Jim held. “Why didn't he take them?”

Jim opened the bag and tossed it back to the cabinet.

“Poisoned,” Jim said. “Don't know what with, but they are definitely not safe.”

“So whoever was kept here is the Sentinel. Probably a new one at that,” Blair said. He ran his hand through his hair. “We have to help him, Jim, if that's the case. At least explain to him what's going on,” Blair was on the edge of pleading.

Jim took a deep breath and centered himself.

“If it's the kid..., yeah we have to at least do that,” Jim reluctantly agreed.

Blair moved to stand beside Jim and rested his hand on Jim's arm.

“Whatever you think is best, Jim. You know I'm behind you one hundred percent,” Blair assured.

Jim patted Blair's hand.

“I know you are, Chief. It took me a while, but I know you are. We'll see how it goes.” Jim paused then added, “He feels safe.”

“Let's go find him then,” Blair said.

“After we report in to Simon about this so they can get a team out here to defuse the bomb,” Jim said.
Simon told them to go a head and track the kid since they had a lead but to take the fruit into evidence. It would be a crucial piece of evidence, and Simon did not want it to disappear between them leaving and the team arriving. They bagged and tagged it to take with them.

They followed the Sentinel's trail. It followed the track for a while before heading out across the woods. They walked until a few hours before dark before looking for a camp sight. Jim headed for the nearest water and commented about the fishing.

Blair shook his head with a smile and started setting up their camp.

**In an unknown woods**

Arthur woke to the smell of breakfast cooking. His eyes flew open and he looked around. There was no one around, but it felt like there was. He sat up and looked around again, but he did not see anyone. Arthur took in a deep breath. The smell of cooking bacon filled his nose. He stood and turned trying to identify where it was coming from. He spun around twice before facing south. There was a hint of smoke from a camp fire. He was getting a funny feeling from that direction as well.

He thought he heard faint sounds in the direction. Arthur focused on them. The sounds turned to murmurs of conversation and gradually became clear like they were moving closer. Arthur could not see any one. Maybe there were funny acoustics bouncing sound around. He had sees thing like that in science exhibits.

“His heart rate has gone up,” a gruff male voice said.

“So he's awake. Is he listening to us?” said a second male voice, softer than the first and oddly calming.

“Don't know,” the first replied.

“How far away?”

“Less than a mile”

Arthur wondered who or what they were talking about. Was it him? If he could hear them, could they hear him? Who are they? What do they want? Are they part of the people who kidnapped him? He was not going back. His breathing accelerated and his hart pounded in his chest.

The conversation became muffled for a moment then he heard the second man clearly.

“Be calm. You're safe. Take a deep breath, hold, now release. Good, now again.”

Arthur found himself following the instructions as if they were meant for him. He breathed with the serene voice. His body relaxed and his breathing returned to normal.

“You are doing good,” the voice assured. “My name is Blair Sandburg. I'm an officer with the Cascade Major Crimes Unit. My partner Jim and I are out following a lead on a kidnapping case.”

If they were from Cascade, then he was in Washington state. Arthur wanted to believe them but what if it was a trap. Who was Blair talking to? He had only heard Blair and Jim talk.

“We found the cabin where you were kept. I applaud your ingenuity.”
Blair was talking to him?

“He’s beginning to panic again,” Jim said.

“No need to get upset,” Blair said. “We are here to help. I would show you my badge, but you can't see a mile away... well at least not without training.” The last bit was muttered as an aside.

“Chief,” Jim warned.

“Think about the last few days. Have things tasted or smelled stronger to you. Have you seen things in greater detail than you have ever been able to before? Have you heard things from great distances? Have any or all of you senses been acting odd or extremely sensitive?”

Arthur had to admit to some of those if he thought about it.

“Yes,” Arthur whispered.

“He said yes,” Jim said.

Blair cut in before Arthur could panic.

“Then there is a good chance you are a sentinel like my friend Jim. You have heightened senses that have come online because of your unique experience. They can cause trouble if you don't know how to control them. I would love to tell you all about sentinels but would prefer face to face. So here's what we are going to do. Jim will walk a hundred feet from our camp in your direction. He will put our badges there. You listen to him come and return to me. But, don't focus only on sound that can lead to a zone. Not a fun thing. Get a stick or something and also focus on touching it.

“When Jim returns, you find our badges to prove who we are. If you are satisfied that we are safe, you can join us for breakfast.”

“Alright,” Arthur agreed.

It sounded like a reasonable plan. If they tried ambushing him, he could run. Arthur gathered up his belongings and set off toward their camp. He listened to Jim moving through the woods, but he kept Blair's warning at the forefront of his mind. He ran his fingers over the pillowcase hem as he carried it.

Jim finally stopped and there was the sound of movement in the brush. Then Jim was headed back the way he came.

Arthur kept focused on Jim and Blair talking to keep him on the right course. After walking fifteen minutes he spotted the badges hanging from a tree branch. Arthur picked up one and opened it. There was the gold badge that said Cascade with a number. The other side had a photo ID with information. The first one belonged to Blair, who had very curly hair. As far as Arthur could tell, they were real. He opened the second. Jim looked like a muscular man with thinning hair. Arthur was surprised that he recognized Jim from the news. Detective of the year or something like that.

A sunbeam hit the badge and drew Arthur's attention. There was so much detail and layers....

In the forest outside Cascade

“I think he zoned,” Jim said.
“Not surprising,” Blair said as he stood. “Let's go fetch him.

They trotted through the woods to where Jim left their badges. There stood Arthur Pendragon staring at the gold shield.

“Sunbeam I bet,” Jim said.

Blair pulled a small vial from his pocket and uncapped it. He waved it under Arthur's nose.

“Arthur, I need you to focus on my voice and the smell of peppermint. I need you to come back to us,” Blair coxed.

Arthur blinked, coughed at the smell, and then looked at Blair.

“How'd you get here?” Arthur asked.

“You zoned,” Blair said. “You got lost in one of your senses to a point of meditation that is hard to break out of. Let's get breakfast, and I'll explain.”

Jim retrieved their badges while Blair led Arthur back to their camp. The bedraggled youth seemed a bit dazed still but was willing to join them. Seeing Arthur in person eased something in Jim. Whatever “instincts” Alex brought out in Jim, Arthur did not – correction they were different instincts. This felt more like he was taking a new recruit under his wing to train. Seeing Blair with him was not troubling nor did it feel threatening like he had feared. Jim sat on the ground by the fire and watched Blair work his magic of getting people to open up.

Blair gave Arthur the plate he had fixed for the other sentinel.

“Thanks,” Arthur muttered and dug in.

“I'll start with your kidnapper was caught,” Blair said.

Arthur's fork stopped mid-path to his mouth.

“Why did he do it?” Arthur asked.

“Boils down to a vendetta against your father and PenChem for presumably causing his brother's death,” Jim answered.

The fork dropped back to the plate.

“No ransom?” Arthur asked.

Blair shook his head.

The wheels in Arthur's head were turning as he considered the facts.

“If he didn't want money...,” Arthur said. “What was the payback cost?”

Something must have shown on Blair's face because Arthur took one look at Blair and knew.

“It was me. I wasn't supposed to make it out,” Arthur said.

“That's what we suspect,” Blair said.

Arthur took a deep breath with his eyes closed.
“My father?”

“Has been raising hell with the FBI from what I have heard,” Jim answered. “He had proof of life until a few days ago.”

Arthur looked confused.

“The kidnapper sent him a link to the camera feed,” Blair said.

Arthur laughed the laugh of those on the edge. He laughed until there were tears in his eyes. They let him do so in peace.

“I thought the kidnappers were spying on me,” Arthur said.

“He might have been as well,” Blair admitted.

“You did what you had to do to get out of there,” Jim said assuredly. “You kept your head and you effectively used what you had to get yourself out. When we get you back to Cascade, the FBI agents will have a lot of questions for you. Answer honestly and to the best of your ability. Don't feel bad if you don't know the answers. It is all part of the process.”

Arthur nodded.

“Now the things you won't want to tell them about is your and Jim's heightened senses,” Blair said.

A flummoxed look morphed Arthur's face.

“I'm not sure if I didn't dream it,” Arthur admitted.

“I know, kid, I know,” Jim sighed. “Take it from me, they are real and can be problematic without the right knowledge and training.”

Blair clapped his hand together. “So, Sentinel 101. Finish eating while I give you the history.”

Jim chuckled at the just caught in a whirlwind look Blair often caused on Arthur's face.

“There are people who have one sense that is more sensitive or heightened. Perfume makers seek out people with exceptional abilities to distinguish smells.”

Arthur nodded as Blair rattled off the same list he had given Jim all those years ago.

“There are some people with two heightened senses found in today's society. But long ago when people lived in tribes and relied on their own skills to provide food and keep their families safe, there were men who had five heightened senses. They were called Watchmen or Sentinels because they watched out for the danger from animals and nature. He warned them of approaching bad weather, because he could smell the water on the air, hear the thunder farther in the distance, and maybe feel the changing barometric pressure. He told them where the game was because he could see and hear farther to locate them. He told them when and from where the enemy was attacking because he could hear their heartbeats as they waited in ambush. He helped organize the men for all of that. If the tribe had such a man they considered themselves privileged.

“All these amazing skills had a price. If tired or stressed, the Sentinel could loose control of one sense or another. His hearing could spike and everything would seem too loud. His vision could dip and he couldn't see. There is the risk of zone outs where the sentinel concentrated one sense on an item and gets lost in it making him blind to the outside world. Sentinels had a partner, a Guide, that worked
with them who watched their back and help the Sentinel keep things in balance.

“As people modernized, the need for a Sentinel was forgotten and the rituals to help a Sentinel come online were abandoned in those places.”

“Then how did I supposedly become one” Arthur asked.

“A Sentinel comes online after a period of being isolation from the tribe,” Blair said. “I believe with your camping trip combined with your time in the cabin was enough to bring you online.”

Arthur looked at Jim in search of confirmation.

“I was an army ranger,” Jim said. “We were sent out on a mission over the Peruvian jungle on a mission. The chopper went down, and I was the only survivor. Struggled to survive for several weeks before the Chopika found me. When I came home, I repressed the abilities and all the strangeness that happened to me there until I was on a long lonely stakeout. Then they came back, out of control, and made my life hell. I would spike and zone. I had trouble working and was at risk of suspension. People, myself included, thought there was something physically or physiologically wrong with me, until I meet Blair.”

“We've had our share of adventures,” Blair said with a warm smile.

“It is important who you share this information with,” Jim cautioned. “A former commanding officer found out about it and tried to force me to use my abilities to help him commit crimes.”

“Not a fun time,” Blair commented. “But we got out of it and he's in jail.”

“Will mine go into remission?” Arthur asked.

“Don't know,” Blair admitted and shrugged. “You are only the second sentinel we have met. The first was psycho and used her abilities to rob banks.”

Blair shivered and Jim rested his hand on Blair's arm.

“She wanted Blair as her Guide and it caused problems between us for a while,” Jim said.

Arthur's eyes darted between the two. Jim suspected he was keying in on other physiological signs that he never was able to before with normal senses. Jim knew there was an odd timber to their voices, their hearts speed up slightly, and – Blair especially – smelled a bit of fear when they talked about Alex. Jim doubted the new sentinel had the experience to interpret correctly all he could take in.

“First, I need to teach you about dials,” Blair declared. “Close your eyes.”

Arthur eyed him wearily.

“Just do it, kid. We are not leaving until you gain a rudimentary understanding of what's happened to you and a few tricks to dealing with it,” Jim said.

Arthur glared at Jim but closed his eyes.

“I want you to picture a console with five dials. Each dial represents one of your senses – sight, sound, smell, taste, and touch. Each dial can be set from zero to ten. Starting with sound, are the sound levels normal to you?” Arthur nodded. “Where is the dial set?”

“Four,” Arthur answered.
“That is your base for sound. Any time your hearing gets too sensitive, turn the nob back to four.”

“How?” Arthur asked and opened his eyes.

“I'll show you. Jim, what's out there for him to find?”

Jim listened for a bit the pointed away from the stream.

“Rabbit twenty yards that way.”

Arthur focused in on the sound.

“Are their heartbeats always so fast?” he asked.

“Yes,” Jim said. “That is one way to identify what is out there.”

“Picture the nob again. Where does it feel like now?” Blair asked.

Arthur closed his eyes and said, “six,” in a surprised voice.

“Take hold of the dial and turn it back to four,” Blair instructed.

The surprise was evident on Arthur's face.

“It worked. I can't hear the rabbit any more.”

“Let's move to the next,” Blair said.

For the next hour, Blair ran Arthur through the dials and several exercises. He even forced the boy into a spike so he would know what one was when it happened. Jim packed up their camp when he was not helping or demonstrating.

“That was a quick and dirty Sentinel 101 class,” Blair said.

“That was quick?” Arthur scoffed.

“At least he wasn't running you through a bunch of tests to learn the extent of your abilities,” Jim said with a fond smile. “It takes practice to keep the dials where you want them. The more people around and things going on, the harder it is especially in the beginning.”

“Oh, don't be surprised if certain soaps and household products irritate you and cause rashes where they didn't before. I can give you a list of things that work best for Jim,” Blair added.

Blair pulled out one of his business cards and scribbled on the back before handing it to Arthur. Arthur took the card and looked at both sides.

“I put our personal cell numbers and e-mail addresses on there. Call any time if you have questions or run into a problem. If we haven't run into it, we can help you figure out how to handle it.”

“Thanks,” Arthur said and put it into the pocket of his hoodie.

Jim joined them after calling Simon.

“Simon said that if we follow the stream for five miles, we should come to a bridge where they can pick us up,” Jim said.

Jim and Blair put on their gear and they all headed out. It took them close to two hours to reach the
bridge. In that time they tried to tell Arthur as many stories about their trials and tribulations as they could in hopes that some bits of being a Sentinel would tuck themselves into his mind to come out in times of need.
And out again

Chapter Summary

Arthur gives his statement to the FBI, Xander escorts his newest Slayer to England, and SG-1 gets called to investigate something out of this world on Earth.

In Cascade, FBI office

The car that picked them up, dropped them off outside the building with the local FBI offices. Two agents were waiting for them and escorted them up. Arthur was escorted to a conference room while Jim and Blair were taken someplace else.

“Agent Benton will be with you shortly,” the escort said. “Can I get you anything to drink?”

“Water would be nice,” Arthur answered.

He scratched at his bearded face. It felt scraggly and thin in patches. He had only caught glimpses of himself in reflective surfaces on his way here. He knew he must be a sight. He could not wait to clean up, now that he was back in civilization.

He automatically kept his hearing tuned to Blair and Jim. He could hear them talking to someone, presumably an agent maybe even Benton, and reporting what happened in the woods. He was surprised to hear about the booby-trapped door. He was now grateful for not being able to pull the hinge pins out. It was nice to know that his instincts were correct about the fruit. He realized that he was probably not supposed to know any of that yet.

The escort agent returned with a bottle of water for him.

Arthur turned his hearing dial back to the base line and smiled at her. He muttered a thank you. He cracked open the bottle and took a sip. He almost spit it back out because it tasted like plastic. He turned his taste dial down. It had crept up without him realizing. He took another tentative sip. It tasted just fine.

He now understood some of the warnings Jim and Blair had given him. Every distant sound drew his attention. He wanted to follow conversations as they traveled further away. The odors were distracting as well. There were so many of them from chemicals in the carpet to sweat where people had touched. It reminded him of a locker room. He knew it was not really that bad, just seemed like it to his sensitive nose.

Arthur closed his eyes and focused on the dials like Blair had told him to do. He imagined adjusting each one and repeating until they all stayed where he put them. The door opened again as he finished.

A stocky mocha skinned man approached the table.

“Mr. Pendragon, I'm Agent Benson.”
Agent Benson extended his hand in greeting. Arthur stood and shook the hand briefly before sitting again. Agent Benson took the chair at the end of the table to Arthur's left. He set a folder and notepad before him. He pulled the recording device already on the table to him and fiddled with it a bit.

“Is it ok with you if I record this interview?” Agent Benson asked.

“That's fine,” Arthur answered.

“Once I start recording, I will ask you again so it is on record,” the agent explained.

Arthur nodded. Benson pushed a button and started talking. He gave their names, date, case number, and location of interview before he started asking questions.

“Mr. Pendragon, tell me what happened to you the evening of July 29th.”

Arthur took a deep breath and closed his eyes to focus on that night.

“We, Lance, Gawain, and myself,” he added for clarification. They always wanted that sort of thing on the TV shows. “...had just set up camp. It was our last night in the park. There was a noise in the woods. We looked but saw nothing. Then there was a canister that landed in our camp. It started shooting out gas. I remember coughing a bit.” Arthur shook his head as if that would knock something loose. “I don't remember anything until I woke up in the cabin.”

“What happened there?” Agent Benson asked.

Arthur told him about the cabin, what was in it, the plan he came up with to get out.

“It was noted that you left the dried fruit. Did you eat any of it?”

“No, it didn't smell right when I first opened it,” Arthur admitted trying to sound casual about it. He hoped that adding when he first opened it would lead them to believe there was a stronger odor was present in the bag than now and not because he had heightened smell. For all he knew it could be the truth. “I had already been drugged once. I didn't want a repeat.”

Agent Benson made more notes on his pad.

“I demand to see my son,” pulled Arthur’s attention.

It was his father. It sounded like he was outside the door, but Arthur guess he was farther away than that. He forced his dials back to baseline.

“Mr. Pendragon,” Agent Benton said.

“Sorry?” Arthur said. “I must of checked out. It's been a long week.” He smiled a what can you do smile.

“I understand. What did you do next?”

There was a commotion outside the room. He could clearly hear his father's demands now. He loved his father, but it sounded like he was outside the door, but Arthur guess he was farther away than that. He forced his dials back to baseline.

“Mr. Pendragon,” Agent Benton said.

“Sorry?” Arthur said. “I must of checked out. It's been a long week.” He smiled a what can you do smile.

“I understand. What did you do next?”

There was a commotion outside the room. He could clearly hear his father's demands now. He loved his father, but the man came across as forceful, arrogant and poppas. Arthur had grown up thinking that was the way to be until college. It was the first time Arthur got to interact with people who did not know him, who did not grow up the way he did. What really got him thinking was when a pipsqueak of a student called him out for being a bully. He blew it and the kid off at the time, but it got him to thinking and looking around at how the people reacted to him. Lance who was his
assigned roommate that year told Arthur he did come off as an ass and bully despite his heart of gold. It turned some people off.

Agent Benton stood and stepped outside. A moment latter, he returned with Uther Pendragon blustering in behind him as if it was his due. No, that was not the kind of person Arthur wanted to be.

Arthur was still happy to see his father. He could see the relief in his farther's eyes as he looked at Arthur.

“Son,” Uther calmly said.

Arthur stood and surprised his father by hugging him.

“Dad,” he muttered into the man's ear.

Arthur felt Uther cling to him in return. Uther pulled back and eyed his son.

“Are you alright? Have you been checked out?” Uther demanded more than asked.

“Yes. Not by professionals,” Arthur said.

“We should...” Uther started moving to the door.

“Finish the interview,” Arthur cut in. He took his seat and pulled the one to his right out for his father. “The sooner we finish, the sooner the agents can do their jobs and we can go home.”

Uther's lips pressed together at having his plans diverted, but eased as he gave in to the logic of it. He sat but threw out, “Shouldn't you have a lawyer present?”

Agent Benton was smart enough to let Arthur handle his father.

“It's an interview not an interrogation. They need to know what happened to build their case,” Arthur said. “I don't need a lawyer for that.”

Benton took control of the proceeding again. He started the recording again and stated the addition of Urther Pendragon to the room before asking how Arthur got out.

Arthur explained in detail from smashing the camera to slipping out the window. When Arthur glanced at his dad, he could see the pride in his eyes.

“Then I walked for two days, following the trail for a bit. I didn't want to run into the kidnappers if they returned so I set off on my own being sure to keep the mountains at my back. I camped by a river the second night. The next morning I woke to the smell of bacon. I cautiously approached to check out what was going on. That's when I found Detectives Ellison and Sandburg. I recognized Ellison from the local papers so I knew they were safe to approach. They told me the kidnapper had been caught and the basic why. We ate and talked for a bit before packing up camp. Detective Ellison contacted his boss who arranged for a pickup point. We walked there and were brought here.”

Benton followed up with a couple questions for more clarification before stopping the recording.

“That's all I need,” Benton said.

“Does that mean I can go home?” Arthur asked.
“You are free to go. We'll call if we have any new information to tell you or have any other questions for you.” Benton pushed a business card across the table. “My contact information in case you have any questions.”

Arthur picked it up and started to reach for a wallet that he did not have.

“Have they found my wallet?” Arthur asked.

“Not yet, but we are still retracing the kidnappers tracks,” Benton admitted.

“All your credit cards have been notified and new ones are on they way,” Uther said.

Arthur nodded to this and stood. “I'm ready to leave and get a hot shower,” he announced.

Uther put an arm around Arthur's shoulders and guided him out of the room and down to the waiting car.

The loft

A pizza box with half a pizza sat on the coffee table flanked by bottles of half drank beer. A game was on the TV and Blair was yelling about a call made. Jim laughed at him before picking up his beverage and taking a long swig. He put it down then held his hand palm up toward Blair.

“Five bucks,” Jim said.

Blair pulled a five from his pocket and handed it over still grumbling about the game. Blair finished off his beer and leaned against the back of the couch. He let out a loud sigh.

“What a week,” he muttered.

Jim turned so he faced Blair and let his arm rest along the back of the couch. His fingers just brushed the edge of Blair's hair. He let his sense of touch take in the rough kinks that caused it to curl.

“Yeah,” Jim agreed.

Jim let the rest of his senses home in on his Guide. He found if he did this once a day, the rest of the day he was good for a normal day.

Blair lulled his head toward Jim.

“So another Sentinel doesn't bother you, really?” Blair asked.

Jim gave a relaxed shrug.

“Nope.”

“You said it was different. How?”

“Once I met him, he felt more like a trainee than a rival,” Jim said thoughtfully.

Blair turned his attention back to the ceiling and hummed.

“I guess that could make since,” Blair muttered.
Jim stayed quiet and watched Blair process and try to fit pieces together. It was one of the things the made him a great detective.

“Newly online Sentinel being mentored by a more experienced one. They would have shared experiences, easier to know what the new sentinel is going through. Never came across anything about multiple sentinels in a tribe, but tribes are relatively small... percent of sentinels per population... don't know... probably low.”

His muttering becomes indecipherable before Blair threw his hands in the air.

“Not enough data, and probably never will be,” he concludes.

“Guess we'll play it by ear like we always do. Worked so far,” Jim said.

“Yeah,” Blair admitted but with reservations clear in the word. “I'd just like to know more.”

“You always do,” Jim commented in a factual tone.

“And me working with Arthur really didn't bother you?” Blair asked looking at Jim once more from his sprawled position.

“No,” Jim paused for a moment. “Maybe in the future if he were trying to take you.” Jim felt jealousy and possessiveness rise at the thought. “Right now you are his teacher... like Incacha was for me.”

“Maybe that's the other path of training,” Blair mused. “An older guide or shaman sets the new sentinel on the path but he has to find his own guide later on. Didn't you say that Incacha said that you would find a guide among your people or something like that?”

“He did,” Jim slowly answered.

That brought back to mind the visions that Incacha had and the whole blue world/spirit plane mambo jumbo that he did not like to think about. It had come in handy, but it was not something Jim was comfortable with or probably ever would be. Incacha handing the abilities of a shaman to Blair wigged him out. It was also something Blair had never pursued learning about so it had faded to the background over the years.

Jim scooted closer to Blair. Blair automatically shifted so Jim would thread his arm between Blair and the back of the couch. Blair settled in against Jim's side. This contact was normal for them now when alone. It was grounding to Jim and Blair always enjoys contact with people. They both found it beneficial and never said anything about it.

“What are we going to watch now?” Jim asked and pointed the remote at the TV.

In Kolwezi, Democratic Republic of the Congo, African

Xander drove the jeep into Kolwezi. Fuma was wide eyed beside him. She had never been to a “big” city before. He knew he would get similar looks when they got to England. Again he thought they should really set up a Watcher headquarters in Africa. It would be a lot easier to work out of than
what he presently did. The constant unrest was always a reason not to. That was not going to keep Xander for not pushing for at least the equivalent of a way station in one of the larger cities.

He also hated that they were taking all the African slayers from their land and not providing any protection for the locals. That seemed to go against their cause. There were more Slayers “graduating” from training and gaining experience each day so there was hope of starting new outposts soon. However, what they were short on were trained watchers to help the Slayers. They were still working on that.

Honestly, it had only been a few years since Sunnydale sank into the ground. When Xander took a step back and looked at the New Watcher Council and what it had done in that time, it was impressive considering they basically had to start from scratch. They had to vet old contacts and establish new ones, while the first priority was always protect and teach the girls.

“It's so big and so many people,” Fuma said.

“Yeah,” Xander agreed. “There are places that are bigger and have more people than here.”

“I can't imagine,” she said.

Xander navigated them through the streets to the small hotel they would be staying at for the night. Xander could feel the control of his senses pulling at the influx of input. He forced them to focus on Fuma as something familiar to ground to. He parked and took a deep calming breath. Fuma placed her hand on his arm knowing it would help him.

“Thanks,” he muttered.

“No thanks, it's honor to act as guide,” Fuma reminded him.

Xander smiled at her.

“I know, but I still appreciate it and want you to know I appreciate you.”

Fuma gave him a large white teethed smile back.

They got out and entered the hotel to check into their room. He got a few lecherous looks because he was an older white man with a young native girl. They thought they knew what he was doing with her. Just the idea made Xander cringe, but it was not worth making a fuss about. That only made them more sure they were right. Xander also knew better than to get separate rooms. He did not like to think about the one time he did that. He and the Slayer got out of the situation alive, but he was never going to show his face in that town again any time soon. Several of the girls had admitted preferring to stay close to someone they knew when in such strange surroundings. That was good enough for him to consider one room standard operating policy when traveling.

They quickly got settled and Xander called the local airport to arrange for a flight to the nearest city with an international airport. There was a flight out tomorrow at 10 AM. Xander booked them two seats.

That evening they went out for dinner and to explore a bit of the city. That night Xander dreamed:

Harley was sitting beside Xander and looking out along the blue tinted plane.

“Hi, Harley,” Xander said. He scratched behind her ears. “We need to stop meeting like this.”
She snapped at his hand.

“So not a social visit then,” Xander said.

Harley looked back out across the land. He could feel the evilness from before still out there. He felt more than saw animals surrounding them and looking into the distance where the evil was. Then there were other people standing among the animals. Not people girls. Despite not looking like anyone he knew, Xander knew in the way you always knew in dreams that they were Slayers. They were also looking toward the evil on the horizon.

**Under Cheyenne Mountain**

The red phone rang on General Hammond's desk. George Hammond picked up the phone.

“Mr. President, how can I help you? Yes, sir. I see. That does not sound good. They want SG-1. Yes, they are the best to deal with his. I will do that, sir. I'll get SG-1 right on that. Thank you, sir.”

George hung up the phone, sat back in his chair, and took moment before calling SG-1 in to debrief on their mission to investigate what appears to be a long buried Goa'uld ship in Canada.

**The Pendragon Estate**

Arthur had been home for not quite a week. He settled into his old life but it felt like putting on a jacket that was slightly too small. It was comfortable in its familiarity but pulled in places where you had put on muscle.

Blair had been right about the soap and cleaners irritating him. He had been home for only half a day, and he had broken out in a rash. He e-mailed Blair for the list he mentioned. Blair got back to him within an hour. Arthur purchased the items he needed from the list and felt better immediately. He explained to Anna, the housekeeper, about the skin condition he had developed and gave her Blair's list and asked her to use them for his things at least. She pinched his cheek and told him she would since he asked so nicely.

Arthur had talked to Lance and Gawain. He had to recount for each of them what had happened and they told him what happened after the attack.

Blair had also sent him a list of tests he had run Jim through when they first met in case Arthur was interested in testing his new skills. Blair did caution him to be careful not to zone. Arthur tucked them away for another time. He did experiment with cataloging new smells and tastes. There were things he could now smell in items he thought he knew the smell of. His new powers were useless if he could not identify what he was sensing. He focused most of his time on practice and control of his senses. He had to go back to school in five days.

**Goa'uld ship in Canada**
SG-1 was escorted to the buried Goa'uld ship. There were armed men standing at the gate of the quickly fenced off area. They checked identifications and let them through. The Canadian colonel led them into the ship.

“Once we realized what we had, we wanted to get you involved,” Colonel Green said.

“We appreciate it,” Daniel Jackson responded.

He was already looking around at the symbols on the wall.

“Where do you want to start?” Colonel Green asked.

Daniel had wandered from the group. Jack O'Neill sighed mentally.

“Carter will want to access the computer,” Jack said.

Jack looked at Sam Carter for input.

“A control room will do,” she said.

“Through here,” Green said.

Jack signaled Teal'c to stay with Daniel while he went with Sam. Teal'c raised an eyebrow in acceptance – or what Jack interpreted as acceptance.

Teal'c took up a position behind Daniel Jackson to see what had caught his attention. Teal'c found himself intrigued as well.

“Wepawet,” Teal'c said.

“The opener of ways, believed to guide a person's soul to the underworld,” Daniel said.

“It is said that he was the one to first master the chap'i,” Teal'c informed. “He has not been heard from since my grandfather's time.”

“Then several hundred to a thousand years at least then. I wonder how the ship got here?”

“It was said that before he vanished he had fallen out of favor with Ra,” Teal'c said.

“I wonder if he was on board?” Daniel mused. “If he was, where is he now?”

After an hour, Sam had access to the records she wanted. Her team and the Canadian representative all looked up at her cry of success.

“Records indicate they took damage and crashed on earth. The Goa'uld...”


“Wepawet was fleeing from another Goa'uld. The ship was damaged beyond their ability to repair it. There were no people around. It doesn't say much more than that.”

“When did it crash?” Jack asked.
“Sometime in the 1400's,” Sam answered.

“That's an awful long time to be around,” Jack said. “Did he survive?”

Sam typed more on her laptop.

“It appears so. Him and a troupe of personal guards are indicated to be on the ship before they abandoned it,” Sam said.

“Great, now we have to look for a Goa'uld that's been on the planet for over five hundred years,” Jack griped.

“We've been keeping track of all cult like groups in case they are Goa'uld led,” Daniel said. “I would have though we would have come across him or some reference to him by now.”

“Don't know, Danny,” Jack said. “We better start searching old records because it could be something so old that we overlooked it.”

Watcher Headquarters in England

Fuma was settling quickly in with the other African girls. The were showing her around and explaining all the odd things in this new world. Xander felt he was leaving her in good hands. It was time for him to find Giles. The head watcher was in his office when Xander knocked on the open door.

“You have several minutes?” Xander asked.

Giles looked up at Xander, studied him, and nodded.

“Always,” Giles said. “Come in, close the door.”

Xander did and took a seat in one of the chairs before the desk. Giles stood and took the one opposite Xander.

“How was your trip?” Giles said opening the dialog.

“Excellent, brought back a new slayer. No one was injured or killed in the process, so good trip,” Xander summarizer.

Giles nodded knowingly. He had been the one Xander had confided all the gory details of the bad trips to.

“Something happened to me when I was out there,” Xander hesitantly admitted.

Giles leaned forward in his chair as if to check Xander over but did not interrupt.

“Have you ever heard of a watchman?” Xander asked instead of explaining.

Giles looked thoughtful for a moment.

“What kind of watchman?” Giles asked.
Xander tugged at his patch.

“Some of the tribes out there have legends about watchman who help the tribe,” Xander explained. “They call it by their own language but it translates as watchman or sentry or scout or lookout. The job is a combination of all. These watchmen have enhanced senses.”

Giles looked intrigued by the idea.

“Are they human?” he asked.

“From what I can tell, they are human. They just can use their senses in ways average humans can’t,” Xander said. “It gives them an advantage in watching out for threats, finding food, and things like that to keep the tribe safe. They call it a gift from the gods. Individuals who have the ability are highly valued.

Giles leaned back in his chair and studied Xander.

“As fascinating as this is, why the interest?” Giles asked.

“I'm one of them,” Xander admitted.

Giles nodded his head as if this was where he expected the conversation to go.

“So, what do you need? How can I help?”

Xander opened up and told Giles all of it. How he traveled for weeks alone only stopping at a village to stock up on supplies. By the time he found Fuma, his senses were out of control. The local shaman recognized what was happening and was able to help Xander. Xander explained about guides and their roll in regard to watchmen, and he explained the spiritual side of it. He told Giles about Harley and his trips to the spirit world guided by Amuk. Then he told Giles about the visions.

By the end, Giles was polishing his glasses with his handkerchief. At least some things stayed the same.

“You are sure they were Slayers?” Giles asked.

“As sure as I can be in a dream,” Xander said.

Giles took a deep breath and settled his glasses back in place.

“I'll get the research teams started looking for any reference to these watchmen and any prophecy about your looming evil.”

Xander was about to voice an objection when Giles countered it.

“I won't mention your new abilities or that this came from you. I'll tell them that I was informed by a reliable source about a vision involving the Slayers and these watchmen.”

“Thanks, Giles,” Xander said. “Oh, one more thing, I think I can detect Slayers.”


“I didn't realize it when it was just Fuma. I just thought Fuma gave me this odd but not unpleasant feeling. Now that I'm here among all the girls, I feel it from each of them. Make my job of finding them easier.”
“Can they sense you?” Giles asked.

Xander shrugged and Giles sighed.

“Something else to figure out,” Giles huffed.
Back to the old grind with a twist

Chapter Summary

Arthur returns to Rainier University and has to learn to navigate the new surroundings with his new abilities.

Xander lands in Cascade in search of a Slayer and discovers there's a Sentinel in residence.

Chapter Notes

If you need the warning, the only sex scene in part 1 is in this chapter. It can easily be skipped if you so like.

Rainier University Dorms

Emrys Merlin, everyone called him Merlin, was hauling the last load of his belongings into his new dorm room. He sat the box on the corner of his desk when there was a commotion down the hall. He poked his head out the door to check out what was going on. A group of boys were trying to maneuver pieces of a loft around to get them into a room. In the center of the group was Arthur Pendragon.

“Great, that clod pole,” Merlin muttered.

Arthur looked over at him in that moment, and Merlin retreated into his room, firmly shutting the door behind him.

Merlin had a run-in with Pendragon their freshman year and told him off for being a bully, which he was being. He was egotistical as his father, not that Merlin knew that from personal experience. That was what they say about Uther Pendragon in the news.

He had seen Pendragon around campus, but since they had different majors, he never saw him in any of his classes. Merlin just hoped that Pendragon was helping a friend move in and not moving in himself. Merlin could not imagine having to live on the same floor as that jerk. The only thing worse would be if Pendragon was his roommate. Merlin froze. No, that was not the name of his roommate. His roommate was Gawain Mallory. Crisis averted, Merlin returned to his unpacking.

Rainier University dorm shower

Arthur was tired. Yesterday they moved in and today they had their first practice. Coach worked them hard and griped they all got out of shape over the summer. Every muscle ached. All Arthur wanted was a hot shower away from people. Dorm life was worse than home had been. There were noises around all times of the day and night. There were so many people and the smells that came
Arthur turned on one of the showers to let it warm up while he set his show things out. He removed his robe and hung it on the hook before stepping into the stall. He pulled the curtain and stepped into the spray. It felt heavenly. He quickly washed to get that out of the way so he could just enjoy the warm water hitting his body. He sighed and closed his eyes. The rhythm of the water was soothing. It was also zone inducing.

Merlin hauled his things into the shower room. One of the stalls was already in use. Odd for this time of day, but not unusual. He took the stall two back from it and started his own shower. He was quick and efficient. He had other things to do today.

When he got out, the person was still in there. Merlin didn't think anything of it other than note it. He went out and brushed his teeth and shaved. The other occupant still had not come out. Merlin would have ignored it, but he had that odd feeling he knew better than to ignore. He went back to the shower room and looked at the feet visible. They were not moving. He waited another minute and still no movement, not even a shifting of weight. He slowly walked closer to the occupied stall and knocked on the edge.

“Hey, you've been in there a while. Are you alright?” Merlin tried again.

Still no answer. Merlin swallowed hard before reaching a hand up to move the curtain to reveal Arthur Pendragon standing there like a statue with eyes closed as if he were asleep.

“Arthur, wake up,” Merlin called.

Still no response. Merlin was getting worried. He reached out and grabbed Arthur's shoulder. He gave it a shake, and Arthur's eyes opened coming out of whatever trance he had been in.

“Are you alright?” Merlin asked again.

Arthur blinked his eyes and seemed disoriented.

“That's it,” Merlin said. “You are not alright. I'm taking you to the health center.”


“You were...” Merlin waved his hands around as if that would explain it, “... were just standing there, not moving, not responding. It was like you were sleeping on your feet or in a trance or something.”

Arthur fumbled to shut the water off and grabbed his robe hurriedly. He slipped it on while insisting he was fine.

“No, you're not,” Merlin argued.

“Just really tired,” Arthur said as he gathered his things. “Had a long hard practice. A nap is all I need.”
Arthur pushed past Merlin and out of the bathroom.

“No it's not!” Merlin called after him.

**Jim and Blair's Loft**

“It's Arthur,” Jim said before the knock sounds at the door.

Blair rolled his eyes and let the young adult in.

“Are you ok?” was the first thing out of Blair's mouth.

“No,” Arthur said as he slunk into the loft. “Dorm life sucks.”

“Damn, didn't think about that,” Jim said with genuine sympathy.

“I just needed to get away,” Arthur said.

Blair guided Arthur to the couch and made him sit. Jim handed him a bottle of water. Blair plopped down beside Arthur and took his hand.

“Where are your dials?” Blair asked.

“Anywhere from three to seven. I even zoned in the shower yesterday,” Arthur sighed. He was at the end of his rope.

“We'll figure it out. Maybe it's time to try meditation, and we can give you a key to our place.” Blair looked to Jim for conformation. Jim nodded and headed for the kitchen to get one of the spare keys. “That will give you someplace to retreat to that's Sentinel friendly even if we're not here.”

“I feel better just being here with you guys,” Arthur said.

Blair continued to hold Arthur's hand because he knew contact always helped Jim recenter.

“I've only been there for two days, and I've already cracked,” Arthur confessed. He tipped his head back so he was looking at the ceiling as if it held the answers.

“There's a lot of new things going on in your life. I think you are doing well given the situation,” Blair assured. “We can try a white noise generator to help block out the rest of the dorm.”

Arthur rolled his head to look toward Jim.

“Did you have such problems, Jim?” Arthur asked.

“I hid in here for several days at the beginning,” Jim admitted. Jim placed his hand on Arthur's shoulder and gave it a squeeze. “It takes time to master and adapt. I at least had the familiarity of my loft to retreat to. You don't have that right now. Everything is new and your space is not your own.”

Arthur nodded in agreement.

“Give it time, and it will be familiar and not overwhelming. A white noise generator will help. I also suggest good light blocking blinds.”

Arthur sniffed the air.
“Anything for smells?” he asked.

“Oh god, a floor full of teens and twenty somethings, the hormones,” Jim bemoaned.

“Yeah,” Arthur agreed.

“I'll think about a solution for that,” Blair said.

Arthur's Dorm room

The white noise generator helped cut out the noise, much to Arthur's relief. Lance did not think a thing of it when Arthur brought it back with him two day's ago, also to Arthur's relief. Classes had started and the homework was already piling up. Arthur was trying to knock some of it off his list when he heard the steady beating of a heart. He could clearly hear it over the generator. Arthur had noticed it a few times in the past but when he shut off the generator to try and follow it, the sudden noise was overwhelming.

The heartbeat was growing closer. This time Arthur decided he would find out in a more practical way. He would open the door and look down the hall. He left his desk and moved to the door. He opened it. Passing was the guy that found him in the shower. He was Gawain's roommate. Name was something odd, last name started with a M. The guy paused and looked Arthur over.

“You look better,” he said before continuing on his way down the hall.

Arthur watched him go. His hearing was followed shower guy all the way.

“What's that about?” Lance asked.

Arthur looked over to see Lance standing by the door. Arthur moved into the room and back to his desk.

“We ran into each other the other day when I was dead on my feet. He was concerned,” Arthur answered.

“Merlin concerned about you?” Lance asked as he shut the door behind him.

“Reason he shouldn't?” Arthur asked.

Lance laughed.

“He's the one the told you off our Freshman year,” Lance said.

Arthur scrunched up his face in thought.

“Really?” Arthur asked.

“Yes,” Lance insisted. “He's been pissed at you ever since.”

Arthur scratched the back of his head.

“Didn't realize that,” Arthur admitted.

Lance just laughed again.
“You're something else,” he told Arthur.

**Rainier University Crosswalk**

Arthur was walking to class. He joined the group of students waiting for the light to change when he heard Merlin's now familiar heartbeat. He followed the sound until he could see the back of Merlin's dark haired head with his prominent ears. Arthur wove through the loosely gathered students until he was behind Merlin. Then Arthur took a deep breath unconsciously taking in Merlin's sent. The light turned and the group started forward. The whirl of fast moving bike tires was approaching down the road. Arthur looked up. The bike was headed right for the crossing crowd. Arthur's hand darted out and grabbed the back of Merlin's shirt. Merlin started to yell when the bike whizzed right through where Merlin would have been.

“Thanks,” Merlin said as he turned to see his rescuer.

“No problem,” Arthur said with a smile. “Got to watch out for the bikes around here.”

“Yeah, sure,” Merlin slowly and unconvincingly said.

Merlin turned to check the light and the road. He started across with a glance back at Arthur who was crossing behind him. He looked like his whole world just tilted off it's axes. That made Arthur's smile broaden. Merlin took one last look back at Arthur before branching off on one of the paths in a different direction from Arthur.

**Cascade Airport**

Xander Harris walked off the plane with his carry-on slung over his shoulder. He headed down to baggage claim to get his checked duffel with his weapons in it. He stepped out of the airport to catch the shuttle to the rental agency when he felt it. Harley was standing beside him looking off toward town.

“What is it?” Xander quietly asked.

It was sort of what he felt from the Slayers, but not quite the same. The only other thing he knew he could sense would be another Watchman.

“There's a Watchman in this city?” Xander asked Harley.

She nodded her head then disappeared. With her disappearance the presence of the other Watchman faded. Xander sighed. This was a complication he did not expect. What was a Watchman doing in a large city? Now he would have to go and announce himself to the Cascade Watchman like a well mannered Watchman should.

“Get the car first,” Xander said.

**On a Cascade Road outside the Loft**

Xander sat in his car looking at the building two blocks away. He knew that was where the other Sentinel was. Harley was sitting the the passenger seat looking like she was laughing at Xander.
“So what if I'm nervous,” he told her. “This is the first Watchman I've meet, and I'm the one trespassing.”

Harley did not seem to mind. She walked through the door to the sidewalk and waited for him several feet before the car.

“Alright I'm getting out,” Xander said.

He got out and locked the car. He tugged at his clothing and adjusted his eye patch. Harley barked once impatiently. Xander sighed and walked over to her.

“Lead the way,” he told her.

She trotted down the sidewalk and Xander followed.

The Loft

Jim and Arthur sat on the couch watching whatever sport happened to be on while Blair put the finishing touches on his healthy home cooked meal. He carried the tray with plates and drinks to the coffee table and set it down. He plopped down between the two sentinels taking one of the plates with him.

“Dig in,” Blair said.

They each grabbed a plate and started eating.

“How's your first week of classes been?” Blair asked.

“Better. The white noise generator helps with the sound,” Arthur admitted.

“We will still work on meditation later this evening,” Blair said.

They ate and watched the sports commentators. Jim was adding his own comment when he sat up straight and stopped talking. Arthur took up a similar pose.

“What is it?” Blair softly asked.


Arthur nodded.

Jim walked to the door and waited. There was a knock Jim opened the door but stood in the opening. A young man stood with a goofy grin and rubbing the back of his head. The look was at odds with the eye patch he wore.

“Hi,” the kid said obviously nervous. “My name's Xander Harris. I just stopped by to let you know I'm in town for a few days. If I had known there was a Watchman in the area, I would have called first.”

“Did he say Watchman?” Blair called from the couch.

Jim glanced back quickly to verify Blair was still a safe distance away. Arthur had his hand on Blair’s shoulder.
“Um, yes,” the young man answered but sounded more like a question. “Is that not what you call us?”

Jim heard Blair try to get up, and Arthur kept him on the couch. Blair was bitching at Arthur to let him go. Jim studied Xander.

“So, I've done what I'm supposed to in these situation...” Blair squawked in the background. “...and let you know that I am here for a few days only. I don't meany any trouble.”

Xander's eye went down to the ground and were tracking something moving from the hall to the door.

“Harley, no!” Xander hissed. “Don't go in there. We haven't been invited. Come back,” he almost pleaded with resignation.

“Is that a hyena?” Blair asked.

Jim looked past the door and saw a hyena sitting in the middle of the loft.

“If she's about three foot tall sitting, brown with dark spots, then that's Harley,” Xander said at a volume to be heard clearly inside. “She's mine, but she doesn't seem to have any manners today.”

She give a laughing bark.

Xander dropped his head to his hand and shook it as if asking why me.

Obviously the kid was no threat to the territory and had a story to tell. Jim stepped back to let Xander enter which seemed to surprise the kid.

“Come in,” Jim said.

“So that's a spirit animal?” Arthur was saying as Jim closed the door.

“Can you all see her?” Xander asked.

They all confirmed they could.

“Just wait until the next dream vision, I'll be demanding answers out of you,” Xander said shaking his finger at the hyena.

Jim stiffened at the word vision but tried not to show it.

“You said Watchman,” Blair jumped straight into pumping Xander for information. “Where did you learn about them?”

“Africa,” Xander answered.

“Sit down,” Jim said. “Water, beer?”

“Water's good,” Xander said.

Jim watched as Xander slowly moved around to the open chair away from Blair as if to prove he meant the Guide no harm. Arthur made sure to keep himself between Xander and Blair, and Blair let him. Jim walked back and handed Xander a bottled water. Jim sat down beside Blair with his arm extended behind his Guide.
Blair seemed to have regained his composure.

“I'm Blair Sandburg. Mr. Overprotective is Jim Ellis. And you probably recognize Arthur,” Blair said.

Xander examined Arthur before he said, “Nope, sorry, I don't. This is the first time I've been back in the US for a couple years.”

“Arthur is just fine then,” Arthur said with an amused smile.

Jim figured Arthur did not meet many people who did not know who he was. It was probably a novelty to him.

Xander shrugged like it was no skin off his nose.

“Just to be absolutely sure, when you say Watchman, you mean a person with five enhanced senses?” Blair asked.

“Yes,” Xander answered.

“I call them Sentinels,” Blair said. “Well Richard Burn did first and that's where I learned about them.”

Xander nodded as if that was logical.

“So what's your story?” Blair asked.

Xander started with his time in Africa and did not bulk at being the first to share information. He told them of Amuk's training and teaching. That was where Blair had a million questions.

“Wait are you using guide in two different ways?’ Blair interrupted.

“Yes,” Xander answered. “Anyone can help or act as a guide, small g, for a Wa.. Sentinel. I use several friends to center on to keep things lined out. With enough training and not in a stressful situation, I can use anyone around me. But to be a Guide, capital G, is a commitment to one Sentinel who works well with you, and there is something special about them. I interpreted it to be they are shaman, but there were other shades of the word Amuk used that I could not fully understand.”

“Like what?” Blair asked.

Xander hesitated but answered. “Like magic.”

“That would go hand in hand with a shaman in many cultures,” Blair said. “So why was Amuk not your Guide?”

“He said my Guide would be from my people,” Xander said. Blair exchanged a look with Jim. “He also said that the shaman who first trains the Watchman is rarely the one who Guides them. I think it has to do with age difference and the life commitment thing.”

“The one with the knowledge to train would often be decades older if their Sentinels come online as teens,” Arthur added.

“That's what I thought,” Xander said and nodded his head.

“Since I haven't found mine yet, otherwise he or she would be here with me at this meet and greet, I only know what Amuk told me. You find you work well with the person. You may find yourself automatically focusing in on the person. You may even feel the person's presence like you feel another Sentinel. It could be as simple as you feel better when you're around the person. He just kept insisting I would know when the time is right. I'm just hoping Harley will point the person out to me.”

Jim noted Arthur's avid attention to Xander's answer and wondered if there was someone specific Arthur had in mind.

“How did he train you?” Blair asked and they were back to the story of Xander's training.

The hours slipped quickly away as Xander explained Sentinel etiquette which all rang true to Jim on an instinctive level.

1. If you know you will be traveling to another Sentinel's territory announce your presence to the other Sentinel before crossing into it.

2. If you find yourself in another Sentinel's territory announce your presence to the Sentinel as soon as you realize it.

3. Respect the claims, territory, and Guide of another Sentinel.

4. All rules are void if at war with other Sentinel's tribe.

In an odd way those rules applied to their interaction with Alex. She was at war with the police on one level so she did not respect Jim's claim to anything.

The clock struck midnight, and Jim called an end to the talk. They did exchange contact information before leaving. Jim saw both Xander and Arthur out. He listened to them walk down the stairs and out of the building. They said good bye and got into their respective cars. The cars started and drove away. Jim let out a relieved sigh. He turned from the door and walked back into the room. Blair was gathering up the dishes and hauling them into the kitchen to put in the sink.

Jim walked up behind Blair and wrapped his arms around the shorter man's waist. He buried his nose in the curly hair and inhaled. Blair placed his hands over Jim's.

“Too much for you?” Blair asked softly while stroking Jim's arm.

Jim grunted a response. They had often stood in an embrace, but tonight Jim wanted something more. He was not sure what. He had never needed anything beyond to hear, touch, and smell Blair before. He nuzzled in closer to Blair's neck and rested his cheek against it.

“I'll sleep in your bed tonight,” Blair said. “I take it Xander was different than Arthur.”

“Yeah,” Jim muttered. “Arthur is mine. Xander is not. He doesn’t have a Guide.”

“Neither does Arthur,” Blair pointed out.

“I think he might have found a good candidate,” Jim said. “And Arthur's mine,” he repeated. “And your mine.”

Jim turned his nose into Blair's neck before darting out his tongue and licking up his Guide's neck. Blair shivered and laughed. It felt right to Jim. He wanted to taste his Guide. He wanted other things with his Guide. Jim's lick turned into a kiss. Blair gasped.
“Jim,” Blair cautiously said, “what are you doing?”

Jim moved up to nibble at an earlobe.

“I'm going to go as far as you will let me,” Jim whispered into the ear.

Blair turned in Jim's grasp and placed a hand on Jim's face. He soberly looked Jim in the eye.

“Are you sure?” Blair asked. “Do you know what you are asking for?”

“I'm asking for all of you for forever,” Jim said.

“Then you have me forever,” Blair said.

He reached up and captured Jim's mouth in a kiss. Jim pulled Blair closer to him and opened his mouth to let Blair's tongue in. They both moaned as they deepened the kiss. They eventually parted.

“You have me,” Jim promised.

Blair rested his head on Jim's shoulder and laughed. He placed a kiss over Jim's heart.

“What are they going to say at work?” Blair pondered.

“Half the force thinks we are already sleeping together but keeping it quiet so we can stay partners,” Jim informed him.

Blair laughed again and it made Jim smile. He rested his chin on Blair's head and enjoyed the quiet moment between them.

“Let's go to bed,” Blair said in a quiet seductive voice that went straight to Jim's groin.

“I think that's a very good idea,” Jim responded as he led Blair to the stairway to their room.

They moved toward the bed, but Jim stopped them by the foot of it. He pulled Blair into his arms and into a deep, tongue dueling, spit swapping kiss. The fire in him grew. The desire to explore every inch of his Guide grew. Blair responded enthusiastically. Blair's hands pulled at the hem of Jim's shirt before moving around front to start on the buttons. Jim pulled at Blair's t-shirt until they had to separate momentarily to remove it completely. Blair finished working on opening Jim's shirt, while Jim let his fingers map the fur covered muscles of his Guide's chest. Blair pushed the shoulder's of Jim's shirt down his arms.

“I have wanted to touch you for so long,” Blair muttered.

Blair rested his hands on Jim's tapered waist. He licked at the right pectoral until he reached the nipple. The rough tongue over the now sensitive flesh pulled a groan of pleasure from Jim's lips. Blair kissed the right nipple before trailing open mouthed kissed down the abdomen and back up to the left nipple. He gave it the same treatment of licks and kisses.

Jim placed a hand under Blair's chin and guided him up to kiss his lips. It was a soft press of lips and small nibbles. Blair pressed against him. Their bare chests toughing and rubbing against each other. Sparks jolted through Jim at each area of contact. Blair slipped his hands into the back pockets of Jim's jeans and forcefully pulled Jim's hips forward while he ground his own into Jim. Their
erections were pressed firmly between them. That was Jim's breaking point. He was going to take it slow – kissing, petting, ending in a mutually satisfying hand jobs. Now being in his Guide was the only acceptable outcome to quench the fire of desire in him.

“I want in you,” Jim whispered in Blair's ear.

“I want you in me,” Blair whispered back.

Jim scoped Blair up and tossed him on the bed. Blair bounced a few times and laughed. Jim quickly removed his remaining clothing. Blair scrambled to catch up. He kicked off his jeans and underwear and turned large pleasure filled eyes on Jim.

Jim grabbed the items he would need from the nightstand and climbed onto the bed to hover over Blair. He studied the blue eyes and grinned. There was no doubt in them. He kissed Blair with all the pent up emotions he had for the wonderful man who had stood by him through shit and storms. Jim moved down Blair's body until he came to the very much at attention organ between Blair's legs. The smell of Blair's arousal was strong and encouraged Jim to keep moving. He licked up one side of the lovely dick before taking it into his mouth. Blair squirmed and groaned with the attention. Blair clutched the sheets as he tried not to buck farther into Jim's warm mouth. Jim applied the lubricant and started to work Blair open while the other was lost in the pleasure of Jim learning the landscape and taste of Blair's dick.

He pushed Blair to the edge of orgasm only to back off and repeat.

“Jim, you bastard,” groaned and panted Blair after the fourth time.

“You're ready,” Jim announced.

Blair looked at Jim lustfully and widened his legs in invention. Jim moved to hover over Blair. He kissed him once before pushing his lube coated penis into the opening of the prepared passage. Jim tuned into Blair's breathing, heart rate, and muscle tautness as he slowly and gently rocked his hips. Each forward glide of the hips moved him further into Blair until he was fully in.

“Oh, god, Jim,” Blair moaned.

Blair wrapped his legs around Jim and chanted move.

Jim did. He pulled back and pushed in experimentally a few times to be sure there were no hangups. Then he thrust quick and hard. Blair's nails dug into Jim's back, but his exclamation of pleasure drove Jim on to another hard thrust. Jim experimented with angle and movement until Blair called out, “Oh, fuck, there, do that again.” Jim complied. They moved together in the age old dance of bodies seeking pleasure.

Close to the edge, Jim stroked Blair in time to the pounding thrusts. Blair exploded in climax. The clenching walls tightened around Jim and pulled him into climax with Blair.

“I love you,” Jim muttered into Blair's ear.

Arthur's Dorm Room

Arthur laid in bed but could not sleep. He kept thinking about all the things they had learned from Xander and how he could use it to help himself. He heard a door open down the hall and someone walk to the bathroom. Arthur tried to tune it out and focus on Lance's heartbeat. Instead he latched
onto the heartbeat of the person in the bathroom. It was a familiar heartbeat. It was Merlin's heartbeat. Merlin washed his hands before walking back to his room and settling into bed. Arthur heard the covers shifting around as Merlin tried to get settled back into bed. His breathing evened out to a sleeping rhythm. Arthur listened to Merlin's breathing and found it relaxing.

“Shit, he's my Guide!”
Slayer in Distress

Chapter Summary

Xander rescues a Slayer

Chapter Notes

Sorry for the later than normal posting. Ended up visiting family this weekend.

Cascade Hotel Room

Xander sat cross legged on the floor. His eyes were closed as he regulated his breathing for meditation. He inhaled for a count; then exhaled for a count. He let his mind slow and let preconceived outcomes drift away. He inhaled for a count; then exhaled for a count. He reached out to his connection to the spirit plane. He inhaled for a count; then exhaled for a count. He was standing on the spirit plane representation of Cascade looking down from the top of his hotel building. Slowly he turned, reaching out with the bit of him that reacted to other Watchmen and Slayers to feel for the newly wakened Slayer that needed his help.

When the magical Slayer detector identified a new Slayer waking, one of the coven witches got a premonition of great trouble for the girl in Cascade. Giles sent Xander to find and help her since he was not on assignment at the moment and hoped that Xander's new skills would aid.

Xander did not know what kind of trouble the girl was in, but he needed to find her quickly. He hoped that the spiritual plane would have less interference for his sixth sense to lock onto her Slayer aura or signal or whatever it was that resonated with Xander's Watchmen essence.

He found Jim and Blair together. He found Arthur in the area of the university. He turned around again casting his sixth sense out farther for a different signature.

Harley materialized and walked over to take her place beside him. Xander squatted down and wrapped an arm over her shoulders.

“We have to find her,” Xander said. “This seemed easier in Africa than in such a large city.”

Xander closed his eyes and rested his head next to her's. Then he felt the Slayer like a feather skipping across his skin. He turned his focus in her direction and reached out to strengthen his familiarity of her signal. Once he was sure he knew where to start looking for her, Xander opened his eyes.

“Thank you,” he told his spirit guide and then came out of his trance.

On the Streets of Cascade
Xander sat in a fast food parking lot trying to follow that tentative connection to the new Slayer, without having to take another trip to the spirit plane. He closed his eyes and remembered the feel of the tentative bond. He found it off to the west. He opened his eyes and looked in that direction. He pulled his map of Cascade from the passenger chair and examined the area in that direction. There were a few housing additions that direction by the look of the road layouts. Beyond that looked like a business or industrial area that lead to the port.

Xander started the car and pulled out heading west. He held tight to the feeling of Slayer and drove. He drove through the neighborhoods and wandered around as he tried to home in on her location. Circle after circle as he narrowed in. He was in a maze of warehouses. He was close. She was in one of the surrounding buildings. He pulled his car over and parked. Xander popped a mint into his mouth to counter as he reached out with his hearing. He ran his fingers over the textured steering wheel. He listened in to each building while still being aware of the mint and texture. There was movement in several of them, but no clue to which one held the Slayer.

He surveyed the immediate area and got out of the car when he was sure there was no one else around. Xander started walking with senses open to what was going on around him. There was light traffic through the area and some men unloading trucks at various docking bays. They took no notice of Xander.

He walked the area until he narrowed down the Slayer's location. She was in a warehouse in the middle of the group. There were men casually leaning against the building. They looked like actual gang members. Xander casually walked into a nearby empty building and found a way onto the flat roof. From this vantage point, he could see the front of the gang warehouse. There were a couple men on each of the front corners looking like they did not have a care in the world. His eagle eyes noted the bulges of guns tucked into waistbands. The glint of metal would show as they moved around.

Construction noises were coming from inside. There was grumbling and cursing, about whatever they were assembling, from the workers.

“It will be worth it,” one of them said. “We made quite a profit last time.”

The others muttered agreement.

“She almost got out,” another said.

“That's why we are electrifying the combat area this time,” a different worker pointed out.

Xander did not like the sound of that at all.

The rumble of an approaching truck forced Xander to pull his hearing back. He turned his attention to the truck. It was full of rolls of wire. It maneuvered around until it could back up to the doors. One of the guards moved from his corner and waited for the truck to stop. He walked up and spoke briefly to the driver. He then walked to the door and rapped on it two times, paused, rapped four more. There was the sound of a bolt sliding before the doors opened. Men moved out of the dark opening and started unloading the truck.

Xander tried to see inside the building but could not get the correct angle. He watched them make quick work of the load and pulled the doors shut. The locking bolt slid back in place. Xander sank to the roof to consider his options. This was definitely gang activity. Was there Sunnydale activity involved? So far everyone looked, smelled, and sounded human.

Could he sneak in during the night and free her? That would require more surveillance to answer.
Could he tip the police off to take care of the gang and he could get the Slayer out during the commotion or after? There was no way he could get in during whatever was being planned and get her out. He could not take them on his own he was sure. Once again more surveillance needed.

No matter which plan he went with he would need photos. Xander pulled his phone out and started taking several pictures. He climbed down from the rooftop and walked around to the back in a wide circle to not be seen. He found another building to get pictures of the back and sides.

There were guards at the back and at the side door as well. He took more pictures. There were windows along the top of the building. Many of them were open to let air in. There was probably a walkway around the building to give access to the windows if not a second floor. He looked for ways to sneak in. There were none obvious to Xander's frustration.

He decided he needed to get a few supplies and something to eat before he returned to his first perch to watch and listen for the rest of the day.

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**Cascade Warehouse**

The sun had fully set to encompass Xander in darkness. The gang warehouse still had lights on but most of the workers had left several hours ago. He could hear movement inside but little else. Xander decided now was the time to attempt to get closer. He climbed down and moved from shadow to shadow in his dark clothing and blacked out face.

There were the same number of guards, but they were bickering among themselves instead of watching for people on foot. Xander made it to the long side with no door and hid behind a stack of crates. A car approached and stopped by the smaller side door. The door opened and slammed shut. Xander could smell food and hear the rustle of several bags. The side door opened.

"About time you got here," the man inside said.

"She awake?" the new man asked.

"Not yet. Dosed her well last time. Didn't want her awake until after we put the food in her cage."

They were silent as they walked across the warehouse. There was the creek of hinges and rustling of bags. There was the hum of electricity as something was turned on.

"Doesn't look close to being done," the delivery man said.

"It will be done by tomorrow. All the cutting has been done. We just have to create the cage and electrify it to keep her in," the guard said.

"Boss has big plans for tomorrow night's show," the delivery man said.

"Guessed, but don't know what," the guard commented.

More bags rustled as food was removed. The sound of chewing replaced the words for a bit.

"He's invited several special guests," the delivery man said. "Guests with a lot of money."

"He bringing in something bigger than dogs?" the guard asked.

"No. He's going to auction her off," the delivery man said. "There was a lot of interest expressed at the first fight. He figured it is better to get top dollar for her now than risk having her damaged or
escape.”

The other man grunted.

“I won't mind having her gone,” he added. “She's hard to keep control of. She broke Rin's jaw last time.”

Xander really did not like the picture they were painting. It sounded like they were using electrified cages to keep her contained. He did not think something like that would hold Buffy or Faith for long unless extremely high, but they were trained Slayers. In there was a young girl who did not know what was going on and did not understand what she could do.

“Just make sure the drugs are out of her system before the show,” the delivery man warned. “We want her to put on a good show for the buyers.”

Xander wanted to be sick.

“Seven like last time?” the guard asked.

“Boss moved it to ten. Never be predictable.”

The delivery man left the building and got in his car. The guard moved toward the electric sound.


There was a groan.

“Eat!”

“Why should I,” a young girl whispered – probably under her breath because Xander had to push his hearing a bit further to hear her.

It sounded like she did obey. There was chewing and slurping.

Xander scanned the area for a way to the windows so he could see in, but this warehouse lacked an external roof access that he had used at the other buildings. He knew it was a long shot but he knew he needed to get closer.

Harley appeared beside him in warning.

Xander stopped woolgathering and focused on his surroundings. Patrols had been added to the night routine. Xander cursed under his breath. He should have waited for later in the night once he had verified the pattern stayed the same. Thanks to Harley he had time. They were just walking along the front.

He eased out of his hiding spot and followed Harley into the shadows until they reached the safety of his car.

Cascade Major Crime Unit

“Ellison,” Jim said when he picked up his desk phone. “We'll be right down.”

Blair looked up as Jim hung up.
“That was Douglass. We have a new lead in the underground fighting case,” Jim said.

“Let’s go,” Blair said.

The two detectives grabbed their things and headed to Douglass's office. Rick Douglass was head of the gang unit. They did a lot of undercover operations and their cases often fell to Major Crime's jurisdiction as some point. After their cases crossed for the tenth time and the departments butted heads, Blair asked Rick to keep them apprised of the cases most likely to fall on Major Crime's desk as long as it did not compromise the agents. Blair did some fast talking and through out very convincing arguments to get Rick to agree on a trial basis. It worked well.

Rick was waiting for them and told them to shut the door. Once they sat down, Rick handed Jim a folder. Jim opened it and they both read the paper within.

“We got that lead today,” Rick said.

It was a description of odd behavior someone saw happening at a warehouse yesterday and bits of overheard conversation. Jim flipped through the other pages which turned out to be photos of a warehouse with Falcon members standing outside.

“Is this legit?” Jim asked.

“Seems to neat and easy,” Blair said.

“My thoughts as well,” Rick said. “I sent a team to scout it out this morning. They reported seeing the same thing. They watched six men enter the warehouse and the guards change. With a parabolic mike, they heard the men talking. It confirmed the tip.”

“When do we move in?” Blair asked.

Warehouse

Xander had no problem getting into the warehouse with the other paying patrons. In the center of the room and toward the back was a large wire enclosed area. High voltage signs were attached to the cage. The people kept this side of the ropes. He moved around the the room that was filling with people.

At either side of the cage were doorways where the “contestants” would be let in. The construction was shoddy but functional for the one time event. There was nothing inside the cage but bare floor. He did not see the Slayer, but he felt her in the back that was sectioned off by a curtain of plastic blue construction tarps from the rest of the room. More gang members stood guard along the curtain. They were looking very alert. Xander knew the chance of getting back there was the same as finding an ice cube in hell.

He turned his attention away and back to the other occupants. There were all kinds here. The scruffy dock hand looking for a violent sport to more affluent and foreign looking. The last he bet were the buyers. Did they know what she really was or think she was an oddity? Which ones were the cops?

Xander had send in his “tip” about the warehouse very early this morning. Then he watched the area. He spotted the officer's car because it kept circling and he heard them reporting in.

He continued to look for loopholes in the security or the cage, just anything he could use to his advantage when the time came.
Time ticked by as the warehouse filled up with spectators. Money was changing hands as bets were placed. There was rough laughter and course words echoing through the shell building. All the input was too much for Xander to use his senses. He grounded them on the Slayer behind the curtain and moved into what he deemed a good position. A tall man came out from behind the curtain and marched to stand before the cage.

“Attention,” he called. “Tonight is a repeat performance for our little Del.”

The crowd roared. Xander clamped his control down tightly to keep from spiking or zoning.

“She will be facing a pack of very hungry dogs.”

The crowd yelled and some booed. A cage of five thin and agitated dogs was rolled out to the crowd’s pleasure. The cage was lined up to the doorway on one end. Next they rolled out a cage with a young Latino looking girl, maybe twelve years old. She was dirty and her hair was matted. Her clothing was ripped presumably from the previous fight. She at least did not look malnourished like the dogs. The crowd screamed their anticipation, as Del's cage was lined up on the other side.

They manually slid the door to the cage open with a rope then opened Del's cage door. She sat in the cage not moving. Her keepers seemed ready for this and started poking long cattle prods through the bars. She moved away from the shocking sticks and into the arena.

“Odds are 1:100 for Del. Place your bets,” the man called. “You have five minutes.”

People shifted around once more to make their bets with the bookies in the crowd. Xander used the opportunity to move closer to Del's door. The five minutes were over.

“Betting is now closed. Release the dogs!”

The doors on the dog's side were opened, and they came running out growling and bearing their teeth. They charged at Del. At first, Xander thought she had given up and would let them kill her. Her self preservation instinct kicked in, and she lashed out at the lead dog with an uppercut that rolled the dog backwards. The others kept coming, and Del lashed out to keep them away from her.

She was not a bad fighter, but it was obvious to Xander that it was all instinct. It lacked the finesse and polish of well honed skills. Against a vampire her odds were fifty fifty, but she would not make it long without training.

The poor dogs were soon out of commission. Del stood breathing hard and looking at the ground. Her fists were clenched at her side. Cheers erupted from the crowd. Money started exchanging hands again.

“As a special treat, I'm opening the floor to anyone who want's to try his or her hand against our little Tasmanian devil Del for seven hundred dollars. Do I have any takers?”

A short man separated himself from the crowd. “I'll take that challenge,” the man said. He had blond hair and walked with a swaggering confidence that reminded Xander of Spike. With that thought, Xander tried to pick up the man's smell. There were too many smells, and he could not separate them. All he could tell was that there were vampires in the room tonight. Xander fingered the bottle of holy water in one pocket and the stake in the other to be sure they were still there. He never left home without them.

The man handed his money over while the dog cage was moved back and the door opened to allow the man in. It closed behind him the man smiled. Xander knew in his gut that the Slayer was in the cage with a vampire.
“Cascade Police,” was yelled as men in tacks vest and with guns raised rushed into the room through the side door.

Chaos instantly erupted as people panicked. One of the smarter gang members opened the large front doors. Everyone headed for them only to run into a police line ready to take them into custody. Xander did not have time for that. He was focused on Del and the vamp.

The vamp attacked, and Del defended. Xander pulled Del's cage away and opened the arena door and rushed in. He threw his bottle of holy water and hit the vamp in the side of the head. The vampire screamed and released his hold on Del. Xander pulled her back to him and handed her his spare stake.

“He’s a vampire. Stake to the heart kills him,” Xander quickly explained while putting himself between Del and the now game faced vamp.

The unhappy vampire growled, said something unoriginal, and charged Xander. He was ready with stake in hand. He used the vampire's own forward movement to help drive it into his chest. It entered the chest, and Xander knew by feel that the stake had hit its mark. He yanked it back and watched the vampire turn to dust. Del was clinging to the back of his shirt.

“What the hell was that?” called Blair from outside the arena.

“Well shit,” Xander muttered seeing Blair in police gear.

Earlier Outside the Warehouse

Jim and Blair moved into position with the other officers around the entrances of the warehouse. As Jim got closer he felt the familiar tingle of another sentinel. He piggybacked his sight with his hearing and found Xander in there. He was not cheering or jubilant like the crowd as they brought the girl out. He had a frown etched deeply on his face, which was a relief to Jim. He did not want to have another bad Sentinel on his hands.

“What's up?” Blair asked in a whisper.

“Xander's in there.”

Blair looked shocked.

“He's not happy with what's going on,” Jim added.

“The reason he's here?” Blair asked. “Maybe who our informant is as well,” he added after a pause.

Jim nodded. That was a very good possibility, but left the question of why Xander was there in the first place.

Jim scanned the area. No one else was approaching. The fight had started and would not last long. Douglass signaled for them to move in. The teams moved in closer to the building, and Jim lead the first team into the side door. They knew that all hell would break loose once they entered. It would be hard to be sure they got all those responsible. They were sure going to try.

Jim locked onto the announcer, who according to their information was the leader of the gang, and made his way toward him before he could escape. Blair moved behind him covering his six. Jim caught his man and cuffed him. He turned to Blair but his Guide was looking into the cage with wide
eyes. Jim turned to look where Blair was. The face of the man in the ring with the girl shifted. There were ridges on his forehead and pointed fangs in his mouth. There was an unrecognizable odor from him that caused Jim's hackles to rise.

The man charged at Xander who was standing between the man and the girl. Xander had something in his hand. In two seconds, that something hit the man's chest and was pulled back. The man disintegrated into dust.

“What the hell was that?” called Blair.

Xander looked at them for the first time. “Well shit,” he muttered.

The girl was behind Xander and appeared to be clinging to him as if her life depended on it. Xander shifted his weight and turned to face them. He stood straighter, and Jim could see determination to protect and the will to fight to the death in his face and body. This was a Sentinel protecting his tribe.

“Don't have time for explanations now, Chief,” Jim said. “Xander is she alright?”

“As good as one can be in this situation,” he answered.

Jim nodded. “Stay there. We'll get you and take you to the station for statements in a bit.

Xander nodded. Blair had snapped out of his befuddled haze and was back to acting like a cop.

In very little time they had cleared the warehouse of people and hauled them down to the station. Xander and the girl stood in the cage still. Jim had warned everyone to leave them until all was clear. The girl was traumatized enough without that. His fellow officers seemed to agree.

While they finished, Xander was softly talking with the girl. Jim only caught a word here or there but assumed it was words of calming and assurance. And it was, only it was assurance that she was not a freak, there were others like her, there was a reason she had these powers, vampires were real, and Xander and his friends could help her. Jim missed all of that as he focused on his own people and securing the scene.

**Cascade Police Station**

Xander sat in a conference room with Delaware waiting for someone to come take their statements. He also knew they were waiting for a representative from child services since Delaware was not a legal adult. Xander was waiting for the Watcher Council's attorney to show. While waiting, Xander had contacted the Cleveland office and gave them the lowdown and Delaware's name so the legal ball of gaining custody could start rolling.

They were lucky that Jim convinced the others that leaving Xander and Delaware together was better for the time being. Delaware sat in the chair beside Xander as close as she could get to him. He patted her hand.

“We'll get this all worked out,” Xander promised. “It may take a bit.”

“You feel safe. I felt you there before I saw you,” Delaware muttered. “Why?” Her confusion and fear was packed into that three letter word.

“I'm something different as well,” Xander told her. “I'm a Watchman or Sentinel. I have heightened senses and that's how I found you.”
“So you're like me? A Slayer?” she asked.

Xander would have preferred she not say Slayer because he was sure Jim was listening in, but he would have to explain it to his fellow Watchman so it was not critical to talk around the topic.

“Don't have the supper strength,” Xander said. “But something like that. Just like we don't talk about Slayers to outsiders, we need to keep the idea of Watchmen quiet as well.”

“They will do to you what they did to me,” Delaware said with a shiver.

“There is that possibility. So when they do come in to talk to you about what's happened to you, you tell them everything but the man in the cage ran off when I came in to help you.”

Delaware nodded.

It was Robin and Faith that came to their rescue and were waiting for them when they got out of their separate interviews. Robin presented the social worker with the paperwork stating they had legal custody of Delaware Rebecca Sanchez. Faith was a good choice to come since Delaware had similar home life to Faith. They would understand each other.

While Faith and Delaware bonded, Robin approached Xander and handed him an envelope.

“Another one has been found,” Robin said. “Giles said to give you the job since you are in the US.”

Xander took the envelope and put it in his jacket pocket.

“How critical?” Xander asked.

“Not like this one,” Robin assured.

Xander nodded. “I have some loose ends here to take care of then I'll head out.”

Robin patted Xander's shoulder.

“Good luck,” Robin said.
Chapter Summary

Xander gives Jim and Blair the Slayer talk. Arthur starts to befriend Merlin.

Cascade Hotel Room

Xander woke slowly. He looked at the clock. It was almost noon. Not surprising after the erratic hours he kept for the past few days plus jet lag. Delaware had gone willingly with Robin and Faith once introduced and they had Xander's approval. They had flown out in the early hours of the morning. Xander had seen them off.

He stretched and got up. He should get cleaned up for who knew when Jim and Blair would call or just show up wanting the promised explanation. There was a knock on his door as he pulled his shirt on over his head. Xander grabbed his eye patch and put it on as he approached the door. He could feel Jim and Blair on the other side.

“Hey,” Xander said opening the door. He stepped back in invitation but never vocally asked them to come in. Old habits save lives.

Jim and Blair entered. Blair had a box of sandwiches and drinks from a local deli.

“Thought you might be hungry,” Blair said.

“I am,” Xander agreed.

They grabbed sandwiches and sat down around the room. Xander took a big bite of his turkey sandwich and chewed while he thought about where the best starting point was for this situation. He looked up. Jim and Blair were eating their own food, but their eyes were on Xander. Xander swallowed and took a sip of his beverage.

“I'll start with Blair's question last night,” Xander said. “I will preface with – you will think it sounds crazy.”

“Crazier than Sentinels?” Blair asked.

Xander looked Blair in the eye and said, “Much crazier.”

“So lay it on us,” Blair said.

“He was a vampire. A real life or dead, blood sucking, evil vampire,” Xander said with calm and assurance in his words.

He could tell Jim had his senses focused on Xander ascertaining his truthfulness. Blair was caught between belief and skepticism.

“Trust me, I know a vampire when I see one. I've been fighting them since I was fifteen,” Xander said.
“Fifteen,” Blair muttered.

“You kill them; they turn to dust. That is what you witnessed last night.”

Xander took a second bite of his sandwich and let them process what he told them.

Blair opened his mouth, closed his mouth, then opened it again only to freeze as he decided what he wanted to ask about first.

“Why was he specifically after Delaware?” Jim asked.

'Give the man a doughnut, he caught on quick,' Xander thought.

“That's a story that goes back a long way,” Xander said and sighed. “It all starts with the earth is older than you think and when mankind was first establishing itself there were other creatures in control...”

Xander told them the story of the creation of the Slayer, Buffy coming to school, Xander getting involved in the supernatural to help his friends, and how they had to activate all the potential Slayers to keep the world from ending. Blair started pacing about half way through and forced himself not to ask questions until Xander was done.

“So, you're saying that Delaware is one of these Slayers and the Watcher Counsel takes them in and trains them,” Blair stated.

“Yeah,” Xander said. “If they are left out there without the knowledge of what they are capable of, they can easily hurt someone and be preyed upon by unscrupulous individuals and things that go bump in the night that would love to have the bragging rights of killing a Slayer.”

It was obvious that idea did not set well with either of the detectives.

“We try to keep the Slayer thing on the down low for the same reason you don't want the knowledge of Sentinels to be public, plus the added fact that most people wouldn't believe in demons living among them.” Xander shrugged as if saying what can you do.

“I noticed a odd smell from the vampire. Is that normal?” Jim asked.

“Kind of stale old person with a hint of dirt – that's the vampire,” Xander said. “Other demon types have their own distinct odor. I haven't been around a lot of them to be able to differentiate since coming online.”

“So these demons are everywhere?” Blair asked.

“There is probably some type of demon or half demon in most towns. Each type prefers different living conditions.”

“What's here?” Blair asked.

“I haven't done much exploring on that. You probably have your non-hellmouthy mix,” Xander said. “We know vampires are here. They seem to lurk in small numbers wherever people live. Probably several verities of peaceful demons, especially if they can pass as human. There is probably a scattering of the non-peaceful types with their tentacles in the belly of the seedy and smelly underworld.”

Jim and Blair looked more and more concerned with each word.
“Unless you're on a hellmouth, they tend to keep a low profile in current society. Stick to the demon areas of town. If you do come across something that's a bit wiggy on a case, call me or the Cleveland office. We'll get you information and send someone out.”

Xander waited for their next volley in trying to understand the Slayer world. Movement off to the side caught Xander's attention. He relaxed when he realized it was just Harley. She walked to the center of the room. From the other side of the room a black cat and wolf joined her. They seemed to great each other before sitting with their backs toward the center of their circle. They looked out across the room as if they were watching for something. It reminded Xander of his vision before leaving Africa.

He looked at the other pair to see if the animals were visible to them. Their eyes were on the furry visitors.

“I saw them back in Africa,” Xander said, “... in a vision.” Xander caught Jim's minute flinch at the word 'vision.' He obviously had issues with the non-physical world aspect of Watchmen and Guides. Jim was a product of the modern age with an ancient gift. Xander understood why Jim reacted that way. “Are they yours?”

“Yeah,” Blair answered. “What are they doing?”

Xander rubbed his chin. If they were the ones from his vision, he had to tell them what he was shown. There was danger coming they would all face and every advantage would be needed.

“Watching for the coming evil,” Xander said. “Before I left the village, I had a dream. There was a great evil off in the far distance. I knew it was coming and it needed stopped. My double told me to find the others, then there were several animals moving in around me. The clearest were them.” Xander indicated the panther and wolf. A though hit him and he groaned.

“What?” Jim asked.

“I just realized what I was asked to do.” Xander tugged at his eye patch. “I think I'm supposed to find others like us.”

“Sentinel and Guides?” Blair asked with barely hidden enthusiasm.

“Yeah,” Xander sighs. “I'll be hunting for Slayers and Sentinels and Guides – oh my.”

“Maybe you will find them just by looking for the Slayers,” Blair said.

The tone made both Jim and Xander study him. Xander recognized it as a shaman's voice, used when truth was being delivered.

“Blair, you really need to seek out training for your shaman gifts. They are leaking out on their own. I have a feeling we will need them.”

**Rainier Dorm**

Arthur stared up at his dorm ceiling. Four days had passed since he realized that Merlin was most probably his Guide, and he had no idea how to proceed or even what he wanted to do. Did he really want a Guide? Would it make that much difference? Just being in Blair's presence made things easier. He could have that with a Guide of his own. Did that mean he just wanted to use Merlin to make his life better? He would then be what Merlin accused him of in freshman year. Merlin did not
even like him. Lance had said as much. But Merlin did comment on him looking better when they met in the hall.

Maybe he was looking at this all wrong. He should put the whole Guide issue aside and think about making friends with Merlin. What did he know about the other boy? Not much when he tallied it. Step one: get to know Merlin.

He could start by talking to him. He could eat with Merlin in the dinning hall. Happen to be going the same places as Merlin... no, too much like a stocker.

Arthur continued to ponder when he heard Merlin walk in the dorm hall doors. He followed Merlin's progress past the front desk. There were a few muttered curses with the sound of riffling through pockets followed by the beep of the card reader that unlocked the door. Merlin moved through the hall then trudged up the stairs. His breathing was slightly heavier than normal. His steps dragged and missed their normal bouncing pep. He finally reached their floor. Merlin's steps sped up as he neared his room only to stop.

“Really, Gawain, a heads up text would be nice,” Merlin huffed with exasperation.

Then Merlin's steps moved farther down the hall.

Arthur focused on Gawain and Merlin's room to see if he could figure out what was going on. Gawain was whispering sweet nothings to a giggling girl. Arthur pulled his hearing back not wanting to listen to where that was obviously going. He searched for Merlin. It sounded like he was pulling books out of his bag and setting them on a table in the floor lounge.

“If I’d known I would be locked out of my room, I would have stayed at the library,” Merlin griped.

Arthur stood and started gathering his own books and was out the door before he realized he had made the decision to go join Merlin in the lounge. The lounge was the standard dorm lounge with tables and chairs spaced through the room and padded armchairs and a few couches scattered around the edges. Merlin was the only one in the room.

Merlin did not even look up from his book when Arthur entered. He did when Arthur sat down opposite him. Merlin looked around at the empty tables as if making a point before looking at Arthur.

“Thanks for doing what you did last week,” Arthur said being sure to look Merlin in the eye.

That seemed to take Merlin back.

“Your welcome,” Merlin said.

Arthur glanced down at the books open before Merlin. It looked medical related.

“Studying medicine?” Arthur asked.

“Nursing,” Merlin said with all the caution of a person teased often about his choice.

“I hear there is a high demand for nurses,” Arthur said. “Aging population and all that.”

Merlin squinted his eyes as he studied Arthur.

“Plenty of opportunity for find a job,” Arthur said and mentally wanted to slap himself. He was babbling, not incoherently, but babbling none the less. “What attracted you to nursing?”

Merlin leaned back in his chair. His arms crossed over his chest. He tilted his head in assessment. He
looked like he was ready to tell Arthur to shove off but instead answered the question.

“I want to help people,” Merlin said.

Arthur leaned back in his own chair to mirror Merlin's but left his arms uncrossed.

“You could help people in other ways,” Arthur pointed out. “What about nursing drew you to it?”

Merlin's arms relax a bit so they are not pressed tightly to his chest.

“I have some experience with it,” Merlin said. “Growing up, I helped a family friend who was a doctor.”

Arthur leaned forward to indicate his interest.

“Why not a doctor them?”

Merlin looked off to the corner of the room.

“Too much schooling and not enough money and don't want to rack up massive debt,” Merlin answered.

Arthur nodded his head and made understanding noises even when he had never thought about that. He had never had to worry about paying for college. He never had to do something less than what he wanted because of lacking money. But, that was probably a concern of many of the students around him.

“So will you be done in four years?” Arthur asked.

“Should be as long as I get classes and labs timed right,” Merlin answered.

Arthur nodded. The scheduling Jenga affected everyone.

“How's living with Gawain?” Arthur asked trying to turn the conversation to a topic that might lead to more relaxed sharing.

Merlin huffed.

“Other than the fact that he seems to always have a girl in the room...”

Arthur chuckled.

“That's been the complaint of all his roommates,” Arthur said and then pulls out Gawain horror stories told to him by those roommates. “Our freshman year, Gawain had not got the hang of putting the sock on the door. Tim, his roommate walked in on Gawain and his girl at the time going at it full tilt. Totally ignored Tim and kept going to the abject horror and embarrassment of Tim, who was a sheltered virgin. Tim admitted that he didn't know which he wanted to do more – run out the door or stay and watch.”

Merlin was laughing by the end. He wiped mirthful tears from his eyes.

“I can so see that,” Merlin said between chuckles. “I can so see that. Makes me glad for the stupid sock. I don't want to see more of Gawain than I already do.”

“He does have a habit of walking around half dressed,” Arthur said with a smile.
He liked Merlin's laugh. It was warm and honest. It made Arthur feel lighter inside.

“What else you got on Gawain?” Merlin asked.

Arthur talked and talked. He told him every Gawain story he could think of. That lead to Merlin telling stories of his childhood friend's antics that always got Merlin in trouble. They shared other stories of school and life. Arthur watched as the barrier between them began to come down. This might not be enough to keep it down but it was a start.

Cascade Public Park

Jim walked into the park on the warming August morning. There were not many people out since school started. Even if the park was packed he would have still been able to find Xander. He felt a Sentinel's presence as he drove here and was able to identify it as Xander almost immediately. He sauntered up to the bench and sat down beside Xander. They both looked out over the empty playground.

“I'm headed out,” Xander said. “Off to Denver this time.”

“Another girl?” Jim asked.

“Yeah,” Xander said. Xander turned his head so his good eye could see Jim. “Jim, I'd apologize for opening the door to the wild and wacky world I grew up in, but I think... I know you will be needed for what is coming....”

Jim sat up straighter in discomfort.

“And you are not comfortable with what I know and how I know,” Xander pushed on. “I don't blame you. If I hadn't grown up where I had, I would be wigged out by all of this. It's just not accepted as plausible or real in today's world. It is something that is a relic of an 'unenlightened' time.”

Jim had to agree that all of that played a factor.

“There is a reason I've seen what I've seen. I'm not asking you to accept it or run out seeking such experiences. I'm asking that you actively support Blair when he does seek such things out.”

“I support him,” Jim protested.

“You do, but this will be harder for you when you don't trust what he's doing. He needs to do this to protect the tribe, and to succeed he will need you to anchor him just as you need him.”

Jim directed his gaze to the trees. He had never been comfortable with the mumbo jumbo once he returned to his Cascade home. In the forest of Peru, it felt right – part of the world there. Here in civilization of science and math, it felt foreign and primal. Felt like something that would take him back to the dark day's in Peru before Inca found him. It was something to not be trusted.

For Blair to fully take up Inca's mantle, he would have to walk the shaman's path in all ways.

“It felt... not imminent. I think we have a bit of time,” Xander said after a long pause.

“I want to be there for him,” Jim admitted.
“I know you do,” Xander said. “I just think you needed a reminder of what he needs.”

Jim nodded once.

Xander brought his hand down on his thigh.

“Well, thanks for listening. I have a plane to catch.” Xander stood and turned to face Jim. “Thank you for letting me pass through you're territory,” he formally said. “May the gods favor you and yours.”

The ritual words resonated with Jim. This was proper and offered the respect due one Sentinel to another.

“May your travels be safe,” Jim responded.

Xander smiled his goofy smile.

“Take care, Jim. I'll call and keep you updated.”

Xander turned and walked down the path and out of the park. Jim watched him go and stayed far longer sitting on the bench thinking about what Xander had said.
One Little, Two Little, Three Little Sentinels

Chapter Summary

Merlin worries about Arthur.
Xander finds more than a baby-Slayer in Denver.

Chapter Notes

I'm going to guess that the Magnificent 7 ATF universe is probably the least known fandoms in this story. It is a universe created by MOG using the characters from the Magnificent Seven TV show from the late 1990's and making them agents for the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, and Firearms (ATF). She graciously lets others play in her sandbox. For more information see: http://blackraptor.net/ATF-Bible/begin.html

The Mag7 Cast:
Chris Larabee: Michael Biehn
Vin Tanner: Eric Close
Ezra Standish: Anthony Starke
Josiah Sanchez: Ron Perlman
Nathan Jackson: Rick Worthy
JD Dunne: Andrew Kavovit
Buck Wilmington: Dale Midkiff

I think you can pick-up what you need to know as we go.

Rainier University Cafeteria

Merlin set his breakfast tray on the table before sitting down. He took a spoonful of his yogurt. He still could not believe that he had spent an evening talking with Arthur Pendragon instead of studying. It had been fun, and he learned quite a bit about Gawain much to Gawain's annoyance. Arthur seemed friendlier this year. Yesterday he waved to Merlin when he saw Merlin at the end of the hall.

Maybe the kidnapping had changed Arthur or maybe Merlin had misjudged him. Tragic events do give one a new look on life. From the few details that had been released about the summer's events, it sounded like a harrowing time for Arthur. Merlin tried not to think about what would have happened if they had not found Arthur. Merlin also wondered if those events were the cause of what happened in the shower. Was Arthur having a flashback or something. Maybe he was suffering from PTSD.

Another tray was set on the table. Merlin looked up, and there was the person he had just been pondering about. Arthur looked sleep deprived and rumpled, like he had just rolled out of bed. Merlin picked up his coffee cup and took a sip to hide his amusement.
“Morning,” Arthur mumbled as he slumped into the chair beside Merlin.

“Morning,” Merlin said. “Long night?”

“You could say that,” Arthur wearily said.

Arthur stared at his food like it was the enemy.

“It’s just a bowl of fruit loops,” Merlin said.

“I don't like fruit loops,” Arthur muttered while he scowled at the offending colorful O's.

Truly puzzled Merlin asked, “Why did you get them?”

“I used to like them,” Arthur admitted. “I don't now. Guess I forgot.”

Merlin could not suppress the laugh. Arthur must have been out late at a party or something.

“Studying or partying?” Merlin asked.

Arthur turned and blinked his weary blue eyes at him in confusion.

“Oh, neither... well I did study, just had trouble sleeping,” Arthur admitted.

Merlin shook his head at the situation Arthur was in and decided to take pity.

“Do you drink coffee?” Merlin asked which seemed to confuse Arthur more. “You don't have any. Do you not like coffee either?”

“Coffee's good. With cream and sugar even better.”

Arthur looked back at his tray as if only now realizing that he was missing the beverage. Merlin went and retrieved a mug of coffee and several packets of sugar and creamers. He set them on Arthur's tray. Arthur started adding sugar.

“Thanks,” Arthur said.

“No problem,” Merlin responded and continued to eat his breakfast.

“Do you like fruit loops?” Arthur asked.

He held the now half empty mug between his hands. He still looked at his bowl like it had betrayed him.

“Sometimes,” Merlin admitted.

Arthur emptied his mug in one go, put the bowl on Merlin's tray, and took his mug for a refill. He returned with a plate of eggs and toast. They ate in silence for a while. When Merlin next looked at Arthur, he seemed entranced by his knife.

“Did you forget you don't like knives?” Merlin asked but did not get a response. He studied Arthur. He was not responding to his environment like he should. He was not blinking. Merlin gave Arthur's shoulder a nudge and said, “Hey.”

Arthur blinked several times then at Merlin and his worried frown.

“Zoned out, didn't I?” he asked.
“Something. Are you alright?” Merlin found himself asking again.

Arthur rubbed his eyes and nodded.

“Need more sleep,” Arthur murmured.

Merlin nodded accepting that for now, but he was beginning to wonder how badly the kidnapping had affected Arthur. Was he seeing anyone about it?

“So that's your informant,” Gawain said from behind them.

Merlin turned to see Gawain shaking his head. He walked around and sat across from them.

“Arthur, I thought you were my friend, but you have been spreading viscous lies about me.” Then he got a good look at Arthur and all kidding dropped. “Man, you look like you went ten rounds with a bear. You should go back to bed, forget classes.”

Arthur grunted.

“Oooh, nonverbal responses.” Gawain turned to Merlin. “You are helping me get him back to his room after I eat.”

Merlin squawked and squawked again when Arthur slumped against him. Gawain laughed.

They managed maneuver the half asleep Arthur to his room. Lance opened the door for them when they knocked.

“Returning this to you,” Gawain said.

Lance looked worried when he saw Arthur being propped up between them.

“He was up and down a lot last night. I wonder if he's getting something.” Lance said.

Lance moved out of the doorway and went to pull Arthur's covers away. They guided Arthur to the bed. He fell into it and curled up on his side. Merlin pulled the covers over him. The three awake occupants looked at each other. Merlin hesitantly broke the silence.

“Has he done this often? Not sleeping,” Merlin asked.

Lance looked thoughtful before answering, “Not like last night.”

Merlin rubbed the back of his head wondering how much to share.

“I am worried about him though,” Lance continued. “There's something off about him since...”

“Since the kidnapping,” Merlin finished.

Gawain nodded his head in agreement.

“I think he might be suffering from PTSD,” Merlin admitted. “I've caught him zoned out a couple times. I don't know him well, but he seems different.”

“He's been more distracted,” Gawain said looking at the subject of their conversation.

Arthur let out a snort and cuddled into the pillow.
“Has he been waking up suddenly as if from a dream?” Merlin asked.

Lance shook his head. “Not that I’ve seen.”

“Has he talked to anyone about this summer?” Merlin asked.

Lance and Gawain exchanged looks and both shrugged.

“He’s told us about it,” Gawain said, “but only the basics of what happened.”

“Never anything about how he feels about it,” Lance said. “What can we do?”

Merlin studied the sleeping Arthur as well.

“Keep an eye on him for now and see what we can learn. It might get better on it’s own, but we might have to have an intervention,” Merlin said.

The others nodded in agreement.

Cheyenne Mountain Conference Room

Daniel Jackson stumbled into the room for the update meeting on the ship found in Canada. The rest of his team was already in the room with General Hammond. Daniel shuffled his stack of papers a bit as he walked. He noted a few other familiar faces in the room belonging to those helping with the research over the past two weeks. Daniel sat down next to Jack.

“I think the crowd gets bigger every time,” Jack muttered.

Daniel pushed his glasses up his nose.

“We keep expanding the search,” Daniel said. “Need people with other expertise.”

General Hammond called the meeting to order.

“I have seen all of your reports,” Hammond said. “Today's meeting is about putting all the facts on the table and see if we can connect the dots to form an accurate picture. So, I hope you have each read the others reports.”

Jack softly gripped about reports as Hammond asked Sam to start.

“We have been combing through the data from the ship...”

Jack doodled on his notepad. They had been talking and arguing for the past two hours, and were still no closer to figuring out if this Wetpants character was still on Earth. The ship records have him being here. Some of the history geeks found references to a legend in the area of the ship that could have been the Goa'uld. The traces of him vanished from Canada after that. Other geeks have the equivalent of Big Foot sightings. Then the debate broke out about how obvious a Goa'uld would be.

“If he were here, there would be some record of a cult or some political group taking over,” history geek number one said.

“He would want to build up a power base first that was unnoticed,” history geek number two argued.
All Jack got from this was they had a big fat zero. There may or may not be a Goa'uld threat on Earth. If he was, they did not have a clue where to find him.

Hammond cleared his throat. The room went silent and eyes turned to him.

“We have looked at all the data and followed every lead we could think of. I'm going to have to classify this as a low threat based on what you have presented,” Hammond said. “I want you all to return to your previous duties, but keep your eyes open. Bring anything that you think might relate to this to me.”

They were dismissed

Denver, Colorado

Xander walked around the streets of Denver following his Slayer detector. He had gotten in late last night and checked into his hotel on the east side of the growing city. He decided to take time to familiarize himself with the city. He had never been in this part of the country. It was a big difference from Africa or California. The nights were cooler than he was used to. [check] There was a quality to the air that he could only describe as greener with depth.

It was a nice afternoon for a walk. The sun was shining and there was a nice soft breeze. Cars were whizzing by as he ambled down the sidewalk. Xander found he was approaching a school. When he got nearer he could see the sign declaring it a high school. Xander smiled at the fond memories of hanging with his friends in simpler times.

It looked like a new building. He could hear the sound of the students moving around between classes. Lockers were opened. Lockers were slammed closed. Kids yelled across halls to their friends. Xander pulled his hearing back before the passing bell rang. That would hurt a lot if he was extended that far when it went. He did not believe it would cause a zone out. Xander liked that term for it better than “lost,” which is what the African work translated to.

The Slayer was in the school. He could not pinpoint her exact location, but she was in there. He could hang around the school until she came out. A look around made him strike that idea. He did not want to be arrested on charges of being a pedophile. He could not tell them he was waiting for a girl he did not know. That would go over well.

Xander continued his walk. He would come back in the morning and see if he could narrow it down. For now he would continue his sightseeing.

Xander found his feet taking him to the heart of Denver. He sat on a bench to enjoy the people and architecture of downtown Denver. Harley appeared at his side. She looked at him and then toward something down the road. Then he felt it. The familiar tingle of another Sentinel... no that tingle was more like what he felt from Blair. Was that a Guide he was feeling? Was it his Guide?

Harley nudged his leg as if to push him off the bench.

“I'm going,” Xander told her.

He walked toward the tingle with Harley leading the way. He wove his way through the other people on the sidewalk while Harley walked through them. Xander stopped before a twelve story building. A group of men in dress pants and ties flowed out of the door and walked around him
without more than a glance at him. That was a good sign that he was not inappropriately dressed for
the building.

Harley walked through the door. Xander followed. He paused at the directory.

“Great a federal agency building,” Xander muttered.

His spirit guide was moving further into the building. Xander thought about turning and walking out,
but the idea of meeting another Protector, Anuk’s term that applied to either Sentinel or Guide, drove
him on. He followed Harley onto the elevator and rode it up with the other occupants.

At each floor they stopped, Xander checked first the tingle then looked at Harley. She did not move
until they reached the eleventh floor. Then she darted out of the elevator. Xander walked calmly onto
the floor.

**Denver ATF Offices**

The group of ATF agents known as the Magnificent Seven were gathered around the conference

table reviewing a new case. Chris Larabee, their leader, handed out folders to each of them.

“This just came down from the Assistant Director Travis,” Chris said.

The group accepted their folders. Ezra Standish had his open and was already skimming through the
material while Buck Wilmington spun his in a circle. Chris glared at Buck who smirked back. Before
they could begin, movement out by the desks caught their attention.

A lanky, brunet, one eyed man stood in the middle of their office looking around and appearing lost.
Chris walked through the conference room door.

“Can I help you?” he asked.

The stranger turned to face Chris with a placating smile on his face.

“I don't really know,” he answered.

“You don't know,” Chris repeated with incredulity.

“Not a strong answer, I know,” the stranger said.

The rest of the team trickled out of the room to “back up” Chris, but really wanted to see what was
going on. The stranger quickly studied each of them obviously looking for something before looking
toward the ground.

Vin Tanner pushed forward and froze. The rest of the team reacted to that small unfamiliar action by
looking for the danger. Vin looked at the floor and then back at the stranger.

“A spirit animal,” Vin said.

“You can see her?” the stranger said sounding excited.

“Yes,” Vin said.

Vin slowly moved toward the stranger but was stopped by Chris who grabbed the back of the
sharpshooter's shirt.
“Then I'm in the right place,” the stranger grinned. “I'm Xander. Xander Harris.”

“What's going on?” Chris hissed in a whisper to Vin.

Vin turned, pulling his shirt out of Chris's grasp, and faced Chris.

“He's got a hyena with him,” Vin said.

“I don't see a hyena,” JD blurted out.

“It's a spirit animal. Only those who have walked the spirit paths can see them,” Vin explained.

Ezra huffed and moved to sit at his desk.

“Just because you can't see it, does not mean it is not there,” Josiah Sanchez, their resident philosopher, said from his spot leaning against the door frame.

Nathan Jackson kept whatever he was thinking to himself but kept an eye on everyone.

“Vin?” Chris asked.

“He's alright,” Vin answered.

Chris nodded then looked at the stranger expectantly. The stranger was studying Vin which caused Chris to bristle. The stranger immediately turned his attention to Chris with an odd look in his eye.

“How can we help you, Mr. Harris?” Chris asked again.

“I think he,” Harris pointed at Vin, “is part of my quest.”

Vin nodded. Ezra snorted. Buck gave him a friendly shove that made Ezra squawk. In the tussle, JD got to his computer and started looking up information on Harris. Nathan and Josiah shifted so they all were not in one location and free to act.

Vin shook his head at his team. “It's alright,” Vin insisted to his team. “Trust me for a few moments.”

Chris nodded.

“What is your quest?” Vin asked.

“I'm to find other... Protectors,” Harris said.

Vin rolled the term protectors around in his head and paired it with the stories of his grandmother's people. He discarded several as not matching what he was seeing and what he felt until he was down to the blessed scout – the Blessed Scout and his Pathfinder. There had not been a known Scout from his people for several hundred years. However, their stories were still told but never to an outsider. Vin's eyes darted from the Scout to the hyena and back as he decided what to do next. Then he looked around at his friends.

“There is a story among my grandmother's people of the Blessed Scout who was gifted with abilities beyond the normal man. He was given eyes of the hawk, ears of the dear, nose of the wolf, and tongue of a snake. He gave the tribe an edge by directing them to the herds and warning them of danger. He was said to walk with spirits and he was always accompanied by a pathfinder.”

Harris looked intrigued but not surprised by the story.
“What are you saying?” JD asked from behind his monitor. “He's one of these legends.”

Harris jumped in before Vin could answer, “Yeah, I am. I'm a Blessed Scout or Watchman or Sentinel. I have heard all those terms in reference to one like me.”

Several of the team looked at him with skepticism. Harris looked around focusing on various things. Then pointed to Buck.

“You had a very good date last night. Her perfume, something with lilacs, is still on your coat and there are very faint hickeys on your neck,” Harris said. He shifted his attention to Nathan. “Your ring is from Colorado University year of 91.” He turned to Ezra. “You have a Dillinger up your right sleeve that you have cleaned recently. No matter how good the clothing, there is still a change in the line and the smell of gun oil is strong.”

Ezra shifted in his chair, leaned forward, and studied Harris.

“So you are observant and good at putting things together,” Ezra said, his southern twang coming through. “I've seen many a good con-artist do the same.”

Harris nodded his head in agreement.

“You pick the test that would prove to you what I'm saying,” Harris challenged.

Ezra stood up and walked into Chris's office and shut the door.

“What's he up to?” Nathan asked.

Harris cocked his head as if listening to something then laughed. He smiled then shared the joke with the group.

“I'm to tell Buck that he makes a prettier girl than he does.”

Ezra was standing in the office doorway.

“Satisfy you?” Chris asked Ezra.

“Enough at the moment to listen,” Ezra said.

JD jumped into the conversation. “If you are here looking for these Protectors and Vin can see your animal, then does that mean he's like you?”

The rest had obviously been thinking along the same lines from the way they looked at Harris.

“He's not a Watcher, but I think he's a Guide or Pathfinder,” Harris answered. “Guides are often shaman.” He looked at Vin with the question in his eye.

Vin fidgeted at the question. This was not something he shared even with his ATF brothers despite how close they were. If Harris was here on a quest, then there was a reason for this to come out in the way it was. He nodded.

“Been training with my mother's cousin since he took me in,” Vin said. He looked at each of his team members in the eye as he disclosed this part of his life. “He said I had the gift. He said I would need it in the future. Every time I go home, we train.”

“So your recent trip...,” Josiah asked.
“Part of it was training,” Vin said.

“How long does it take?” JD asked.

“It takes as long as it takes,” Vin said with a quirky smirk. “I have known the basics for years. You could consider what we do now as advanced training.”

“Why do you need to find these Protectors?” Chris asked.

Harris shifted his weight. It was the first obvious sign of discomfort he had shown.

“That parts even more difficult to believe than what I can do,” he said.

Chris's office phone rang interrupting their pow-wow. Ezra re-entered the room and answered it. He returned minutes latter.

“There's a development in our case, and they need us on site,” Ezra said.

Chris nodded.

“Pack 'em up,” Chris ordered. The others scrambled about to get their kits. “We'll escort you out.”

He told Harris.

Harris nodded and walked to the exit.

In a Rental Car Parked close to a Denver High School

Xander arrived early and parked where he could see the school drop off. He reclined his chair and closed his eyes. He did not need to see until she arrived. He opened up his Slayer sense and waited. His thoughts move straight to yesterday afternoon's twist. Xander was still amazed with how well he kept his cool despite the urge to run as fast as he could.

Vin was a Guide, he was sure. Vin, at the heart of it, felt like Blair. They were not exactly the same, but they had the same base. Maybe that was the best way to put it. What he had been taught of Watchmen and Guides said that a Watchmen would know when other Watchmen were around, but none of it covered Watchmen knowing when Guides were around. Yet, he seemed to be able to do it. But, Harley was always around at the initial moments and seemed to boost the “signal.”

Jim did not act that way... well, he was not around a new Guide. No proof of Jim being able to feel other Guides. What it came down to was that Xander was a data point of one. It was hard to make correct conclusions with one data point.

The encounter with the ATF agents was interesting. Vin was a Guide, but not his Guide. Xander did think he knew whose Guide Vin would be. During the middle of the “meeting.” Xander had felt a blip of a Sentinel in the room. It was quick and sharp and took him by surprise. He thought you had to be isolated for a long period of time before coming online. Chris seemed to be in the beginning stages of coming online when he felt Vin might be taken from him.

Blair would find this all interesting and have a list of questions to ask. What was the process? How quickly do the senses come online? Can they be controlled easier if you know about them before they come online. Did Xander's presence triggered Chris to make the shift? Most of all, Blair would be curious about Xander sensing the spike. No one had told Xander what a new Sentinel felt like compared to an old one. He did not know if that was usual or not. Maybe all pre-Sentinels have
episodes like that before hand. Maybe some never come online.

Xander dismissed that idea in Chris's case. Vin was a functioning Guide that Xander was brought to. Chris was without a doubt his Sentinel. He would come online soon. Xander had left his card on one of the desks so they could contact him if they needed to.

More traffic was moving through the area, but the Slayer was not yet there. He peeked at the dash clock. There was still forty minutes before the students arrived. He had gotten there really early because he did not want to miss her. He did feel something else – approaching the car. It took him a moment, but he identified the presences as Vin. There was another set of steps with him that he bet where Chris's.

Xander pushed the lock button. All the locks popped up when the pair were beside the car. The doors on the passenger side opened. Chris slipped in the back, and Vin took the front. Xander continued to recline and have his eye shut.

“Morning,” he said. “So nice of you to visit, but I figured you would call first.”

“We were in the neighborhood,” Chris said.

“ Convenient,” Xander said.

“JD tracked you phone,” Vin said.

Xander cracked his eye and looked at Vin.

“Isn’t’ that illegal without a court order?” Xander asked.

“Who said we didn't have it?” Chris said.

Xander pulled the lever and brought his chair to its upright position. Chris was pinging his radar again. He studied Chris in the mirror. Then he felt her approaching. His head snapped back to the school, and his two guest looked where he was.

Bus 68 pulled up to the school and students started unloading. Xander tried to pick out which girl it was. It would have been nice if she was first or last, but she had to be in a pack of girls in the middle. Xander watched closely for any sign of Slayersness. He focused on their movements and compared them to Buffy at that age. He looked deeper and deeper...

Vin had a hand on his shoulder giving him a shake and talking to him.

“...know what pulled you in, but you need to come back.”

“I'm back. Thanks.”

Vin removed his hand.

“What happened?” Chris asked.

“I zoned out,” Xander answered.

“He focused to hard on one thing with one sense, and he got lost,” Vin expanded on it.

“Doesn’t sound like a good thing to happen,” Chris commented.

Xander rubbed his head as a headache began to form.
“Fatal at times,” Xander said.

Chris looked surprised for some reason.

“If it happens at a crucial moment like crossing the street, then not of the good,” Xander said with a shrug. “That's why training and Guides are important.”

Vin was nodding right along with his statements.

“The Pathfinder leads a Scout back from such incidences. He also leads the Scout along the paths that will not lead to such things,” Vin explained. “This enables the Scout to lead the tribe.”

“Makes sense for tribal life. What good is it now?” Chris asked.

Vin shrugged.

“You can use it to help find clues that can be documented at crime scenes,” Xander said, thinking of Jim. “Be your own bloodhound. Hear someone sneaking up on you.” Xander gave each of them a grin at that one. “Feel the imperfection that will cause the tire to blow in the next hundred miles once you were away from any help.” That was from Xander's experience in Africa.

The school traffic was beginning to thin.

“Why are you staking out a school?” Vin asked.

“Wanted to reminisce,” Xander said. Which he had done, so not a lie.

Vin and Chris both give him a look that said pull the other one.

“I did reminisce,” Xander protested. “I'm looking for someone.”

“Why?” Chris asked.

“Your Guide?” Vin asked.

“No and because she's in danger,” Xander answered.

Both ATF agents straitened up at that.

“What kind of danger?” Vin asked.

Xander looked at Vin and pursed his lips. Would Vin's studies cover what goes bump in the night? Did he tell them the truth or make something up? He looked back at Chris. Chris's expression was hard and unmoving. Xander had a feeling that even if Chris's gifts were not up and fully functioning, he would know if Xander lied to them.

“Have you ever heard stories about Boca del Infierno?” Xander asked.

Surprisingly it was Chris that answered. “The mouth of hell is not a nice place.”

Vin was the lost one for the first time since Xander had met him.

“What'd ya mean, cowboy?” Vin asked.

Chris shook his head and leaned back into the backseat.

“I've heard stories,” Chris said. “Stories from my grandma about hellmouths. There are things that
live there that are from nightmares.’

“Amen!” Xander seconded.

The agents looked at him now.

“Grew up on one,” Xander explained. “Glad to have only lost my eye in escaping it's destruction.”

“What sort of things?” Vin asked.

“Things you don't want to meet in a dark ally,” Xander said, “or a lit ally.”

Xander heard Chris shift suddenly and felt his eyes on him. When he looked, Chris' narrowed eyes were locked on Xander. His lips were pressed together.

“You know about hellmouths and the creatures it attracts. You're here about a girl,” Chris said, voice cold which put Vin on alert. “Are you a Watcher?” The question dripped with disdain.

Oh, boy. There was history there. Xander knew he would have to step carefully through what was probably a minefield. Hopefully none of them will go off.

“I am not one of those uppity, hidebound, inflexible, pompous windbags that have the survival instincts of a... I'm not going to insult lemmings by comparing the old council to them. Needless to say they couldn't see an apocalypse brewing on their own doorstep,” Xander said. “No love lost on my part when they got themselves wiped out. Good riddens.”

“But she's a potential and your here to take her,” Chris accused.

Xander blew out a breath and fingered his eye patch. Vin looked more lost as the conversation became more cryptic.

“She's more than a potential, and I'm not here in exactly the way you think I am,” Xander said. “Things have changed a lot from what you learned from your granny. I don't mind telling you the story, just not here. I need something to drink while I talk.”

“Little early to start drinking,” Chris said.

Vin shot him a look that Xander could not interpret but knew there was a story there.

“Old man was a drunk. I stay away from liquor lest I follow in his footsteps.” Xander shivered at the thought. That way led to the dark side. “I just need something to sip as I talk. It's a long story.”

“The Saloon?” Vin proposed.

“Good a place as any,” Chris agreed.

“Am I driving you or are you taking your car?” Xander asked.

“Following us,” Chris said before getting out.

J. Watson's AKA The Saloon

Chris sat quietly in his usual seat at their usual table as Inez brought them their drinks and an appetizer that Vin ordered. The kid did not have the look of a Watcher, but he seemed to know an
awful lot about things to rule out the possibility. The kid's vitriol in describing the watchers his grandma had told him about seemed real.

Harris took a sip of his soda and cased the room. He noted the exits and where the other patrons were in relationship to them. He seemed satisfied with the setup.

“Care letting me in on what you two were referring to back in the car?” Vin demanded.

“The world is older than you think,” Harris started.

He told of the demons and the shadow men using magic to create a weapon to fight back, just like his grandma had told him.

“This weapon was a young girl given the power of a demon. One young girl in the whole world to stand between humanity and the waves of creatures who wanted to eat, enslave, and/or destroy them. When she fell, for no one is indestructible, another girl was called. Another after her, and so on. The shadow men watched over their creation the best they could. They sought out the girls and trained them about the enemy they would be facing. Each Slayer had a watcher to aid them. Eventually their descendents formed the Watchers Council to organize it all. Like all organizations and despite their noble intentions in the beginning, they became wrapped up in their own self importance and what they saw as their purpose.”

Xander took a sip of his drink. He had been keeping an eye on both of them as he talked.

“With me so far?” Xander asked.

Vin nodded. Chris gave a grunt.

“Jump forward to Sunnydale, California 1997,” Xander said. “A new transfer student started that year. She was blond and hot and everything a geeky teenage boy dreamed about. There was also something odd about her. It didn't take long before the geeky teenage boy and his two friends got wrapped up in it. They learned about vampires when one of them was turned. They learned that the new girl was the Slayer and the new librarian was her watcher. They learned the true danger of their town because it was on a hellmouth. Instead of running and putting their heads in the sand, the two remaining friends set out to befriend and help the Slayer, causing much disapproval from her watcher.

“The watcher eventually warmed up to them and allowed them to help. They all became close and a force for good on the hellmouth. Because of them, the blond Slayer flourished and lived longer than any Slayer before her. They faced major foes and prevented several apocalypses before they graduated high school. They even prevented the town mayor, turned giant snake, from eating their graduating class by blowing the school up with the snake in it.

“Life went on. Then the First Evil was freed and started seeking out and killing potential Slayers. He raised an army of powerful Turok-Han vampires. He took out the Council. Life on the hellmouth went crazy. We gathered as many potential Slayers as we could. There's fighting and magic and a lot of boring and gory details. In the end, all the potential Slayers were activated to face the First Evil, the hellmouth was closed, and we ran for our lives out of the sinking town.”

Vin let out a soft whistle.

“Sounds like you're lucky to be alive,” Vin said.

“Yep, sure am,” Harris said.
“What happened to the Slayers?” Chris asked.

His grandma had told him of her time as a potential Slayer and how there was only one Slayer at a time. She said she was relieved once she passed the age to be called. In that time, she had witnessed what was out there in the dark. She told him her stories because she wanted him to know what to look out for and how to avoid it. When Sara was pregnant, she warned him of the Watchers and how they would take girls from their homes. To bad her warnings were not about your average humans with twisted minds.

Chris could not imagine all potential Slayers being active. How many would that be? His grandma said a Slayer was lucky to last a year. She had learned, unbeknownst to her watcher, of some that only lived a few days after being called. How many did they loose in a year? He understood how amazing it was that Harris' Slayer lived to graduate high school.

“We have established schools for them,” Xander answered. “There they are taught to control and use their powers with others their age by the older Slayers and what few Watchers we have trained. They are taken out on patrols to learn about what is out there and how to handle it. Most important they are sent to school and encouraged to have friends. When they graduate Slayer school, it is their choice what to do. They can stay and help at the school. They can be sent out to hot spots of activity, with a qualified Watcher, magic user, and other support staff, or they may return home with what resources we can send them with.”

“Do any go home?” Chris asked.

“To early to know,” Xander said. “It has only been a few years since Sunnydale collapsed. Those with the age and experience grew up under the Council's care or have seen to much to leave the fight. They learn then they teach the younger ones. They watch each others backs.”

Vin looked gobsmacked and maybe horrified. Chris knew he had been once he was old enough to fully understand the ramifications of the stories.

“How old is the oldest?” Vin asked having pulled himself together.

“Under twenty five,” Harris said.

Vin rubbed his head.

“The Council?” Chris asked.

“Killed off and we created our own from the ashes. It's not like it is one girl against a room full of old men telling her what to do. The Slayers outnumber the Watchers. The Watchers are taught to do more than just watch.”

That sounded better to him than what he had been told.

“How do you know all about this?” Harris asked looking at Chris.

Chris should not be surprised at the question. Harris had told them his story. It was only fair he ask about Chris's story.

“My grandma was a potential.”

Vin's head whipped around to look at Chris in a very un-Vin like way. He had pulled the rug out from his friend. Harris on the other hand only looked contemplative.
“When was she identified?” Harris asked.

“Not until she was fifteen,” Chris answered.

Harris was solemn as he nodded as if he knew what happened next. Vin did not and he asked.

“They took her from her family.”

“Did they use the special school route, job opportunity, or did they just take her?” Harris asked. “The girls talk and share... I call them origin storied.” He added to answer the question that showed on their faces.

Vin chuckled at that.

“Those old goats had all sorts of tricks to get the girls away,” Harris said complementing their creativity but obviously disliked their methods.

Chris had to think about that. He rolled the memories of her telling him the stories to find the answer. “She never said,” Chris said. “She talked around it a lot.”

“I never wondered about those who were not called,” Harris said. “I was always so busy with the one that was called than those that weren’t.” Harris looked thoughtful for a few moments then turned to horror as he followed it through. “What happened to potentials who were never called? Was there an age limit or something? If so, what then?”

The boy had enough experience with the old Council to take a few stabs at what happened.

“There was an age limit, twenty two, even though the oldest to ever be called was nineteen,” Chris answered.

“Probably wanted to be sure,” Harris said.

“They gave my grandma a choice of becoming a Council member or leaving.” He put emphasis on leaving. “She wasn't a fool and had spied on enough of her watcher's meetings and calls that she knew it was a join them or die situation. She had plans to run away, but they were attacked by a monster before she could. Her watcher was killed and she was severely wounded. She made it look like the monster had carried her off and let the Council think she was dead.”

Inez brought them refills and asked if they wanted lunch. Chris had not realized the morning had gone by so fast. Lunch then back to the office. The others should have yesterday's incident wrapped up.

“Better put in a to go order for the rest of the team,” Vin said. “The usual, Inez.”

“Will do,” she said having taken Harris' order first and headed for the kitchen.

“You explained what you are doing here, but not how you became a Scout,” Vin pointed out.

“You want all my stories on the first date, for shame,” Harris said with mock shock.

“We do have to get back to the office soon,” Chris said.

Vin was disappointed with that but nodded agreement.

“Harris, when you get your business wrapped up or have down time, come out to my place for dinner and you can tell us then.”
“Cowboy, can grill up a hunk of meat real good,” Vin said with a heavy twang.

“Don't call me Cowboy,” Chris ordered.

Harris laughed.

“Sound's like a plan. Give me your number.”

Vin pulled out a business card and pen and was putting the information on the back.

The loud sound of breaking glassware filled the Saloon suddenly. Chris covered his ears as more glass broke when the busboy tried to steady the unbalanced tray. Glass should not be that loud. It hurt his ears. Everyone in the room was shouting. Harris said something to Vin that he missed because of the pain.

Vin placed his hands on Chris' over his ears and turned Chris' head to look Vin in the eye. Vin's lips were moving but Chris could not hear what he was saying. He focused on trying to here Vin, who looked very concerned and very instantiate. Harris handed Vin Chris' glass. Vin held it so Chris would take a drink from the straw. Chris took a sip. He focused on the cool rich flavors on his tongue.

“That's it, focus on something other than your hearing,” Vin said. “Don't focus too much on it,” he warned. Taste the tea and feel my hands on yours.”

Vin pulled Chris' hands away from his ears. The noise level was back to normal. The busboy was cleaning up the broken glass. The shards clinked together as he swept, but it did not bother Chris.

“What happened?” Chris asked.

“You just experienced a spike,” Harris said. “Welcome to the club.”

It took what felt like several minutes for Chris to get what Harris was implying, but it clicked. He was like Harris.

“Chris?” Vin said.

Vin was worried about him if he was using Chris' name. Chris pulled away and took his glass from Vin.

“I'm fine,” Chris said.

“Do you know what to do?” Harris asked Vin.

“Vague idea,” Vin answered.

Chris felt like he was missing part of the conversation.

“Just stick with him through the day. Don't let him focus too hard on one sense. If this happens again or he zones, try to pull him out using his other senses. You will do fine. I have someone I can call who may have more information you can use,” Harris said.

Why would he need Vin to... then it hit him. Vin was a guide or pathfinder or whatever. He could help him with what was happening. That must have been what he was doing earlier.

“Back with us fully?” Harris asked. “The first time it takes a while.”
A glance around showed no one was paying them any special attention. Inez brought them their food.

“I’ll bring the teams out when you get ready to leave,” she said.

“Thanks,” Vin said.

“So what happened and how do I prevent it from happening again,” Chris asked.

Harris told them as they ate about the problems of being a Watchman and the tricks he uses to not fall into zones or spikes. He admitted to suspecting Chris was a Watchman/Scout and why.

“Right now you don't feel like a Watchman to me, but you did when you spiked and a bit before. This is new to me,” he admitted. “Mine were all active by the time I found someone who knew what was going on. You seem to be flickering on and off like a bird flapping its wings in practice for flight. I wish I could tell you more.”

Chris could hear that it was the truth.

“You just turned back on,” Harris said.

It was going to be a long day.
Night of Wonders

Chapter Summary

Chris and Vin tell the team.
Xander goes hunting.

ATF Magnificent Seven Office

Vin and Chris returned to the office with lunch for the others. The rest of the team descended on them like a flock of hungry seagulls on the beach. Vin was left holding an empty box.

“Where you boys been?” Buck muttered around his sandwich.

Vin sat down at his desk across from Ezra and leaned back in his chair. Chris took up his regular post in Vin and Ezra's visitor chair. The rest of the team looked at them to see if they would answer.

“You seem a bit... off, Chris,” Josiah observed.

Chris took a slow even breath and let it out. Vin shifted slightly, and Chris waved him off. He was fine for now.

“We tracked down yesterdays visitor and had a chat,” Chris said.

“There's something odd about Harris' hometown, even before it was pulled into a sink hole” JD said.

“The death rate was out of proportion for a city of its size. There appears to have been a secret government agency based there at one time.”

Chris arched an eyebrow at JD on that. JD waved a hand dismissively.

“I didn't break through anyone’s cyber defenses. Just pieced things together from reports and requisitions I found here and there.”

Chris nodded for JD to go on, because the kid would not let it rest until he had reported it all.

“Things happened there and are explained with inanely unrealistic causes. The high school was blown up and they cited a gas leak.”

The rest of the team perked up inquisitive ears at that.

“What makes you think it wasn't a gas leak?” Nathan asked.

JD tapped at his computer and put a picture up on their main screen. It was an aerial shot of the school. One section was in splintered pieces while the other half remained standing. JD overlaid the image with another of blue lines.

“The lines are where the gas lines in the building were,” JD said.

The team studied the image for a moment before Buck stated the obvious.

“They are no where near the explosion.”
“Exactly,” JD said. He typed more and the image focused in on the blown up section. “Nathan, in your expert opinion, what would you say did that?”

Nathan walked up to the screen to get a closer look. He walked from one side to the other of the screen. He asked JD to enlarge certain parts of the school before giving his verdict.

“Well placed C-4.”

“How did they miss that on an investigation?” Buck asked.

“Incompetence,” was Ezra's dry rejoinder.

“Or they are hiding something,” Nathan countered.

JD swiveled to face the room.

“That was only one case. There are hundreds of abnormalities that don't make sense,” JD exclaimed.

Chris rubbed his head at the headache that was forming behind his eyes.

“Let it go for now, JD,” Chris wearily said.

All eyes turned to assess Chris.

“We learned a lot from our talk with Harris,” Vin said. “Now's not the time to talk about it. I suggest we meet up at Chris' house tonight.”

“Right now we have a case to wrap up,” Chris said. “So where are we?”

The Loft in Cascade

“I've got it,” Blair called as he grabbed the phone. “Hello.”

“Blair, it's Xander.”

“Hey, what's up?”

“I need a guide to being a Guide,” Xander said.

Jim was beside Blair instantly.

“Hi, Jim,” Xander added.


“I've found another set,” Xander said.

“Really!” Blair said.

“Odd thing is the Sentinel is just becoming active. He keeps flickering on and off my radar.” There was honest confusion in Xander's voice. “He hasn't had the alone for weeks before schtick either. He seemed to come online when he thought his friend, who's a Guide, would be taken from him.”

Blair hummed into the phone.
“Doesn't match what I know about it,” Blair added. “Jim, you?”

Jim grunted a negative.

“Anyway, the Guide had Native American family and is shaman trained, but he doesn't have any Guide experience. Do you have any tips I can pass along?”

“I could write a whole book on it,” Blair said, “but I won’t.” He looked at Jim with a smile. “Let me jot down some of the important bits. I'll send them to you.

“That sounds good. Thanks,” Xander said. “I know he'll appreciate it. Oh, also, I haven't said anything about knowing other pairs of Protectors to them. The only reason I'm telling you about them is they need your help. So until you say I can, mums the word.”

Blair looked at Jim in a silent conversation.

“Once your new Sentinel is fully online and ready, you can tell them,” Blair said.

“I think they will appreciate knowing others who have the same experiences,” Xander said. “It's been a long day. Talk to you later.”

“Bye, Xander.”

Xander hung up. Blair returned the receiver to the cradle.

“That's interesting,” Blair said.

Blair walked to the couch and sat down. Jim sat down beside him. He wrapped his arm around Blair and pulled him against his side. Blair nuzzled up contently in his spot.

“I never dreamed of so many Sentinels,” Blair said. He tipped his head up and kissed Jim's jaw. “You're my favorite.”

Jim lowered his head. Their lips met and caressed against each other before pulling away.

“Your thoughts?” Blair asked. He rested his head on Jim's shoulder.

“The Sentinel will need something as well,” Jim said.

Blair hid his smile in Jim's shoulder. Jim ran his hand up and down Blair's arm.

“You going to help me then?” Blair asked.

“Can't have you filling their heads with your endless tortures you call tests,” Jim teased.

Blair pinched Jim's side. He pinched Blair's arm. Before Blair can retaliate, Jim said, “If Xander's dream is correct, then he will be finding others. How many will know before hand what they are? I think your paper could help them.”

Blair froze afraid he was hearing things. Slowly he looked up at Jim with wide blue eyes.

“With modifications, of course,” Jim added.

“Of course.”
Denver Hotel Room

Xander hung up with Blair. It had been a long, frustrating, yet interesting day. The morning with Chris and Vin had been different. Another set of Protectors found. How many did he have to find? How many were out there? He missed catching the Slayer after school. He could not find out which area her bus covered. Now he felt like taking his frustrations out on the local night life, if he could find any.

He grabbed his weapons and headed out to find something to kill. He would start at local clubs and end in a cemetery if he did not find anything there. Vamps liked clubs. Lots of lambs to choose from and easy to separate from the herd.

Chris' Ranch House

Chris woke from his nap. His headache was gone. He immediately locked onto the sound of Vin moving around in the kitchen. He knew that he should not hear him so clearly. Obviously he was active again. It seemed to be happening more frequently. He took a slow calming breath. He could smell the sauce Vin had simmering for the pasta. Chris got out of bed and ambled down the hall to the kitchen.

Vin looked up when he entered and smiled.

“You look better,” Vin said.

“Feel better,” Chris admitted. “I'm online again.”

Vin put down the towel and walked over to Chris. He placed his hand on Chris's arm.

“How are they doing?” Vin asked.

“Manageable,” Chris answered.

He could feel the warmth of Vin's touch spread across his skin. He took in the lingering smell of Vin's cologne. He was conscious of each of Vin's heartbeats. The steady rhythm was soothing.

“We need to tell the others,” Vin said. “They can't help if they don't know what's going on.”

Chris reluctantly agreed. It was a valid point Vin made. Vin could not always be by his side as he got a handle on this new and crazy part of his life. He trusted the team in life and death situations every day; he could trust them with this.

“Good. They will be here soon,” Vin said.

Vin returned to cooking. Chris walked to the counter where the salad ingredients were set out and started cutting. They worked in comfortable silence for a while before Chris heard the sound of tires turning off of pavement and onto gravel at the end of his three quarters of a mile drive.

“Someone's here,” Chris said. “Just pulled off the road.”

Vin smirked at Chris. “Sounds like you are getting the tune of it.”
Denver Night Club

Xander parked and walked down the row of night clubs and bars. He did not know which one would be good hunting ground or how active the native supernatural community was in Denver. He was just going on years of experience on the Hellmouth. Xander wrapped his fingers around the stake in his jacket pocket. He had a second secured in a loop in the waistband of his pants at his back and a third strapped to his leg. The pepper spray-like canister of holy water was in his other pocket. He was prepared for vampires, but not any other types of monsters.

Caustically Xander extended his senses looking for distinctive odor of vampires. He walked down the sidewalk sniffing for any sign of the undead and balancing it by focusing on a second sense. He came to the end of the road and walked up the other. There were faint traces here and there, but they could be days old.

A few more blocks, and he found a fresh trail. He followed it to what appeared to be a popular club with a long line at the door. The set of intimidating bouncers stood at the door letting people in and out. The line was full of young people. Some looked young enough to still be in high school. Xander walked past and glanced down the alley. There were several people standing outside the door smoking. They did not smell of vampire though.

Xander wondered if he should move around back or stay to the well traveled areas of the sidewalk. He was weighing his options when he felt her. The Slayer he was chasing down was here. He focused on where she was and moved down the alley. The smokers did not interfere as he strode between the buildings. He came out in the delivery alley at the back of the building and turned left. He picked up his pace. The smell of vampire was strong. Three buildings down, a girl was struggling with a man. Her punches were doing damage, but she was sloppy and not as effective as she could be.

The vampire was dodging most of her punches.

There was another girl leaning against the wall and unconscious. Xander could hear her breathing and heartbeat. She was fine for the moment. He focused on the fight. The vampire was wearing the new Slayer down. He spotted Xander approaching but dismissed him in favor of dodging a kick from the Slayer.

The Slayer was yelling at the vampire for attacking them and did not see Xander move closer. The two fighters circled in the alley. When the vamp's back was to him, Xander plunged his readied stake into the vampire's back. The vampire arched back and screamed for a moment before becoming a cloud of dust that drifted to the ground.

The shocked girl looked at Xander through the falling particles. He waved with the hand not holding the stake.

“Stake to the heart or beheading is the best way to kill them,” Xander said.
The whole team was seated around the table with plates of food. They were digging in and chatting and teasing, but they all were obviously waiting for Chris or Vin to tell them what was going on. The food was swiftly finished. Chris passed out bottles of beer and sat back down.

Chris opened his mouth then closed it. He did not know how to even begin to tell them about the supernatural. Should he even mention it. Starting with what affected them personally would be where he started.

“Turns out I'm a Watchman like Harris, and it's just now turned on for some unknown reason,” Chris said.

There was a moment of quiet then the table was filled with questions from those around it.

Vin cut in, “Xander believes I'm Chris’ Pathfinder. He used the term Guide.”

“So you can help him?” Buck asked.

“Theoretically, yes,” Vin said. “Each of you can, too. I don't know much about the specifics of it. Harris told us what he could, and offered to find more from a friend of his.”

“Who would he ask on such matters?” Ezra asked.

“Didn't say,” Vin said and shrugged.

“Are you sure you can trust him?” Nathan asked.

“Surely he's after something,” Ezra added ever the doubter.

They were all talking over each other again until JD whistled. All eyes turned to the youngest member of their group.

“I came across something in my research on enhanced senses. Several years ago there was a big fuss about a supposed thesis paper on people with enhanced senses. The author, Blair Sandburg, denounced it as a fraud. He was kicked out of Rainier University in disgrace.”

“I think I remember that,” Buck said. “What's a made up story have to do with this?”

JD paused then proposed, “What would you do if something you did put one of our lives in danger?” He held up his finger to stop them. “Keep that in mind. Sandburg went on to become a police detective and is partnered with the same person that the paper was supposedly about.”

The pieces were clicking into place for all of them.

“His partner is like Chris and Xander,” Josiah said.

“That's what I figure. The kicker is, Harris was in Cascade, Washington, for a week and a half before coming here. The same city where Sandburg lives.”

“So you think his contact is Sandburg?” Ezra said.

“It's a good guess,” JD said. “Before that he was briefly in England after a long stay in Africa.”

“If Sandburg has been working with a Watchman for this may years, he would have valuable information he could share that's more applicable to life today,” Vin said.

“Life today?” Nathan questioned.
Vin nodded and leaned forward in his chair.

“This isn’t stuff that you learn about just anywhere. It's mostly held by people with tribal roots, like myself,” Vin explained. “My guess is, he became active and was trained in Africa. He hasn't been anywhere else long enough to be at the level of control he's at, except there.

“Tribal training would not take into account the stimulus from modern life. Xander warned us about household cleaners and other modern items that I'm betting came from someone acting as a Guide for an active Scout in an industrial setting.”

“Not his own life experience?” Joshia asked.

“Could be, but the list was too long to be just him. JD, how long has he been in the “modern” world?” Vin asked.

JD pulled out his tablet and accessed his files.

“He arrived at Heathrow on August 11th.”

“That gives him less than a month in industrialized cities,” Chris stated. “He's been traveling to a new location every few weeks.” Chris shook his head thinking of the possible reactions Harris had told them about. “Not him personally from the information given.”

“What'd he tell you?” Nathan asked.

Vin told them how items could irritate the skin causing rashes, and could be bad enough to make the person sick. They answered the team's questions as best they could. JD was taking notes of those that could not be answered. The team was going to support them any way they could.
The Loft, Cascade, Washington

Arthur jogged up the steps to Jim's loft. He hummed to himself as he climbed. He realized that he was content for the first time since his kidnapping. His senses had been easier to control the past few days. Days he had seen and talked to Merlin at least for one meal. The other boy's presence was enough to keep his senses from going crazy. Arthur grinned as he rounded the last newel post. Jim was standing in the loft's open doorway.

“You're chipper,” Jim said.


Arthur ducked but did not avoid Jim tousling his hair in a parental way – a way Arthur at times wished Uther would. He liked it when Jim treated him like that. He felt wanted and included in a way he had never felt before. He trusted Jim and Blair despite knowing them for only over a month. They were closer to him than his family at this point.

“Glad to hear it.”

“Hey, Blair,” Arthur called out.

There was a bump and thump from the room under the loft that Blair used as an office. Blair stuck his head out of the doorway. There was dust and cobwebs caught in his hair.

“Arthur, good to see you.”

Arthur plopped down on the overstuffed chair like the apartment was home. Jim had detoured to the kitchen and handed him a soda.

“Cleaning?” Arthur asked.

“Sort of,” Blair said. He emerged from the room with a stack of books and papers. “I'm trying to find all my old research notes.” He put the stack on the coffee table.

Arthur leaned forward and looked at some of the papers. “Why?”
“Xander found a newly awakened Sentinel and Guide. He wanted information to help them figure out what they were doing.”

Arthur looked over at Jim to see what he thought.

“I agreed,” Jim said. “Xander seems to have a knack for finding Sentinels. A Sentinel for Dummies book would have been helpful back in the day.”

“Hey!” Blair squawked. He turned to confront Jim. “It is not Sentinel for Dummies. It is a beginners guide for Sentinels and Guides.”

Jim stepped closer to Blair and brushed the debris from his hair. He tugged on a strand when he was done and pulled Blair against him.

“I know,” Jim smirked. He gave Blair a quick peck on the lips before moving away.

Arthur found their new romance cute and was happy that they did not try to hide it from him. They all knew that would have been pointless. He noticed the change in the scent of the apartment the last time he visited. It took him a bit, but he finally deciphered what the change was and what it meant.

Blair turned to Arthur and pointed.

“You look better.”


Blair rubbed his chin and studied Arthur. He plopped down on the couch.

“So tell me about your Guide and what he... she is doing to help you,” Blair ordered.

Jim picked up a folder from Blair's stack and sat down at the other end of the couch.

“He's a friend. Just hanging out with him daily seems to help my control,” Arthur admitted.

Blair hummed and looked perplexed.

“Doesn't fit with the other data I have, but I'm the first to admit only one case study will not provide information for all cases. I've been talking to Xander about his training. They use a different approach to it.”

“Does he know?” Jim asked.

“No. I want to get to know him as a friend first. I don't want him to be my Guide out of any sense of obligation. I'm doing fine as things are.”

Jim accepted the statement and turned back to the papers.

“If that changes, call,” Blair ordered.


Blair huffed. He picked up a binder from his stack and thrust it at Arthur with a post-it note pad.

“Here read that. Post-it note anything you think a new Protector should know.”
Denver Airport

Xander parked and walked with Missy to the ticket counter.

“I wish you were going with me,” the teen said.

“I know, but I have others like you to find,” Xander said.

Missy gave him a hug and squeezed him tight. Xander grunted at the pressure, and she let up.

“Thanks for saving me and convincing my parents to let me come,” Missy said.

“Glad I could help,” Xander assured. “You've talked to Faith and some of the other girls. They will meet you at the airport in Cleveland.”

A bit of show and tell in a graveyard with her parents was enough to get them to agree. Giles might not agree with his methods, but it worked. If they wanted a diplomat, they should send someone different. He had spent the past year in a country where half the population still believed in the supernatural. That was a lot easier to convince them to let the girls come.

“I know.” Missy smiled at him and flipped her blond hair over her shoulder. “I'm looking forward to it.”

“Get going before you miss your flight!” Xander ordered as he ruffled her hair.

She batted his hand away, hugged him again, and trotted down the walkway to the security check. He sure hoped she left any obvious weapons at home. She disappeared into the queue of people. Another one on their way.

Xander waited until he felt she was in the terminal before turning and heading to his car. Slayer business out of the way, it was time for Watchman business – or Sentinel business. That was the term Blair used in the document he sent Xander. Since Blair was the leading expert at the moment, he should probably use it to keep everyone on the same page as he met more Protectors. There is a reason for a standardized nomenclature after all.

Safe in his car, Xander picked up his phone and called Vin. It was time for their dinner date.

Chris' Ranch House

Chris was seasoning the steaks when an unfamiliar car pulled into the drive.

“Company,” Chris called to Vin in the other room.

Vin sauntered to the door to let Harris in, while Chris finished with the steaks. He could hear Harris getting out of the car and walking to meet Vin. They exchanged greetings, and Vin escorted Harris to the kitchen.

“Evening,” Harris said.

Chris nodded in greeting. Harris pulled a nine by twelve envelope from the inner pocket of his jacket and placed it on the counter.

“My contact came through and sent me this.” Harris tapped the manilla envelope. “Read through it after I printed it out. He has some good tips and advice in there.”
Vin picked it up and opened it. He slipped out the papers and started scanning them.

“The controls are a good idea,” Vin said.

“Thought so myself,” Harris said. “I was trained with the idea of casting your senses out like a net and pulling them back in. I think the dial idea gives the Sentinel a more precise control of level.”

“Does the net image help you spread your senses out over everything like the net and not focus on one item that could cause you to zone?” Vin asked.

Harris shrugged. Vin hummed. Chris could see the wheels turning and foresaw experimentation in his future. If it gave him the control he would need to work and live without adverse reactions, he was willing to give it a try.

“How are you doing, Chris?” Harris asked.

“Spikes are a bitch,” Chris said.

Chris set the steaks to the side and started pulling out the potato salad and beans out of the refrigerator. He set them on the counter. He grabbed the platter of steaks and took them out to the deck. The steaks sizzled when placed on the hot grill.

Harris and Vin followed him out and were carrying the plates and sides. Vin returned for the beverages. He handed Chris a beer and Harris a glass of lemonade.

“How do you like your steak,” Chris asked.

“Don't bother answering. He only cooks them one way,” Vin teased.

“Just under medium is good,” Harris answered with a smile.

Chris ignored Vin and flipped the steaks.

“Find your Slayer?” Chris asked.

“Yeah. She's safely with the others in Cleveland with her parent's blessing,” Harris answered.

“I believe you owe us a story,” Vin said.

“Yes,” Harris said. “It started in Africa.”

Vin gave Chris his 'I was right' smirk. Chris turned his attention to plating the steaks. He shut off the grill before passing out the plates. Then he took his seat beside Vin.

“Vin has a theory,” Chris said to answer Harris' inquisitive look. “You just validated it.”

Harris chuckled then moved forward with his story while they ate.

Arthur's Dorm Room

Merlin sat on Arthur's bed pretending to read his assignment while Arthur worked on his math homework at his desk. Arthur looked better than he did last week when they tucked him back in bed. Lance reported that Arthur seemed to be sleeping better. Maybe whatever was bothering Arthur had passed. Merlin pondered that and what he knew of PTSD. He was unsure.
“What’s on your mind?” Arthur asked.

He looked up and met Merlin’s eyes. Merlin rubbed the back of his head in embarrassment at being caught.

“You’re looking better,” Merlin muttered.

“I’m feeling better,” Arthur admitted.

Merlin looked down at his book then back to Arthur.

“Are you talking to someone about it?” Merlin blurted out.

Arthur looked puzzled.

“Your experience this summer and your PTSD,” Merlin clarified.

“I don’t have PTSD.”

Merlin shot off the bed, dumping his books on the floor.

“What do you mean you don’t have PTSD!” Merlin started pacing across the room. “You have trouble sleeping, you zone out, you don’t respond to those around you, you had a traumatic experience this summer. What about that doesn’t point to PTSD!”

Arthur smirked at him which made Merlin more angry.

“Do you not care about your health? Your friends and I do and think you should see someone.”

Merlin started picking up his things with aggressive shoves of items into his bag. A warm hand rested on Merlin’s shoulder restraining him.

“Merlin, sit down.”

Merlin sat on the bed with a slight push from Arthur. Arthur sat down beside him. He set Merlin’s bag to one side.

“What I’m going to tell you, you can not tell anyone,” Arthur said.

Merlin nodded. He knew how to keep a secret.

“What you thought was signs of PTSD are caused by something else.”

“Have you seen someone?” Merlin asked.

“I have. I have talked to a councilor about the kidnapping and an expert on what is going on with me.”

“Are you dying?”


Merlin nodded, mimed zipping his lip, and waited with wide eyed interest.

“Something happened to me when I was out in the woods alone.”

Arthur arched an eyebrow as soon as Merlin’s mouth began to open. Merlin slapped his hand over
his mouth.

“My senses started doing odd things. I thought I was imagining it at first, but someone else with the same gift found me and explained what was going on.”

Arthur explained what a Sentinel was, and how a Guide helped them. Most of his problems were because he was new to it and was still learning how to control it. Once he had a safe haven to retreat to and the right techniques, Arthur had control of the situation.

“But you would be better if you had a Guide,” Merlin clarified.

“Yes, but right now, Blair is my training guide. Xander said that was how it is done in Africa.”

Merlin chewed his lip as he processed the new information. Ideas trickled through his mind about the ramifications of Arthur's abilities. He managed to mutter, “Sorry about the earlier outburst.” while his mind continued to analyze Arthur's behaviors and how he could help.

Arthur chuckled.

“Don't worry about it. You had the best of intentions. I'm glad you care enough to tell me when you think I'm wrong.”

**The Loft, Cascade, Washington**

Blair answered the phone on the second ring.

“Hello.”

“Hi, Blair. The information you sent was great. Very helpful to me and them,” Xander said.

“Glad to help.”

“Vin, that's the Guide – oh, they sort of figured out you were my source on their own.”

“How did they do that?”

“They're ATF agents, did some digging, and put the pieces together.”

Blair had to admit that he and Jim would do the same thing in their place. His thesis had been big news back then. Records of the event were still out there even if people forgot.

“Vin was wanting information on the testing you did with Jim.”

“He wants to do his own testing?”

“Um... sort of.”

There was too much hesitation in that answer for Blair's liking.

“Sort of, huh,” Blair said. “What does that mean?”

“It's testing with a slight bend to prank jokes on Chris. He's the Sentinel.”

Blair shook his head and chuckled. It would still get them data on how sensitive the Sentinel was. Maybe better than his method. It might lead to paranoia. On the other hand, if that was standard in
their office, the Sentinel was already paranoid.

“T've been organizing and typing up my files. I'll e-mail them to you.”

“Thanks, man.”

“Don't mention it, specially to Jim.”

Xander laughed.

“Will do. Talk to you later.”

“Bye, Xander.”

Cascade Major Crime Unit

“What?” Blair asked when Jim cocked his head.

“A Guide is coming our way,” Jim whispered.

“That's new. Who?”

Jim shrugged. Even Blair can hear the ding of the elevator in the hall outside the unit's doors. Jim inhaled slowly and deeply.

“Arthur’s,” Jim answered just before a willowy boy charged through the doors. He paused to look around. His eyes alight on Blair, and he stumbles over. “Spunky,” Jim whispers before turning his attention to his computer and leaving Blair to deal with the miffed Guide.

“I need to talk to you,” the Guide said to Blair.

Before Blair could say a word, Jim was shooing them both off.

“Go, get out of here and talk,” Jim said.

Blair rolled his eyes and gathered his things.

“Come on, kid. Let's grab a coffee and a quiet corner.”

The kid, having gotten what he wanted, seems to deflate, and obediently followed Blair out of the building, reminding Blair of a puppy.

ATF Office

Vin watches Chris walk out to the coffee pot with his mug in hand. Nathan had just filled his own mug and was taking his first sip when Chris got there. Chris picked up the pot and filled the mug. He exchanged a few words with Nathan before he took his first sip. Chris made a face and spit it into the sink.

“Something wrong?” Nathan asked.

“There's salt in the coffee,” Chris said.
Nathan scrunched up his face but took another sip of his own.

“Don't taste it in mine and it's the same pot. Was it in the mug?” Nathan asked.

Chris looked doubtful, but dumped his coffee and rinsed the cup. He poured a small amount and took a tentative sip. He picked the pot back up and sniffed it.

“Tanner!” Chris yelled.

Cascade Coffee Shop

Blair sat down at one of the outdoor tables and waited for Arthur's Guide, who he learned was named Merlin. Merlin ambled out with cup in hand and fell into the seat across from him. Blair took a sip of his coffee and watched Merlin fidget. Merlin turned his cup around.

“Arthur told me what was causing his black outs. Said that you were helping him.”

“I am,” Blair said in his calmest professor voice.

Merlin looked up from his cup and at Blair.

“From what I understand, he needs a guide, a Guide of his own.”

Blair fought to keep his face from showing his surprise that Merlin did not know he was Arthur's Guide. He probably should not be, considering Arthur voicing his desire to not force Merlin into the position. So, he needed to handle this very carefully.

“True.”

“How do we find him a Guide?” Merlin asked. “I can't imagine freezing like that. It's dangerous.”

“Finding a Guide is unique to each person in my experience.” Blair was picking his words with extreme care. Once Merlin learned that they all knew he was Arthur's Guide, it could be very bad. “There are many people who can guide a Sentinel and help him or her through daily life. There are techniques and tricks he can use to keep things in balance, as I have recently learned.”

“This is what you are teaching him?”

“Yes. Like any new skill it takes time to master. He is doing well in such a short time.”

“If he had a Guide?” Merlin returned back to the topic like a homing missile.

“To be a dedicated Guide is a lifetime commitment. It is like any other relationship. It needs a good foundation to grow from. It takes work to grow and keep healthy. It takes sacrifices by both parties at times. Would you be willing to give up your dream, maybe even your identity, to stand in the shadow in support of another? Do you think Arthur is ready for that? Is the person who is his Guide ready for that? Would Arthur want someone to do that without really understanding what he or she was agreeing to?”

Blair took another sip of his coffee and waited for Merlin to think all that through. They were both so young with their lives ahead of them.

“I see. It's more complicated than I thought,” Merlin admitted.
“Many things are, and yet they are sometimes so simple,” Blair muttered. He sighed to get Merlin's attention. “Here's what I propose. I will run you and any of Arthur's other friends he trusts with this through Guiding 101. That way you will know what to do to help Arthur when things go wonky.”

Merlin's face lit up at the prospect.

“I've just got to find the time to sort out the correct material,” Blair said. He had what he gave to Xander for Vin. That would be a good start, but new comers would need a bit more background. Taking Merlin through it would be a good test.

“I can help with that,” Merlin eagerly offered.

And that might be an even better way to sort out the chaff from the wheat.

“Alright. What are you doing tomorrow night?”

“Just planning on studying,” Merlin answered.

“Come over to my place, bring Arthur if you want, and we'll start writing up a manual.”

Blair jotted down his address on the back of his business card and handed it to Merlin. Merlin looked at the address a long moment before putting it in his pocket.

“I'll be there.”

Merlin began to gather his things.

“Before you go, I have one question,” Blair said. “How did you find me?”

Merlin broke out in a wide smile.

“Arthur said that he was found by someone like him. The papers mentioned you and your partner being involved.”

Merlin lifted his hands before him indicating the rest was easy to put together.

“So much for a low profile,” Blair muttered which caused Merlin to chuckle.

“It was nice to meet you,” Merlin said. He seemed to be vibrating with eagerness.

“You too,” Blair answered.

Merlin bounded away with his new information and a promise for more. A shadow fell over Blair. He tipped his head back and looked up at Jim. Jim rested his hand on Blair's shoulder.

“Nicely handled,” Jim said.

**ATF Office**

Xander walked into the ATF office. He pushed away the annoying beeping at the lower range of his hearing. Vin was obviously up to another “test.” The various members looked up and called out greetings to Xander. Ezra stormed into the office.

“Will someone make that gawd awful beeping stop!” Ezra demanded.
Xander and Vin looked at each other then Ezra. Vin shot out of his chair to find the noisemaker. Xander walked up to Ezra reaching out with his radar.

“Damn, I was so focused on Chris coming online, I missed you following in his footsteps.”
Round Two

Chapter Summary

Ezra struggles to get a handle on his senses, Balin escapes and comes after Arthur, and Xander finds another sentinel in DC.

Denver ATF Office

Ezra had read the papers Mr. Harris had given Vin and Chris about Sentinels and Guides and various training exercises, and so had the rest of the team. Chris appeared to have things mastered after a week. Mr. Harris said that was because Chris had his Guide. Ezra was struggling five days out and feeling like there was no hope. His senses were up and down with no rhyme or reason. He thankfully had not suffered from a zone or major spike yet. Mr. Harris had pulled him aside before he left, to give advice from one Guide-less Sentinel to another. Told Ezra the tricks he used to ground himself. Mr. Harris warned that he could only do that after training with a shaman for many months and encouraged him to not be discouraged.

Easy for him to say. Did his job depend on him being at the top of his game and sharp for days on end while undercover?

Vin entered and gave Ezra an easy smile as he slumped into his desk chair.

“Morning, Ez,” Vin said. “How you been?”

“I'm fine, Mr. Tanner,” Ezra said.

He was hit with a wadded up ball of paper from Vin.

“I'm fine, Vin,” Ezra restated with a growl.

Vin laughed and turned to the folders on his desk. Ezra pulled his mind from it's previous melancholy thoughts and focused on his own work. The others were working on their own cases at the desks around them. JD was rhythmically typing away on his keyboard and the sound drew Ezra in. The soft click of plastic keys as they were pressed in quick succession formed a lulling tune that Ezra got lost in.

A kick to his shin from under the desk causes Ezra's head to snap up and look at Vin.

“You zoned,” Vin whispered. “We'll work more on your control at lunch.”

Ezra gave a quick nod and glanced around the room. The rest of the team appeared to have not notice his small lapse. He sighed. It seemed that things were getting worse not better.

Cascade Major Crime Unit

Jim hung up his phone and let out a string of curse words that would make a sailor blush. He stomped off to Simon's office slamming the door behind him. Everyone looked curiously at Blair.
Blair shrugged his shoulders. He did not know any more than they did.

Five minutes later Jim came back out. He stopped briefly at his desk to pick up this keys and coat. He leaned down and whispered in Blair's ear.

“That was Agent Benton. Balin escaped. I'm going to talk to Arthur.”

It was Blair's turn to cuss up a storm.

“How? Where is he?”

“They don't know how yet. Benton said he started acting odd when he learned Arthur was still alive. Seemed to think Arthur should have died from his poisoning.”

“How did he find out that?” Blair asked.

“Some gullible guard answered his questions about Arthur. I got to go.”

Blair nodded. Jim was out the door. What were they going to do now?

**Arthur's Dorm Room**

There was a knock at the door. Arthur took a moment to gather sound and smell clues about the person and recognized Jim in a few seconds. He was not yet very good at sensing other Sentinels around like Jim and Xander were. Arthur opened the door and let Jim in. Jim stalked into the room. There was something majorly wrong for Jim to be giving off the signs he was. Arthur shut the door and sat on his bed, motioning for Jim to take the desk chair.

“I'm not one to beat around the bush,” Jim said. “I got a call from Agent Benton. Balin has escaped, and we believe he will be coming for you.”

Arthur froze with the depth of the multiple emotions rolling through him. Fear thumped in his gut. Anger hissed and spit in his mind. The desire for revenge rolled in his chest. He clenched his fists and his jaw as he wrestled with them so he could face this new challenge with a rational mind. That was what had gotten him out of the cabin; that would help him now.

“Do we have a plan?” Arthur asked.

“Right now, Benton is scrambling the troops. He's arguing a case for protective custody for you with his boss. They haven't told your father yet.”

Arthur sighed. That could go either of two ways. Uther could yank him out of school and keep him under lock and key at home, or he would insist on a security detail at school which would bring more attention to Arthur. Arthur would not put up with the first option. It would take him away from Merlin and into more danger.

“Can we use me as bait?” Arthur asked.

“That was another of Benton's ideas. He wanted me to approach you about it before they tell your dad.”

Arthur saw the logic in that. If they had the plan in place before, his dad might not try to take over – might not try being the key words here. Arthur knew he would have to be the one to sell his dad on the idea.
“What are the odds of it working?” Arthur asked Jim.

Jim leaned forward, elbows rested on his knees, and hands folded dangling between his knees.

“In our favor,” Jim said. “Can’t guarantee that something won’t go wrong. We don’t know if he will try kidnapping again or some other method. But what we do know helps tip the balance to our side.”

“I’m in. I want that bastard back in jail,” Arthur verged on hissing. “Do we have a plan?”

“Not yet. Benton wanted your answer before anything solid. From my experience, they will put men in the dorm with you. Have agents along your normal routes to class. They will want to restrict you movement, but not so much that we tip our hand.”

“Won’t Balin know I’m being watched?”

Jim shrugged. “I just can't tell you for sure,” Jim said. “He could and not care. He could come in with guns blazing because he's blinded by the desire to reach his goal or he could be just as slow and calculating as he was to set up the kidnapping. That's a call for the head doctor.”

“What do you think he will do?” Arthur asked. He trusted Jim's assessment.

Jim did not answer right away. He moved his folded hands to under his chin. He pondered it then gave his opinion.

“He's already made his play and expected a pay off. It did not work. He might have the patience to go to ground and wait until things settle....but I don't think he will want to risk it. He'll make a play for you as soon as he feels he has a chance to succeed.”

Arthur leaned against the wall and looked up at the ceiling.

“Would he try to get here before the FBI? Or would he wait for them to get settled in and find an opening? If it's the latter, he probably won't risk attacking in the dorms knowing the FBI would be here,” Arthur pondered.

“Or he could find the chink in the fortifications, and be waiting in your room one night,” Jim pointed out.

“Hopefully I'd register he was in here before entering.”

Jim nodded.

“That would mean you would need to be using your senses a lot of the time. You will need Merlin to keep you stable.”

Arthur laughed a heartfelt laugh despite the downward spiral Jim's news brought to his life.

“Since he started spending time with Blair, he's always by my side making sure everything is good. You just happened to catch me in a Merlin free moment.”

Jim had a soft reminiscent smile as Arthur told him all the things Merlin had been subjecting Arthur to.

“He will probably get worse when he learns about Balin,” Jim pointed out. “Let's call Benton and get this ball rolling.”

Jim pulled out his cell phone and called the agent.
Evening in Arthur's Dorm Room

Merlin, Lance, Gawain, and Arthur, were gathered in Arthur's dorm room that evening with Agent Benton. Merlin kept glancing over to check on Arthur, as Agent Benton explained to them what was going on, and the surveillance they would be under.

“We have officers stationed in the dorm and others watching from outside. Agents will be staked out along Arthur's routes to class. We will have eyes on you at all times. If you see anything suspicious, let us know,” Benton said. “You will have to act like nothing is wrong.”

Lance spoke up, “Won't Balin expect Arthur to know he escaped, and be secured away someplace safe until he is caught?”

“But is that how Balin thinks Arthur will act?” Gawain asked. “Should he hide, or should he be arrogant and defy Balin by walking around as if nothing's wrong?”

Benton listened to their comments.

“The profiler said Balin sees Arthur as arrogant and self-important, and believes he is safe. Detective Sandburg has agreed to work undercover as a grad student, and will be sitting in on several of your classes.”

“How are we to react to him?” Merlin asked. “Do we know him or treat him like a stranger? Do we try to sit near him?”

“You need to keep enough distance that he can see what's going on around you,” Benton answered. “He will move into position after you take your seat.”

Benton went over the dos and don'ts of the operation with them before leaving. The four young men sat in silence for a while once the door closed behind Benton. Merlin moved to set beside Arthur. He placed his hand on top of Arthur's in a way it was hidden from the room's other occupants. He figured Arthur needed the grounding.

“How are you taking this?” Merlin asked.

Arthur took a deep breath. He turned his hand to interlace his fingers with Merlin's and gave a squeeze.

“It still feels surreal,” he admitted. “But, this is the right thing to do. He needs to be caught, otherwise I will be looking over my shoulder until he is.”

Lance sat at the head of his bed while Gawain sprawled on the lower half.

“We'll help watch your back,” Lance said with Gawain seconding it.

“I know you will, and I appreciate it,” Arthur said.

On the Spirit Plane

Blair was walking down a path through the jungle. There was a darkness, an evil, just out of sight. He could feel it pressing in on him. He picked up his pace. He had to follow the path. It would lead
him to the help he needed to fight off the evilness. The presence grew stronger as Blair traveled. His gut rolled with the rot of destruction lurking on the edge of the world. Blair instinctively knew that it would swallow them all and leave behind nothing but chaos and charred bones if it was not stopped. The path would lead him to something to help stop it. He just had to get there in time. He just had to.

He started running. Time was short. He had to get there. Blair was panting hard. His four paws moved swiftly over the ground. His tongue flopped around with each bounding leap forward. He had to get there.

It was pressing in closer. It was going to catch up. He ran harder. He ran deeper into the jungle. He ran. He stopped. Large trees had fallen across the path. He could see the path continuing on the other side, but he could not find a way around the blockade. It was coming closer.

Blair shot up out of bed and was breathing heavily. He pulled gasping breaths into his lungs while his heart continued to race. It's beating echoed in Blair's ears. His eyes darted around the room as he came to terms with it being a dream. Jim sat up beside him and pulled Blair against his warm body.

"I've got you," Jim whispered.

Blair gabbed onto Jim's t-shirt with a death grip. His lungs still heaved like a smith's bellows. His body just did not want to calm down. Jim ran a soothing hand up and down Blair's back.

"Tell me," Jim said.

Blair buried his face against Jim's chest and began to talk.

"I was in the jungle, on a path. There was something out there, dark and growing. It was after me... more than me. I had to get to the end of the path, so I ran and I ran... then the way was blocked and I couldn't get around it... and it was coming."

Even with retelling it, Blair felt the fear and adrenaline pumping through his system screaming at him to run.

Jim settled against the headboard. Blair moved with his gentle tugs of guidance. He placed a kiss on Blair's temple.

"Was it a prophetic dream?" Jim asked.

"What?" Blair blurted out. That was not a question he expected out of his lover. "I don't know. Could be, I guess," he assuredly answered.

"It's got you rattled," Jim observed. His hand now ran up and down Blair's arm. "Did it have any of the things of a... vision? Everything tinted blue, animals that morph into you in a loincloth, people telling you cryptic things?"

Blair thought back to the dream and tried to focus on the details. Yes, there were some of those elements. Blair took a deep slow breath trying to calm himself down.

"It was blue, I just didn't notice it at the time. I was the wolf at one point. I don't think I started that way, but when I was trying to get to the goal, I was running on four paws."

Jim nodded against the side of Blair's head.
“What do you think it means?” Jim prodded.

Blair thought about it. He thought about the things in the dream. He thought about what they could symbolize. He thought about dreams from the first few years they had teamed up. He thought about Xander and his dreams.

“Could the evil I felt be the same thing Xander was being warned about?”

Jim wrapped his arms around Blair.

“They sounded similar in description to me,” Jim said.

“Something is coming that needs Sentinels and Guides to fight it,” Blair said. Then he got angry. “We don't know what it is, when it's coming, where it's coming from, or how to fight it!”

Blair started to pull away. He was going to jump out of bed and... Jim pulled him tight to him and made soothing noises until he settled.

“I think that is where the dreams come in,” Jim pointed out. “We are being warned. We are being given tasks. Xander's task is to find others. What is your task?”

Blair had to admit Jim was right. He should not go off half cocked. He needed to figure out where the path lead or meant. He must have been muttering to himself because Jim offered his own interpretation.

“Could it be the path of the shaman?”

Blair groaned at how simple and self-evident that was. Xander had told him to continue his training. He had poked through a few books but nothing more than that. Part of him was still afraid of Jim's reaction to it, but here he was the one calmly offering it as a solution.

“I think you're right,” Blair said. “If I do this, you won't freak?”

Jim kissed Blair's temple.

“No, I won't freak,” Jim promised. “Xander pointed out a few truths to me before he left. This non-modern mumbo-jumbo is part of us. I don't have to jump in head first, but I have to stop running away from it because it is there for a reason.”

Blair leaned back to look up at Jim. His face was lit up with his smile.

“I'll have to thank Xander for that.”

Jim dropped his head and swept Blair into a heartfelt kiss.

“Why don't I distract you from your horrible nightmare with more pleasurable things?” Jim asked.

“I like the way you think.” Blair shifted so he straddled Jim's lap and gave him a Cheshire cat grin. “Make me forget my troubles.” He waggled his eyebrows.

Jim cuffed him on the side of the head before cradling the back of Blair's head. The kiss that followed was soft and tender, full of love and devotion, full of trust and support. Blair returned it with his own feelings of love and loyalty, of understanding and appreciation. They would fight through whatever was coming together.
Merlin walked with Arthur the next morning on his way to class. Arthur was constantly sweeping the area with his senses, and Merlin's presence helped keep him grounded. Merlin was a natural at reading Arthur and knowing when he was pushing to hard or in danger of zoning. He was absorbing Blair's information about Sentinels and Guides at a quick pace. He was deft at placing a hand or saying a word to pull Arthur from the edge. Arthur found he was quickly becoming reliant on the other boy.

He still had his doubts about Merlin's involvement. Was he trapping Merlin? Would Merlin grow resentful and walk away? Those were thoughts for another time. Right now he needed to focus on staying alive.

Arthur knew where the agents were. They all smelled a bit of gun oil. The rest of the student body flowed around them. Arthur carried out a quick visual assessment of those approaching for signs of Balin, now that he knew what the kidnapper looked like. Beside him Merlin chatted away about inane topics acting as a tether for Arthur.

They came to the point Merlin would usually part, but he hesitated to leave Arthur's side.

“Merlin, go. You have to go to your class,” Arthur said.

“But...”

“I'll be fine. Gawain will be there,” Arthur said.

Merlin bit his lip and looked like he would balk for a moment. He nodded and turned. He looked back to check on Arthur one last time, then walked down the path to the science building. Arthur watched him go for probably longer than he should. It did not feel right to let his Guide be apart from him in such a time of danger. Arthur settled his shoulders back, then set off with a quick pace to his class.

Arthur entered the lecture hall. He did not see Gawain, but he did locate Blair sitting in a chair in the back corner. He instantly locked onto Blair and realized the other Guide was muttering softly so only he could hear.

“Sit where you normally do,” Blair whispered instructions to Arthur.

Arthur moved down the aisle to where he and Gawain usually sat.

“Jim's watching from the top of the library,” Blair said. “He'll let us know if he sees Balin on campus.”

Arthur wondered if Jim would be alright with Blair in here, but Jim was more in control of his abilities and able to do a lot more with his senses without Blair beside him. Jim told him that he would gain the skills in time. Jim had years of experience to perfect their use while Arthur was not even a year.

Gawain sat down beside Arthur and class began. Arthur found himself focusing on what was going on outside the classroom instead of the class itself. Blair called him on it.

“Jim's got the outside. You focus on learning,” Blair chided.

Surprisingly that did calm Arthur down and redirected his attention. He fell into the rhythm of taking notes. As soon as class was over, Arthur was back on high alert. He anchored himself with Gawain's
presence like Xander said he did. That did give Arthur the stability he needed, but he could not sense as far as he could when Merlin was with him. Arthur found he was searching for Jim now that he knew the other Sentinel was around. He did find him on the library like Blair said he was. As they walked past the library, Arthur felt an odd tingle. He glanced around and saw no threat. It faded as they walked away. Was that what the presence of another Sentinel felt like?

He would ask later. Right now he had three more classes to get through. Merlin would be organizing study time, tucked away in the dorms. He looked forward to that. It was always good to have his friends around him and watching out for him. He just hoped none of them got hurt because of this mess.

Hotel in Washington DC

“Evening, Giles,” Xander said into the phone.

He flopped onto the bed and kicked off his shoes. They each thunk-ed when they hit the floor. Hopefully the floors are insulated enough to muffle the sound for the floor below.

“Xander, I've been aiming to call you,” Giles said.

Xander's interest was piqued but wanted to be sure to update Giles first.

“Sent the newest Slayer off to Robin and Faith. Easy to find and convince. Locating with my radar is getting easier each time.”

“It's probably like any skill. The more you practice the better you are at it,” Giles said sagely.

“Oh, so true, G-man.”

Giles groaned and muttered, “Xander.”

“I'll be staying in DC longer than expected. Had a Sentinel dream.” Xander loved saying that. He got to be the special one this time, and it was much better than being the One Who Sees. He would have liked to give up that title before his run in with Caleb, but deep down he knew he would do it the same for his girls. “I feel at least one pre-Sentinel around. That's getting better as well. There might be two. I don't think the second one is as close as the first.”

“They are just popping up all over the place,” Giles observed.

“Yeah. The worrying part is they are breaking from what is the standard pattern.”

“About Sentinels: I found information buried in the vaults about a group that match the description.”

Xander sat up on the bed. He grabbed at the pen by the hotel phone, and pulled the small hotel branded pad of paper to him.

“Lay it on me,” Xander said.

“It seems that at one time long before Rome, the duty of the Watchers was shared by a group called Guardians. For many generations they had the same goal. The book says that they were men and women of magic and perception who protected their kin. There were only a few in each clan. They gave warning of brewing trouble. They could locate the pre-Slayers from among their kin and then would train them.”
“When did they split?”

“It seems the Guardians did not like it when the Watchers decided the best way to train and utilize the girls was to take them from their families when identified.”

“The Guardians didn't like that,” Xander stated. “They are part of the tribe.”

“That seems to be the case,” Giles confirmed.

“Explains my feelings about removing the African girls to England.”

“Xander,” Giles said softly, “you know if we had the resources and a secure base, I would leave them there.”

Xander raised his hand to fuss with the eye patch that was not there.

“I know you would, Giles. I kept telling myself that with each girl I sent to you.”

“Maybe in a few years, when some of the girls are older.”

He heard the hopeful desire in Giles' voice for the future.

“When did they split?”

“Around the beginning of Rome. Seems the Watchers flocked to the cities and marshaled the Potential Slayers in the greater populated areas. The Guardians tended to theirs. As time passed, the Watchers forgot about the Guardians except for an odd reference here or there.”

“And the Guardians vanished as civilization grew,” Xander said filling out the rest of the story.

“That was my assumption as well.”

“That explains why I feel the Slayers. It's part of the job.”

“Good for us. I have to go. Keep me posted.”

“Will do, Giles.”

Xander pushed the end call button. He scrolled through his contacts and found Blair's number. He hit call. He might as well tell him about this now.

The Loft Cascade, Washington

Blair glanced at the display before answering his cell phone.

“Xander, find more Sentinels?”

“Actually, yes.
Blair rolled is eyes and grins. That kid's luck. He looked for years, and Xander finds them everywhere he goes.

“Haven't met them yet,” Xander said. “But I felt one when I got into town. I think there is a second. Still honing what my radar is telling me. The dream telling me to stay in DC was the other giveaway. However, I'm sure they are not online yet.”
“Damn, Xander. You don't do anything by half. Talking about dreams, I had one last night. I think I need to get serious about the shaman training.”

“Really?”

Blair told Xander the dream.

“I've got books, but is that enough?” Blair asked.

“I'll give you Vin's number. He can help you with that,” Xander assured. “I talked to my boss who found some interesting information about Sentinels that I'm sure you don't know.”

“What kind of information? What's his source?"

Xander explained how Sentinels and Slayers used to work together long ago.

Denver, Colorado

Buck and Ezra were watching a warehouse they suspected Clyde Hill, a gun runner, of using. Rumor on the street said there was a shipment coming in soon. The others were watching other warehouses that Clyde was known to use. Ezra had the same look of concentration he wore when Vin had him trying to use his senses. Vin had tried the dials and the net analogy Xander had mentioned. But it seemed that was not working real well for Ezra. He had not been spiking like Chris did, but he could see that the effort to maintain control was wearing his friend down. Ezra was all about control.

Maybe something different would fit Ezra better. Buck pondered that as he watched the light traffic move down the street. Ezra was always messing with the card deck he carried, but Buck could not see anyway cards could be used to contain his senses.

A truck turned the corner. It's headlights paneled across the interior of the car and right into their eyes. Ezra covered his eyes and groaned. The truck passed. Ezra opened his eyes and swiftly shut them again with cursing. Buck reach over and placed his hand over Ezra's eyes.

“Okay, pard, relax. Take a deep breath and center yourself on my voice,” Buck said in his baritone voice. “I'm not even going to ask about dials or levels, 'cos that's not working for you, is it?”

“No,” Ezra said.

“So I've been thinking...”

“God save us,” Ezra muttered

“You need something that is more suited to you. Is there something you associate with control?”

Ezra stilled under Buck's hand.

“Not one specific thing,” he answered.

“Would the way you create and shift between persona's give you a mechanism to control your senses?”

Ezra leaned back in his chair and rested his head against the headrest in thought.
“Maybe, I'll have to think about it.”

“Only other idea I have is your cards, but I don't know how they would help,” Buck admitted.

“That might work,” Ezra said to Buck's surprise.

Ezra seemed to go away for a bit before he pulled Buck's hand from his eyes and opened them without flinching.

“It work?” Buck asked.

“Seems to be for the moment,” Ezra said.

“What did you do?”

“Dealt them all an average poker hand.”

Buck laughed at the idea Ezra was using poker hands to level out his senses.

“Only you, Ez, only you. So we have any activity in there?”

Buck pointed to the warehouse. Ezra tipped his head as if listening.

“There's movement in there, more than mice. A truck pulled in from the back side. Mr. Hill is there,” Ezra confirmed.

“I'll call it in and see what Chris wants us to do,” Buck said.

**Vin's Apartment**

Vin placed the mat in the middle of his floor and sat down for his evening meditation. They had a busy day taking down Hill after discovering his shipment the night before. The calmness he gained from meditation would help him come down from the adrenaline high of a bust and sleep well. He closed his eyes and followed the steps of calming his body and mind. When that was complete, he took the step out onto the spirit plane to see what he could learn.

He found himself in a different spot than he usually entered. It was more like jungle than the western plains he grew up in. Waiting for him on a tree branch was a raven. It cawed to him as soon as he saw it.

“Are you my spirit guide?” Vin asked.

The raven cawed again, before flapping its wings and pushing off the branch. It glided over to him and landed on his shoulder.

“I am honored,” Vin said.

The raven shifted on his shoulder until it was satisfied with its position. It pulled at a lock of Vin's hair before taking off again. It flew into the trees cawing for him to follow. Vin did. The raven flew out into a fenced off pasture. It landed beside a red-tail hawk that was perched on the fence post. It playfully pecked at the hawk, who swatted at it with a wing.

Vin walked closer.
“You must be Chris' spirit guide.”

The hawk tilted his head to look at Vin, then gave a nod.

“It's nice to meet both of you,” Vin said.

Vin moved back to awareness of his apartment. Tomorrow he was going to tell Chris about their spirit guides.

**Washington DC**

Harley woke Xander up early in the morning, like before the sun was up early, with that 'you must follow me now' look she was a master of. Xander grumbled but rolled out of bed and got dressed.

“Do I have time to brush my teeth?” he asked.

He took her not moving for the door as a positive sign. He brushed his teeth and shaved quickly. He grabbed his coat and followed Harley out of the hotel. She led him on foot through the waking streets of DC. The sun was above the horizon and blessing the world with its radiance, when they entered a park. Xander followed Harley along the jogging paths.

A group of people were gathered ahead. There was a large medical vehicle with flashing lights parked on the grass. The area had crime scene tape around it with men in uniforms standing guard and keeping the gawks back. The small tickle at the back of his mind was telling him one of the pre-Sentinels was here.

Xander focused on that feeling. He eased himself into the crowd, and scanned the area. The person was not in the crowd but beyond the crime scene line. The body was covered. An older man with a Scottish accent, was talking to a younger man in blue coveralls with NCIS blazoned across the back. They were moving the body onto a gurney. There were at least three other NCIS agents working the scene, according to their jackets and hats. A steely eyed, graying man seemed to be in charge as he barked out orders and smacked one of his men on the back of the head with the hand not holding the coffee cup. Xander caught a “yes, boss,” from the younger one before he moved off to take more photos.

Xander slowly worked his way around the edges of the crime scene, trying to pinpoint the baby Sentinel from the law enforcement personnel milling around the yellow borders. His radar was not real good at accuracy yet.

The body was being moved out to the ambulance upwind of Xander. The hint of a pungent, gut turning smell hit him and raised his hackles. He was ready for a fight. It was familiar in a vague memory, can't put your finger on it kind of way. Xander whipped around to get a better sampling in hopes it would jog loose what it was. It drifted away as the body was loaded and the doors were closed. Xander's instinct was to follow and locate the threat. But was the threat the body or the one who killed him... or her.

Harley trotted through the crowd and beyond the cops. She paused and glanced over her shoulder to be sure she had his attention. Then she walked over to the dark haired NCIS agent taking photos and sat down beside him. Her looked at Xander said, “Here he is. Why couldn't you find him.”

Xander studied the baby Sentinel who was now chatting with a baby faced coworker.

“Got everything, McGeek?,” the baby Sentinel said.
“Yes, Tony,” baby face groaned. “I do know how to do my job.”

“Well, you know, probie...”

Baby Sentinel was dressed in slightly above average clothing, but not close to the level Ezra preferred. He was neat and ordered, but tried not to show it. He obviously liked to joke and tease from his continuing banter with his teammate, and probably used it as a mask to hide behind. Xander knew that trick well. He could also see the core of professionalism and tenacity beneath the disarming layers.

The clicks of a “casually” held camera let Xander know that he had attracted the attention of the baby Sentinel. That could be good in getting Xander into the new Sentinel's world, but it could mean a hell of a time for Xander in the process. He had watched enough TV cop shows to know the killer returned to the scene of the crime.

The crowd was being moved aside so the ambulance could get out.

“McGee, DiNozzo, get over here!” rang clearly across the area.

The two agents snapped to attention and loped over to the gray haired man.

Chunks of the crowd were drifting away now that the main attraction was leaving. Xander took that as his cue to skedaddle. At least he now had a face and possible names.

**DC Crime Scene**

Tony DiNozzo held his camera up, and snapped a few more shots of the corpse before Ducky came in and did his thing. There was something about this that just did not feel right. It was like something had crawled up his nose and died there. He could not shake the feeling. He moved on to documenting the rest of the area.

Ziva David was questioning the morning jogger who had found the body of Petty Officer Jenkins. The locals were at the scene first. As soon as they ran her prints and identified her as being from the navy, they called NCIS in. When they got there, they found Jenkins decked out like a forties pinup girl only gutted.

Tony gave a shiver just thinking about it. Normally he had a strong stomach, but today he was glad to have missed breakfast because of the early hour of the call.

Jimmy Palmer and Ducky Mallard had arrived and were moving in to do their thing. Tony nodded to them as they passed. Timothy McGee was working the other end of the scene for clues. Boss, one Jethro Leroy Gibbs, was talking with the local police first on scene. Tony glanced around the scene verifying his teammates were where they were supposed to be. He scanned the ground for clues that would help in the case. So far, it was a big fat zero.

The hairs on the back of Tony's neck tingled. Tony casually stood from his stooped position and let his eyes comb the gathered crowd. He took a few quick shots of the bystanders without lifting the camera from its position hanging from his neck. He turned to find Gibbs standing beside him.

“Tony.”

“Boss, go well?”
“Standard. Something wrong?”

Tony shrugged but looked around the scene again.

“Feeling odd about this one, Boss,” Tony said.

“Your gut?”

“More the hairs on the back of my neck.”

Gibbs took a sip of his coffee and covertly scoped out the area.

“My gut agrees,” Gibbs said. “Done with the pictures?”

“Not yet,” Tony said.

“Well get to it. They won’t take themselves,” Gibbs ordered and gave Tony a head slap.

“Yes, Boss.”

Tony got back to work. The feeling was stronger. He looked out of the corner of his eye and saw a young man with an eye patch. You could not miss him. Not many people wore an eye patch. There were probably several very good reasons to wear one, but it stuck out as odd. It made Tony think of pirates, which lead to Johnny Depp and the Caribbeans. He would love to be in the Caribbeans right now.

He shook his head bringing his thoughts back in line and on the case. Eye Patch was moving around the perimeter of the scene, which was strike two in Tony’s book. Eye Patch was acting odd and moved like a predator. Tony snapped more photos. He tried to get a clear shot of pirate wannabe.

Jimmy wheeled Jenkins out with Ducky commenting on what the ancient Egyptians did. Tony did not want to know and stopped listening. He focused back on his work while keeping an eye on the buccaneer. He suddenly turned and watched Jimmy load the body like it had offended him. Tony got a good profile shot. He paused and thumbed through the images he had captured so far. Timmy joined him.

“Got everything, McGee?” Tony asked.

Tony switched from viewing images to taking pictures.

“Yes, Tony,” Tim groaned. “I do know how to do my job.”

“Well, you know, probie...,” Tony teased.

Patch was now looking at them. Tony took the opportunity to grab a few more shots of their quirky watcher while he chatted with Tim. Gibbs called them over. They obediently went to him. Tony purposefully did not look back toward Jr. pirate.

Hey, Boss,” Tony said. “There’s an odd fellow with an eye patch hanging on the fringe behind me.”

Tony grabbed Tim’s shoulder to keep him from turning to look. Kid still had some things to learn. Tim realized his mistake at Tony’s friendly pat and gave a sheepish look. Gibbs was already scanning the crowd.

“Gone now,” Gibbs said. “Think he’s a suspect?”
Tony scratched at his cheek.

“Not sure. I got pictures of him just in case.”

Gibbs nodded saying he expected nothing less.

“Tim, run them when we get back.”

“Yes, Boss,” Tim said.

**DC Park**

Xander kept his ears on the conversation happening behind him. Just great, he was on their person of interest list. Xander pulled his phone out and accessed his contact list. His thumb hovered a moment as he decided who would be the best for him to call. Should he call Giles with a heads up of the trouble he may find himself in soon? Oh, yeah, the odd smell... was that something for Giles or Jim? Giles would be up with half his morning behind him while Jim was still several hours before sunrise. He dialed Giles but would call Jim as soon as the hour was decent on the west coast.

Xander lead with, “Giles, I might get arrested.”

**DC Cafe**

Xander sat at the outdoor table sipping his coffee, with the remnants of his breakfast scattered before him. He pondered that odd smell from the crime scene. It set off alarm bells in him. He pondered his reaction to it. His instinct was yelling at him to track it down. Harley did not seem interested in it, since she had vanished after identifying the Tony guy as the baby Sentinel. She obviously thought he had more important things to do.

He looked at the time. It was now after six in Cascade. He called Jim.

“Xander,” Jim answered. His voice was gruff and alert.

“I know it's early,” Xander started, “but I need advice only you can give.”

Xander heard Jim moving around the loft. There was the soft click of a door closing.

“What's up, Xander?”

“My fuzzy friend got me up early and demanded I go to the park. She took me right to a crime scene crawling with cops. Found the new baby Sentinel. He's an NCIS agent. Don't know what that is yet.”

“Naval Criminal Investigation Service,” Jim supplied.

“Good, saves me the trouble of figuring that out. He's not the thing bothering me at the moment. It's the corpse. It smelled funny.”

“Explain funny, kid.”

“It was pungent, sharp, with a touch of putrid mixed in. It put me on alert instantly. I'm still freaked about it and fighting the urge to chase it down.”
Jim was silent for a bit.

“I’ve never ran into anything like that,” Jim admitted. “Closest thing was your vampire.”

“You might be onto something,” Xander said. “It does remind me a bit of the Hellmouth. Maybe this is something ooky instead of Sentinel.”

“From what Blair was telling me, the two seem to be related.”

“Shocker for me, I tell you,” Xander said. “I'll let you get back to your morning. Oh, wait... umm, the NCIS dudes may think I'm a suspect.”

Xander heard Jim's exasperated sigh.

“Why might they think that?” he asked.

“I'm a shady looking guy with an eye patch, who was lurking around the edges of a crime scene... probably murder investigation, maybe looking a bit too interested in the investigators,” Xander explained. “Plus I heard them talking about me when I was walking away.”

There was another sigh.

“Yes, when put that way I can see why you would think that,” Jim snarked.

“How worried should I be?”

“Your background check will raise questions, but nothing that should lead them to think you are the killer,” Jim answered.

“So I don't have to be worried about being hauled in for questioning?” Xander asked.

“Depends on how the investigation goes and if there are other suspects.”

“Crap, hellmouthy feeling plus my luck, I'll be hauled in,” Xander whined.

“Good luck with that,” Jim cheerfully said.

“Thanks,” was Xander's dry reply.

They hung up. Xander had a bad feeling. He tossed his trash and headed back to his hotel room. He had to look up where NCIS was, and case the joint to see if he could get to that body.

**Arthur's Dorm Room**

Merlin sat on Lance's bed with a book in his lap trying to read. Merlin's thoughts drifted back to Arthur and not to what he was reading. It had been four days since the kidnapper had escaped. The FBI have not found him despite Jim reporting suspicious activity at the north end of campus. The stress was beginning to show around Arthur's edges. Merlin felt Arthur was pushing his senses too far and was afraid he would zone soon.

He glanced over at Arthur on his bed. Arthur was sitting crosslegged on his bed with eyes closed trying to meditate per Blair's instructions. Arthur scrunched up his nose at some smell he was picking up.
“The agents ordered pizza again,” Arthur said.

Merlin closed his book and tossed it onto the bed. He stood and marched over to Arthur. He gave Arthur a punch in the shoulder.

“Hey!” Arthur said.

“You are to be meditating, not listening to people down the hall,” Merlin chided.

“How am I to know what's going on?” Arthur asked. Arthur stood and started pacing around the room. “I'm tired of this waiting – for the other shoe to drop. Where is he? What is he planning? Is he really after me, or does he have another target?”

Merlin stepped into Arthur's path. He placed his hands on Arthur's shoulders, and looked him in the eye.

“You heard what the agents said. He wants your father to suffer by losing his family just like he did. You are Uther's only family. He will come after you.”

“It's the when that's driving me up the walls. I've not been beyond the dorm, classes, and the dining hall in the last four days. I restrict my time outdoors because there's greater chance for attack. I haven't even been to Jim and Blair's in over a week. I am going stir crazy!”

Merlin tightened his hold on Arthur to keep him from pacing again.

“I know. I've been right here with you. It will be over soon enough.”

Arthur stared at Merlin.

“How do you know that?”

“I don't. I just have to believe it or I'll go insane like you are trying to do.” Merlin shifted his grip on Arthur to direct him back to his bed. “You are going to come off of high alert.” He shoved at Arthur to sit. Arthur let Merlin do so. “You are going to meditate. You are going to get the sleep you have been depriving yourself of. All of this is not healthy.”

“I'm crap at meditation,” Arthur said. “It's worse now.” He waved his hand in the air in an all encompassing gesture.

Merlin put his hands on his hips and looked sternly at Arthur.

“Which means you need it now,” Merlin said.

“It's not going to work,” Arthur responded.

Merlin placed his knees on the bed and crawled around Arthur until he was behind him.

“I've been working with Blair. He gave me exercises to try with you on this.” Merlin pulled Arthur against his chest. Arthur tensed. “No one's going to see us. Lance won't be back from his date for several hours. Now just focus on my heart beat.”

Arthur relaxed and rested his head against Merlin's shoulder. He let his head roll to the left to be closer to the rhythm's source. Merlin wrapped his arms around Arthur, and interlaced their hands.

“Take a deep breath.” Merlin waited for Arthur to do so. “Now let it out slowly. Good. Now think of a memory that makes you feel good and at peace.”
“I don’t know,” Arthur said.

“How about a place. You like camping. Why do you like camping?”

“It’s quiet, and it’s nice to get away from people every once in a while.”

“Okay,” Merlin said. “Focus your senses on me, take several breaths, and tell me about your favorite camping memory. Why it is your favorite. What you appreciated about it.”

Arthur did. He talked about the memory, and slowly the tension eased from his body.

“Now hold on to that feeling and close your eyes. I want you to breath with me and put yourself back in that place in your mind.”

Merlin could see Arthur close his eyes in their reflection on the closet door mirror. Merlin took slow deep even breaths. Arthur mimicked him. They sat there breathing slowly for ten minutes before Arthur went slack against Merlin. Merlin opened his eyes and looked in the mirror. Arthur's jaw was slack and his face relaxed in sleep. Merlin rolled his eyes. He had been hoping to get Arthur to successfully meditate to calm him to sleep; he had expected Arthur to be horizontal in his bed when he went to sleep not using Merlin as a pillow. Merlin sighed but did not move. He did not want to wake Arthur just when he seemed to be sleeping soundly for the first time in four nights.

Merlin waited until he was sure Arthur was deeply asleep before trying to move him to a horizontal position. Merlin tried moving to free his hands to be able to maneuver Arthur in a controlled manner to the bed. Arthur clung tighter to Merlin's hands. Merlin stilled to let Arthur settle back down. Merlin tried to shift out from behind Arthur. That caused a greater reaction from the sleeping blond. Finally Merlin decided to just fall sideways and take Arthur with him.

It was a quick descent. Their heads hit the pillow. Arthur muttered something and released Merlin’s hands.

“Now you let go,” Merlin huffed.

He prepared to slip out, when Arthur suddenly rolled around to face Merlin, throw an arm over him, and bury his face against Merlin's chest. Merlin snorted.

“You always have to be difficult,” Merlin told Arthur.

He did not want to wake Arthur, so he settled down into the bed to await an opportunity to extradite himself from it. His mind wandered over what he had learned about Sentinels for several minutes until he, too, was soon asleep.

Merlin stood on a forested hill with a rolling valley stretching out before him. Everything had a surreal quality about it which he found intriguing. He turned around in circles looking at the place. Below in the distance appeared to be some kind of large fortified building. It was too far to make out clearly. There was a light breeze dancing through the trees and around Merlin. There were no other people around.

Was this the dream world that Blair wrote about?

A large roar came from above. Gusts of wind tried to bowl Merlin over. He looked up to see a large dragon lowering itself to the ground. Its large head coming closer to Merlin with each flap of its large wings.
There was a warm presence pressing against Merlin's leg. He looked down to find a male lion with thick, dark brown mane rubbing against his leg in the same way the barn cats back home did to mark their territory.

“Welcome, young lord,” the dragon said as he examined Merlin. “I knew you would come. It is just in time.”

The lion circled around Merlin before knocking him over and stretching out across Merlin's legs with a vibrating purr of a diesel engine. Merlin cautiously patted the lion's head.

“You did?” Merlin asked. He looked back up at the dragon.

“It is your destiny to be here and to be with him,” the dragon answered.

“Oh.”

Merlin felt idiotic because that was the best comment he came up with for this odd situation. The dragon laughed at him.

“You have much to learn, and I have things to teach you. However, now is not the time. The one you guard is in danger. You must WAKE!”

Merlin's eyes shot open. He was in Arthur's room with Arthur curled up before him. The lights were still on, meaning Lance was not back yet. Merlin's heart was beating like he was running a marathon. The elevated beat must have roused Arthur because he was blinking his eyes sleepily as he pulled away.

The sound of a key in the lock drew their attention. Merlin assumed it was Lance, until Arthur grabbed his phone and punched a few keys. The lock clicked, and the door slowly opened. Arthur sat up, and Merlin followed. A man with a gun slid into the room, and closed the door behind him. Arthur stood, and moved to the desks as he entered. Balin looked around the room and at each of them.

“I didn't expect you to be awake, or to have company,” Balin said.

“Life doesn't always go as expected,” Arthur said.

“That seems to be true where you are involved. I can shoot two as easily as one,” Balin said.

“Why do you have to shoot anyone,” Merlin said from his seat on the bed.

Arthur shot a quick glare at Merlin for attracting Balin's attention.

“Because Arthur's daddy needs to pay for what he did,” Balin answered.

Arthur edged away from his bed while Balin focused on Merlin.

“He has nothing to do with my father,” Arthur said pulling the man's attention back to him.

“True, but he does have something to do with you.”

“How did you get in?” Merlin asked, suddenly curious and with worry growing in his gut, at the way Balin got in with a key to the room. Balin's coat looked a lot like what Lance went out in. Balin had a similar build to Lance.
Balin noticed what Merlin was looking at, and smiled a very creepy smile.

“Your roommate lent me the key and his jacket so I could get in here without hassle.”

That answered that question. He just hope Lance was not injured.

Balin lifted his gun and pointed it at Arthur.

“I might just shoot your friend in the gut. Give him a chance to survive, but you get a kill shot. I don’t want you to mess up my plans again.”

Balin's finger tightened on the trigger.

Merlin yelled, “No!” as the gun fired. He lifted his hand. His eyes glowed gold. The bullet hung in the air. A ball of golden light formed in Merlin's hand, then shot off and slammed Balin against the wall. Merlin took a breath. Arthur was looking at him with wide eyed shock. The bullet hung frozen. He knew he could not leave it there. He waved his hand, and it shot off on an altered path and slammed into a section of wall between Arthur and Merlin.

“Someone will be here soon,” Merlin said. “You tackled him into the door when he aimed his gun at me. The gun went off and the shot went wide.”

There was shouting in the hall.


The door opened, only to be stopped by Balin's crumpled body.

Merlin huffed and moved to the door.

“Wait a minute. Have to move some trash,” Merlin said.

Arthur was now moving too, and helped Merlin move the unconscious intruder. They pulled Balin into the middle of the room. The door opened, and Jim was standing there with phone in hand. He showed it to Merlin. There was an active call and the name on the screen was Arthur.

“We'll talk about whatever happened later,” he ordered. He put his phone back into his pocket.

Both boys nodded.

“Benton's on his way. I found his men knocked unconscious. Blair sent out someone to find Lance.”

Merlin was relieved to hear that.

Jim took out his handcuffs and checked on Balin. He secured Balin's hands behind his back just as agents entered the room. There were a lot of people moving around a small room. Questions were asked and answered. Evidence was collected. The bullet was fished out of the wall. One of Benton's men reported that they found Lance stumbling back to the dorm. He had a head wound, and they sent him to the emergency room to get looked at. Merlin called Gwen, Lance's girlfriend, to let her know what happened to him. She was headed to the hospital before he hung up with her. When it was all sorted out, it was almost dawn. Blair sat on Lance's bed. Merlin and Arthur sat on the other while Jim talked with Benton in the hall.

Merlin slugged Arthur in the arm.

“What was that for?” Arthur asked while rubbing his arm.
“For not telling me that I was your Guide, you clodpole,” Merlin hissed.

Blair was watching them with interest.

Arthur hit Merlin in the arm and said, “That's for not telling me about whatever that was that you did.”

They both huffed.

“Boys, we'll discuss it when we get home,” Blair said.

They both looked at Blair with confusion.

“You will be staying with us at least for the night while this is considered a crime scene. Jim's talking with Benton about it right now.”

“Can't we just say in my room?” Merlin asked.

“You could, but being in a different environment will be more relaxing right now.”

Jim walked in the door.

“You are coming with us!” he ordered.

Neither boy argued.
Chapter 12

Chapter Summary

Merlin explains. NCIS investigates and learn that another agency is interested in the case.

The Loft, Cascade, Washington

They all filed into the loft, sandwiched between Blair and Jim as if they would bolt. The boys collapsed onto the couch. Jim and Blair took the flanking chairs.

“I would like an explanation,” Jim said.

The boys looked at each other, and seemed to be arguing which would go first. There was pointing and jabbing, but no words. Blair cut in.

“Arthur, you go first.”

The boys submitted to the authority of the senior Protector pair. Arthur ran his fingers through his hair as he began.

“We fell asleep. I woke up because Merlin's heart was racing. We heard a key in the lock. I thought it was Lance returning, but he didn't smell right. That's when I called Jim. He came in. I moved to the desks, away from Merlin. I tried to buy time by engaging him in conversation as you heard. He pointed his gun at me for a head shot, I think. It felt like it was aimed between my eyes. Merlin yelled, and raised his hand out in front of him. His eyes turned a yellow, maybe gold, color, and the bullet stopped in mid air.”

Arthur looked from Jim to Blair to gauge their reactions. Jim was blank as stone. Blair inclined his head and indicated that Arthur should continue.

“Then he shot a ball of light at Balin. It hit him and forced him back into the door. He fell to the floor unconscious. Merlin waved his hand, and the bullet hit the wall. You came, and the rest you know.”

“Merlin,” Blair said.

Merlin had been looking at the floor the entire time. He scuffed his feet on the carpet several times. He forced himself to stop and looked up.

“I'm magic,” he blurted out, then turned red to the tips of his ears.

Arthur snorted and Blair gave a gracious smile. Jim sighed and shook his head.

“Just when I though life couldn't get any weirder,” Jim grumbled. “Tell us what happened, then tell us about being magic.”

Blair gave Jim a wide grin of approval.
“I was trying to help Arthur meditate to relax, because he was wound tighter than a clock spring. He fell asleep. He refused to let go of me, so I ended up falling asleep, too. Then I was dreaming. I was on a hill looking over a valley. There was a dragon who talked to me, and a lion who pushed me over and laid across my lap.” Merlin shoulder bumped Arthur. Merlin paused thinking for a bit. “The dragon said I was destined to be there and with the lion. Then he told me the one I guard was in danger and yelled at me to wake, and I did, and I heard the key in the door. The rest happened as Arthur said. Balin came in. He threatened us. We both tried to get him talking to buy time. He shot at Arthur. I stopped the bullet with magic, then blasted him with an energy ball. He was out. I put the bullet into the wall, otherwise questions would be asked. Shot fired, but not finding where the bullet went and all that.” Merlin waved his hand in the air. “I told Arthur the cover story, because who would believe magic saved us.”

“Good move,” Blair praised him.

“Yeah,” Merlin said blushing again. “Magic... it's real.” Merlin looked up and focused on the book on the table. He extended his hand to it. His eyes flashed gold, and the book flew into his hand. “I've been able to do that since I was six.”

“Wow,” Blair said.


“You don't look surprised,” Merlin said.

“When you watch a vampire turn to dust before your eyes, and learn that the things that go bump in the night are real, what's someone who can do magic in comparison?” Jim said.

“Vampire?” Arthur asked.

“Have we got a story for you,” Blair said.

DC Hotel Room

Xander hung up with Blair and shook his head. He was very glad that Arthur was all right and had found his Guide. That his Guide turned out to be a magic user, a powerful one from the sound of it, surprised him. It really should not, considering Guides are often shaman who have some magic. Shaman magic is healing and curses and chanting and vision quests, not throw someone across the room magic like Willow. So that may be a bit unique.

Thinking of Willow, Xander wanted to pick her brain about this. He checked the time, decided it was still a decent time to call her, and hit call by her phone number.

“My Xander shaped friend, good to hear from you. Giles said you have been busy finding Slayers.”

Xander grinned at hearing his childhood friend's voice. They talked so rarely the past few years – him in Africa, her studying with the coven in England.

“That I have, my Willow shaped friend. What's new with you?”
Willow set into telling him about her current girlfriend and what the coven was up to.

“Giles has himself a new gal too,” she said.

“He’s always been sneaky about the ladies,” Xander said.

“I know. It’s like he doesn’t want us to know about it or something,” Willow said with indignation.

“Not like we would give him a hard time,” Xander added.

“Well... we kind of do,” Willow admitted.

“Yeah, we do,” Xander said. “How would he know we care if we didn’t.”

Willow giggled. When the fit had passed she asked, “Why did you call?”

Xander gasped in mock hurt.

“Xander, there is always a reason that you call,” Willow said.

“Considering in the past several years I didn't have easy access to a phone...”

“Even before. So give!”

“Learned a friend of a friend is a magic user... a very talented magic user. Wanted to get your opinion on it.”

“What do you know about him?” she asked.

“College student. He doesn’t need spells, and he trained with a guy named Gias. Gias was originally from England so I thought the coven might have heard of him.”

“I’ll ask,” Willow said.

“What are the others up to?” Xander asked.

Willow was off filling him in on the goings on in the lives of their friends.

That night when Xander dreamed, the wolf and jaguar visited. With them came a lion and a dragon.

Coven in England

Willow approached Harriet, one of the elder members of the coven. Harriet looked up from her book and smiled at Willow.

“What’s on your mind, dear?” Harriet asked.

“Xander called. He learned of a magic user who was trained by an English witch named Gias. He wondered if the coven knew him?”

Harriet gave a light joyful laugh.
“Yes, yes, I know Gias, but he's not a witch. He's a druid.”

“They still exist?” Willow asked shocked.

Harriet patted Willow's arm.

“Yes, dear, they do, just not in great numbers. How did our darling Xander come across Gias's pupil?”

Willow sank down into the chair beside Harriet.

“He didn't exactly say. He just said he was a friend of one of Xander's friends.” She chided herself for not thinking to ask more about the friend and the boy. She was just happy to talk to Xander after so long.

“A while back Gias did inquire about various aids in training his young charge. We send him the materials that we could, but we did not have someone at the time that could help train the young warlock.”

“Warlock?” Willow stuttered over the word. “Aren’t they bad?”

Harriet clucked her tongue.

“Not inherently,” Harriet answered. “Their goodness or badness is as independent of their power as anyone. In this case a warlock in a person with innate abilities. They just need the proper guidance to help hone them before they get out of hand.” Harriet reached over and patted Willow's hand, much like a grandmother would. “You border that line yourself. In fact, you would be a good candidate to assess Gias' apprentice, and be there for him as a peer. He needs to know there are such people out there to help him. Yes, yes, I will call Gias and see what he thinks.”

Willow gaped at the quick moving conversation.

“Go pack, dear. You will be headed for the Americas soon.”

**DC NCIS Bull Pen**

Gibbs strode into the bull pen where his team was working to pull the clues together on the death of Petty Officer Jenkins.

“What have you got for me?” he barked out causing them all to come to attention.

Tony stood and walked over to the large screen. He motioned for Tim to put something up.

“Seems this is not the first murder with this MO,” Tony said.

Ziva moved around to complete their little circle. On the screen images from three other murder scenes were displayed.
“In Boonsboro, there were three murders, each a week apart. Each were dressed in forties era clothing, and their guts ripped open,” Tony narrated. Another set of three images replaced those on the screen. “Two weeks before the first of Boonsboro's victims, these three were killed in Strasburg, each a week apart.”

Gibbs started to open his mouth but was stopped by Tony's grim grin, “And to make it better...” He signaled Tim to move to the next bit. “... the same pattern holds true for these three from Fredericksburg.”

“Serial killer,” Gibbs stated. “Any of them Navy?”

“No,” Ziva answered. “They were all local women of the area that don't have any obvious connections to each other or the armed forces.”

“Suspects in the cases?” Gibbs asked.

“None that we can find, but I've already asked the LEOs for copies of their files,” Tony said.

“What about your one-eyed man?” Gibbs asked.

Tim worked his magic and two pictures from yesterday's crime scene popped up. There was a young man with an eye patch and a polo shirt. One was in profile, the other was not. He looked very solemn and intense.

“Meet Alexander Lavelle Harris,” Tim said. “Born to Jessica and Anthony Harris...”

“Good strong name,” Tony comments with a prestigious air.

“He appeared to be a drunk, and couldn't keep a job,” Tim promptly informed Tony, making him shift uncomfortably. He did not give Tony a chance for rebuttal and jumped back into his report. “Raised in Sunnydale, California. Graduated from Sunnydale High School in 1999. Worked as a construction worker until Sunnydale was pulled into a sink hole. After that he traveled out of the country. Records show most recently he's been in England and Africa. It is not clear what he was doing in either place.”

“Why the eye patch?” Ziva asked.

“Medical records show that he lost his eye around the time Sunnydale went under,” Tim added. “Ouch. Breaking into medical records, McCurious,” Tony said.

“No,” Tim rebutted. “It was noted in the California records for disaster relief.”

“Friends, family, anything else about him?” Gibbs asked.

“His parents did not survive Sunnydale. Some of those recorded with him after the disaster moved to Cleveland. Others went abroad – mostly England.”

“Good bet he's stayed in contact with them, taking into account his recent trip there,” Tony said.

“Any connections with any of the victims?”

“None,” Tim answered. “He looks clean.”

“Still gave me the heebie-jeebies,” Tony said.
“Keep him on the list of persons of interest,” Gibbs ordered.

“Yes, Boss,” all three said.

**FBI Behavioral Analysis Unit, Quantico, Virginia**

Penelope Garcia rushed into the office with a paper clutched in her hand.

“I found her,” Penelope told the group gathered there, “two weeks after the last one.”

Aaron Hotchner, Unit Chief, asked, “Where?”

“DC.”

“Our own back yard,” Derek Morgan said in disbelief. “Is he trying to taunt us?”

Dr. Spencer Reid responded, “Fredericksburg was closer to us, even if we didn't pick up the case until Boonsboro. The chances are...”

Aaron cut Spencer off with a gesture.

“Who has the case?” Aaron asked Penelope.

She glanced back at her paper.

“The victim was a Petty Officer Jenkins, found by a morning jogger,” she read.

“NCIS then,” Aaron said. “I'll go make some calls.”

**NCIS Offices**

“Gibbs,” Agency Director Leon Vance called down to the office floor from the walkway railing. “I need a word with you.”

Gibbs nodded and headed for the stairs. The rest of the team exchanged looks wondering what was up, and how it would complicate the case. Gibbs cleared the stairs, and followed Vance to his office.

“What's up, Leon?” Gibbs asked as soon as the door was closed.

Vance walked to the conference table, and motioned for Gibbs to take a seat. Gibbs pulled a chair out and sat. He leaned back into the chair, looked at Vance, and waited Vance out.

“I got a call from the FBI,” he said.

Gibbs stiffened, and gave the director the stink eye.
“Their BAU unit in Quantico wants to partner with you on the case. I suggest you take their help,” Vance said.

“Why do they want to do that?” Gibbs asked.

“They were working with the LEOs in Boonsboro after their third murder. They have been studying the killer for two weeks, and are very familiar with the case. They want to share their analysis and behavioral expertise,” Vance said.

Gibbs snorted. “They will get in the way.”

“They may have valuable information that it will take your team time to dig out,” Vance countered.

“Are you ordering me to work with them?”

“Do I have to?” Vance asked.

Gibbs and Vance stared at each other for several moments.

“There is less than a week until he kills again,” Vance pointed out.

Gibbs huffed. The rigidity in his shoulders eased.

“What do you know about them, and when will they be here?” Gibbs asked.
Outside the Washington Navy Yard

Xander sat outside the Navy Yard studying the building and the people coming and going. He carefully cast his senses about the area to see what he could learn. He needed a way to get in and to get a closer look at the body. The park, when he returned, did not hold enough of the worrying odor to help identify what it was from. It would help if he just knew the layout of the building.

Xander was pulled from his thoughts by the presence of the second baby Sentinel moving toward him. He knew the first was in the building before him. Now the second seemed to be approaching. Xander turned his head to look in the direction. A car with three people drove past and up to the gate of the Navy Yard. Xander shamelessly eavesdropped as the guard asked them for names, identifications, and who they were there to see.

NCIS Office

Tony looked up as voices grew closer to their area. A group of four individuals moved down the wall of windows. One of them was one of the security guards from the lobby. The other three he did not recognize. The one in the lead with the guard was tall, dark haired, well dressed, and very somber. He made Tony uneasy for no apparent reason. Behind them was an athletic, Henley wearing, African American who moved with confidence and grace of a predator. He was listening to what appeared to be a college student, complete with messenger bag secured across his body, walking beside him. The guard lead them right to Tony's desk.

“DiNozzo, they are here to see Gibbs,” the guard said with a gesture to the group.

Tony stood and walked around his desk to take up a position at the opening into their area. Tim watched from his desk but appeared to still be working. Ziva gave them an evil eye over the top of her monitor. The guests were looking around and assessing them with a professional demeanor.

Tony jerked this thumb in the direction of Vance's office.

“He's up with the Director,” Tony said. “I'm Senior Special Agent Tony DiNozzo. May I help you?”

The tall somber man stepped forward and offered his hand.

“I'm Supervisory Special Agent Aaron Hotchner with the FBI's BAU.”

Tony shook the man's hand. He made sure he looked nonchalant, when he was really suspicious of why they were here. Visits from other agencies usually meant trouble. Behind him, he could hear Tim typing swiftly on his keyboard, a sound that was absent only a moment ago. He was probably...
hacking the FBI computers right now to find information on their guests.

“This is Special Agent Derek Morgan and Dr. Spencer Reid.” He turned slightly toward his companions as he introduced them. “Is there someplace we can wait for Agent Gibbs?”

“No need to wait,” Gibbs said.

They all turned to find him only steps away from the group. Gibbs looked the group over and nodded a dismissal to the guard. The guard headed back to the lobby.

“The Director just finished briefing me about your visit.” Gibbs moved through the group and to his desk. He grabbed his coffee cup off the desk and took a sip. He turned and faced the whole group. “What do you have to share with us?”

**Outside the Washington Navy Yard**

Sitting outside the Navy Yard was not getting Xander anywhere. The NCIS building was too far for him to use his senses without risking zoning. He could enter the yard and get closer, but he would have to show his ID. Would that alert the agents of his presence? He was not ready for them to detain him yet. He had a feeling he needed to figure out what was going on before that. If he did not trigger anything, how would he get into the area of the building he needed, without getting caught? That presented the same dilemma as before.

What other sources of information did Xander have? He thought about the smell, how it made his teeth itch. He had trouble sitting still with the thumping call to action. What would set off a Sentinel's defensive instincts so vehemently? It would have to be a very serious threat to the tribe. But this was not Xander's tribe – technically speaking. What if the threat was so great that it was a danger to many tribes? Would that cause such a reaction? What would that threat be?

Xander ruled out natural disasters, since the feeling was related to the murdered girl. Serial killer? That could be a threat to many tribes, but wasn't enough of one to call a Sentinel to action. What was bigger than that? In Xander's experience, the big threats were always supernatural in nature.... that gave Xander pause. Maybe he was limiting himself too much to the mundane. In Jim's experience, only vampires triggered anything close to what Xander was feeling. The Sentinels helped the Slayer back in the day. It would be beneficial if they knew when something freaky was up. The more Xander thought about it, the more that solution felt like the correct one. They would not have had all the books and references the Council used to find information on the big-bad. They had to have something, and maybe the Sentinels were part of that.

Supernatural problems required supernatural sources of information. Xander needed to find the local demon bar, and get the lowdown on what was happening in town.

**NCIS Office**

The BAU team and the NCIS MCRT were gathered in the conference room. Tim had his laptop connected to the large screen to pull up the case information for all to see. There were small stacks of case related folders scattered around the table, along with cups of coffee.
Dr. Spencer Reid stood at one end of the room, delivering the profile on the unsub with his usual detached calm, as he recited the facts.

“We believe that the dressing the victims up in clothing of a bygone era stems from a close connection with probably a family member to whom that time period was important. The unsub grew up on stories of a simpler time,” Spencer said. “There was some kind of event in the unsub's life that has complicated his life – loss of job, divorce, death of a supporting family member. This pushed the unsub over the edge and set him on his killing spree.”

The agents around the table listened intently to Spencer’s analysis.

“We are still searching for victims prior to Fredericksburg. As you know, serial killers don't just start with the pattern that we are seeing in Fredericksburg, Strasburg, and Boonsboro. There is a time of experimentation before a pattern is settled on.”

Tony DiNozzo lifted his pen in the air, drawing the room's attention.

“Doesn’t the time scale usually escalate between killings? We are not seeing that.”

Spencer paused in his first show of hesitation since he started.

“We have noted that,” Spencer said.

Aaron Hotchner picked up the conversation.

“Yes, that is generally the pattern in ninety eight percent of the cases, and why my team is still looking for earlier incidents, in hopes to lead us to the unsub.

The BAU wrapped up their briefing for the NCIS team. Gibbs nodded for Tim to present their information to the newest case. Tim tapped away on his keyboard. The image on the screen changed to images from the park.

“At 5:40 AM a jogger found Petty Officer Jenkins in the park,” Tim said.

He ran them through the evidence found at the scene.

“Stop!” Spencer said. “The guy with the eye patch. Do you know him?”

“We did a background check on him,” Tim answered.

“What drew your attention to him?” Derick asked.

Tony looked Derek in the eye.

“He was acting odd, and he just triggered a feeling,” Tony said.

Derek nodded in understanding.

“What did you find?” Aaron asked.

Tim pulled up the records on Alexander (Xander) Harris and ran through Xander's background information.

“He was not in the country until recently, so therefore unlikely to be our killer. However, we have kept him on the person of interest list, in case he was more than an interested bystander.”
“Interesting,” Spencer commented.

“Spencer,” Aaron asked, “Why did he catch your attention?”

“He was outside the gate when we came in,” Spencer answered.

Gibbs’ attention snapped to Spencer.

“You sure?” Gibbs demanded.

“A guy with an eye patch sticks out, and I have an eidetic memory. I’m sure,” Spencer answered.

Gibbs turned to his team.

“I want him brought in for questioning,” Gibbs ordered.

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**AFT Denver, Colorado**

Five days had passed since Buck gave Ezra a new way to approach things. The poker hands seemed to be working for him most of the time. He had zoned while in the office, and JD pulled him out of it. Vin did point out that the times his senses got the better of him in the past week, were when he was with the team in a safe environment. Vin reckoned Ezra was too much of a professional to let it happen in the field.

Ezra was not willing to take that risk, and neither was Chris. That was why Buck would be going undercover with him on their latest operation. Buck would be acting as Matt Penn’s bodyguard, which would not be unusual. Mr. Penn was a man of influence and wealth after all.

Buck entered the room dressed in a suit, with a gun strapped under the jacket.

“Are you ready, Mr. Penn?” Buck asked with a serious face plastered on his usually jovial complexion.

Ezra tugged his shirt sleeves to straighten them under his suit coat.

“I believe I am, Mr. Willis.”

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**DC Demon Bar**

It had taken most of the afternoon, but Xander located a bar catering to the supernatural population of the city. He could smell the various demons the closer he got. There were only a few he could identify, because their odor was strong enough that he had picked it up when he had average senses. It made him wish he had spent time to catalog demon scents after he come online. No use wishing, because wishes were taboo. It was time to act now and remedy that.

He walked into the bar armed with his demon hunter gear distributed about himself. Half the patrons watched him enter. He ignored them and walked to the bar. The bartender, some half demon by the mix of human and demon smell, gave him a wary eye. Xander slipped a fifty onto the bar top, but
kept a firm hand on it.

“I'm looking for information,” Xander said in his most sinister voice.

The bartender shifted and glanced around.

“What sort of information?” he asked.

“I'm tracking a demon who's new to the area,” Xander said. “Into killing humans and leaving them where the normals can find them. Not very neighborly of him to attract so much attention to a well behaved community. Things like that risk exposure to normals, draws the attention of hunters, and maybe even Slayers.” The bartender shifted uneasily at the mention of Slayers. Xander paused to let the risks sink in. The tension in the room told Xander that the rest of those present were listening in. Most of those present at this time of day were the peaceful varieties of demons. Xander hoped that a threat to their way of life would get someone to spill. “Hate to see such a fine community and business threatened by the actions of one individual, who didn't have the sense to cover his tracks.”

The bartender swallowed hard before moving closer. He leaned closer to Xander.

“There is talk of someone new,” the bartender whispered. “A half Re'uuk demon. Came into town a while back. They say he's wanting to become a full Re'uuk.”

“How's he planning on that?” Xander asked.

The bartender gave the room a quick sweep before answering.

“A ritual – I don't know what kind, just that it requires twelve sacrifices.”

The bartender's heart was beating faster than normal, but it felt like he was telling the truth.

“Know anyone who would?” Xander asked.

The bartender shook his head in the negative. Xander tapped the bill then slid it across the bar top.

“Thanks for the info,” Xander said.

He turned and left the bar. Once he was safely in his car and on the road back to his hotel, Xander started making calls to get the research ball rolling and to get Faith and a few Slayers to DC to deal with whatever was brewing here.

**NCIS Interrogation Room**

Gibbs and Hotchner stood behind the two-way mirror observing Mr. Harris. Tony and Ziva had picked him up at his hotel first thing in the morning and brought him in. Harris sat calmly in the room looking around. He had been in there for fifteen minutes. He looked at the mirror and waved with a cheeky grin. It irritated Gibbs. Hotchner seemed unmoved with the action. Tony brought Spencer and Derek into the observation room, with Tim tagging along behind.

“Boss,” Tony and Tim greeted.

Tim handed Gibbs the printed file on Harris. Gibbs flipped through it briefly.
“Who you taking in with you?” Tony asked.


Xander cocked his head, then chuckled for no apparent reason.

Gibbs jerked his head to indicate Hotchner should follow him. The two exited the room. The remaining four turned their attention to the glass.

“He seems calm,” Derek observed.

Spencer gave an assessing hum.

“What are you thinking, Spence?” Derek asked.

Spencer gave a shake of his head.

“Not sure,” he answered. “He’s different.”

The door opened, and Gibbs and Hotchner walked in.

“When one is playing good cop?” Tony asked. “They both look like hard asses.”

The comment got a smirk out of Derek.

“Tony, shush,” Tim chided.

Gibbs and Hotchner took the seats across from Harris. Gibbs let the folder fall to the table with an echoing clap as he sat down. He opened the folder and flipped through a few pages, while Hotchner watched Harris with a stony expression.

“Mr. Harris,” Gibbs said. “I’m Agent Gibbs, and this is Agent Hotchner. Thank you for coming in”

“Always want to do my part,” Harris said with a smile. His one eye bounced between Gibbs and Hotchner. “How can I help you?”

“He seems very calm,” Spencer commented softly.

Harris’ gaze darted to the mirror briefly before returning to the agents in the room with him.

Gibbs pulled a photo from the file and turned it to face Harris.

“You were observed at a crime scene a few days ago. How did you come to be there?”

Harris glanced down at the picture.

“I woke early and went for a walk. I ended up at the park.” Harris said.

“His hotel is miles away from the park,” Tony muttered.

Harris’ gaze darted to the mirror again.

“I walked for a bit before coming across the scene and joined the gathering watchers to see what was going on.”

“What did you see?” Hotchner asked.
“There were agents moving around taking pictures. Others were putting the body on a gurney and
took it to the ambulance. Officers were standing around the perimeter keeping people out.”

Gibbs pulled out several more pictures showing Harris moving around the crime scene.

“You seemed to be really interested in what was going on,” Gibbs said.

Harris casually shrugged his shoulders.

“First time at a crime scene. I was curious,” Harris answered with comfortable ease.

“Curious enough that you were hanging outside the navy yard?” Gibbs said with a harsh snap to his
words. Gibbs locked eyes with Harris.

Harris blinked normally and seemed unruffled by Gibbs' glare.

“Researching what NCIS was. Hadn't heard of it before,” Harris answered.

“Cool as a cucumber,” Derek commented.

Harris' gaze darted to the mirror. Spencer stiffened.

“I think he can hear us,” Spencer said.

The others only got out the beginnings of protest at the idea when Harris looked at the mirror, laid his
index finger along side his nose, and smiled. No one said a word after that. Tony grabbed a pad of
paper and pen. He started writing down orders.

*Tim – get whatever you need and check this place for bugs.*

*Derek – you keep an eye on Harris.*

*Spencer and I will pull Hotchner and Gibbs out and explain what's going on.*

They all nodded and set about their tasks. Tony knocked on the interrogation room door once, before
opening it and sticking his head through.

“Boss, a moment,” Tony said standing up to Gibbs' glare.

“Excuse me,” Gibbs said.

“Need both of you,” Tony added.

Hotchner nodded and stood. The two men walked out of the room to find Tony and a nervous
looking Spencer waiting on them.

“This better be good,” Gibbs said as soon as the door was closed.

“Oh it is,” Tony said.

Tony motioned for them to follow him. Gibbs was not pleased. Hotchner seemed curious as to what
had his analyst so edgy. Tony did not stop until he had the entire floor between them and Harris.

“Harris could hear us talking in the observation room,” Tony said.

“What?” exclaimed Gibbs, incredulously.
“It's true,” Spencer said backing Tony up. “He looked at the mirror any time one of us said anything. When I made the observation that he could hear us, Harris looked right at me and placed his finger to his nose. The only conclusion is that he could hear us.”

“How?” demanded Gibbs.

“I have Tim sweeping the room for bugs,” Tony said. “We could have Harris searched.”

“Not enough evidence or reasonable cause unless we find something,” Hotchner commented.

“You're sure he heard you?” Gibbs asked.

“As sure as I can be in such circumstances,” Tony answered. “He was too deliberate in his actions for it to be Harris playing around.”

“He was playing, just with us,” Spencer added.

“Spencer?” Hotchner asked for clarification with the one word.

“However he was able to hear us, he set up a pattern seeing if we would catch on. When I did, he acknowledged it with a gesture he had not before used, and that made clear his message.”

“Right on the nose,” Tony smoothly added, and repeated the gesture.

Tim found them to give his report.

“Room's clean. I would swear he was watching me through the glass while I worked.”

Tony gave a body shiver. “Spooky,” he said.

Xander watched the agents leave the room, and tried to suppress a smirk at the hornets nest he had just stirred up. He probably should not have done that, but he didn't know any other way to introduce the baby Sentinels to what they would eventually be able to do, without them thinking he was crazy. He also wanted to establish himself as a valid source of information on the topic, despite his youth. Both baby Sentinels were older than Xander. They might find it hard to take direction from him. He could always pass them off to Jim as the more experienced Sentinel.

Tony lead the agents away. Xander followed them with his hearing, and grounded himself with touch. He ran his fingers over the top of the table seeking dips in the metal top. He also stared at the mirror. He could just make out the lone person on the other side. It was one of the FBI agents if he was not mistaken. The two way mirror was an interesting challenge to see through, but he had managed to figure out the trick while waiting for Gibbs and Hotchner to come in.

Xander chuckled at the confusion yet surety being expressed by Spencer and Tony, that he had heard them in the observation room. The other NCIS agent returned with a device and moved around the room. He was probably looking for bugs. He finished and left the room to report his findings.

The group was sounding more agitated. Xander was not sure how he would get out of this, but the girls were on their way, and they knew of his possible detainment by NCIS. They would make sure he was extracted if he did not manage on his own. Xander pondered what his next move should be.

Gibbs huffed in irritation at the news.
“How did he hear us?” he wanted to know.

“Don't know, Boss,” Tim and Tony promptly responded.

“Maybe he has some technology on him,” Tim pointed out.

“Maybe he's a mind reader,” Tony offered and got a head slap for it.

Spencer's gaze wandered off into space. Hotchner recognized the sign of Spencer putting pieces together. Spencer was off to his laptop with a muttered, “I need to check something.”

Gibbs looked questioningly at Hotchner.

“He's onto something,” Hotchner said, before following his agent.

The others followed. Spencer had the NCIS files on Harris pulled up, and was swiftly scrolling through his itinerary since returning to the country. Hotch stood to the left of Spencer so he could see the screen. Spencer was muttering to himself as his fingers danced across the keyboard, pulling up information. The NCIS agents took up position around Spencer, trying to gain an insight into what the younger agent was doing. Hotchner rested his hand on Spencer's shoulder to help pull Spencer back from inside his head.

“Several years ago, there was a grad student who's research caused a media frenzy,” Spencer said. He pulled up a few more files before leaning back in his chair. “It ended when he held a press conference and declared it all fake.”

“What was his research on?” Hotch asked.

Spencer swiveled his chair around to face the agents clustered around him. The NCIS agents took a step back to give him room.

“His paper was about people with enhanced senses. It particularly focused on one individual.” Spencer twisted back around and pulled up a picture. “James Ellison, Cascade police detective the student was riding along with. The excerpts I was able to get my hands on at the time credited the enhanced senses to aiding the detective in solving cases. He could supposedly hear things on other floors, identify compounds we would send to the lab by smell or taste, and see things miles away.”

“But he said it was a fake,” Tony said.

Spencer turned back to face them. “What if it wasn't? What if it was real?”

Tim scratched at his cheek. “Why would he do that?”

“I think I remember that,” Hotch said. “I was in Seattle at the time. The news crews were hounding Ellison. I remember some of the LEOs I was working with commenting on them hindering an investigation by following Ellison everywhere.”

Tony groaned.

“That would be irritating,” Tim commented.

“So the kid came clean to save his friend, or he took a bullet by sacrificing his work to save his friend,” Gibbs surmised.

Spencer nodded. He turned back to his keyboard and pulled up the records of Detective Blair Sandburg.
“The grad student is now a Cascade detective partnered with James Ellison,” Spencer said.

“Damn,” Tony said. “It's like On the Waterfront, when Terry Malloy realized his actions lead to Joey Doyle's murder and Edie and Father Barry convince him to testify... or maybe its more like...”

Gibbs head-slapped Tony again.

“You think there is some truth to the paper and that Harris might have enhanced senses,” Hotchner summarized.

“He could be listening to us now,” Tim added.

They all paused and looked at each other.

“My question is why did he let us know?” Spencer asked stumping them all for a few moments.

“Because we wouldn't believe him any other way,” Gibbs answered.

Hotchner rubbed his chin then said, “The reason he was acting odd at the scene was because there was something there he detected. He couldn't share that unless we knew what he could do.”

“Do we really believe he can do that?” Gibbs asked.

“We can test him,” Spencer said. He pulled out his phone and called Derek. “Derek, we're going to try something. I'm going to put you on mute, but tell us if Harris does anything.”

“Alright, Spence,” Derek said with hesitant doubt.

Spencer muted his phone.

“Alexander, if you can hear us, raise your left hand,” Spencer said.

They all looked at Spencer's phone waiting.

“What if we are too far or he's not listening?” Tim asked.

Derek cut in, “He raised his left hand like in school.”

“You can put it down now.” Derek relayed the action. “Do you need more proof?”

Gibbs rubbed the back of his head in contemplation.

“Don't know if it would help or not,” Gibbs admitted. “I keep trying to come up with other explanations, but they seem just as far fetched.”

“I'm good,” Hotch said.

Spencer took his phone off mute.

“Thanks, Derek. Will you get Mr. Harris and bring him to the conference room?”

“Why?”

“Mr. Harris raised his hand because Spencer asked him to,” Hotch answered.

“How, what, why?” Derek sputtered.
“I'll explain when you get here with Mr. Harris,” Hotchner said.

“OK,” Derek said.

Hotchner punched the end call button on the phone on the table. They waited. Derek entered with Harris in tow. Harris took a seat that Gibbs indicated. The rest returned to their places around the table. Awkward silence filled the room.

“What did you find at the crime scene?” Spencer asked Harris.

“An odor that set off all my warning bells,” Harris answered.

Derek, still in the dark, raised an eyebrow in quandary and looked to Hotchner for clarification. Gibbs watched Harris with intent to ferret out his secrets but seemed satisfied to let the FBI agents take the lead in questioning for the time being.

“Can you explain that further?” Hotchner asked.

Harris shifted back in his seat, took a breath, and then leaned forward resting his forearms on the table. He looked first at Spencer.

“Was there anything else you remember from the paper you read?” Harris asked.

Spencer tilted his head as he reviewed the memory.

“He called people with enhanced senses Sentinels. It was first documented by Sir Richard Francis Burton. I read Burton's monograph.” Harris nodded to encourage him on. “The Sentinels were watchmen and protectors of the village. Burton talked about them having partners that worked with them. Do you have a partner?”

Harris' grin faulted momentarily at the question and did not gain the same intensity it started with.

“They are called Guides, and I haven't found mine yet,” Harris answered.

Spencer quirked his head in surprise. “They are important.” he stated.

Harris laughed, short and dry.

“A Guide is a Sentinel's anchor.” Harris looked around the room at all the confused looks directed at him. “Imagine looking at a grain of sand and you are able to zoom in on it like a microscope to see the cracks and bumps. All your attention is on looking closer and closer at the moon like landscape balanced on the tip of your finger. If you are not careful, you look so close that you are no longer receiving input from anything else. Then even the sight disappears and you are unaware of what's going on around you.”

“Sounds awful,” Tim said. “Does it happened often?”

“It can when a Sentinel first comes online,” Harris answered.

“How's he get out of it?” Derek asked.

“Sometimes he can come out of it once the source of the zone is gone or other senses are stimulated to pull him back to reality.”

“Ah,” Spencer said. “Hence the guide.”
Harris nodded with glee. “You are quick to figure that out.”

Spencer shrugged.

“Anyone in the village can act as a guide with a bit of training, but ideally the Sentinel needs to find a Guide that was born to be one. They have qualities that anchor a Sentinel better.” Harris paused and pursed his lips. “Anyone can learn to shoot a gun, but there are special innate qualities needed that no amount of practice can give to say, become an exceptional sharpshooter.”

Tony glanced at Gibbs to gauge his reaction. Gibbs was his normal stoic self.

“Just as a sharpshooter brings out the best in the weapon, the Guide,” the capital in the word was clear with the way Harris said it, “brings out the best in a Sentinel.” Harris clapped his hands together. “We’ve gotten off topic. To understand the heebie-jeebies I felt, you have to understand what drives a Sentinel. A Sentinel’s first instinct is to protect the village or tribe. There is...” he waved a hand around in the air by his head, “for a better word – a sixth sense for threats to the village. Something at the scene caused mine to jump to red alert.”

“When did it do that?” Gibbs asked.

“When the body was moved to the ambulance,” Harris answered looking Gibbs in the eyes.

Tony held up one finger. “It’s either one the victim,” another finger went up, “two someone who knew the victim,” third finger added, “or the killer.”

“Or something that found the body after it was dumped,” Tim added.

Tony flipped up a fourth finger and gave Tim a nod of approval.

“Something?” Derek asked.

Tim hesitated a bit before explaining himself. “An animal with a disease or something similar that could be a threat. Could it not?” Tim looked at Harris who appeared thoughtful.

“That is a good idea. Don’t know if it would or not, but the reasoning is sound if it was a threat to a large population.”

“How can this help us?” Gibbs asked.

“If I had someone acting as a guide...”

“How are you surviving if a guide is so important?” Tony blurted out.

“Training and tricks keep me from zoning or spiking but limits my range to a portion of what is possible with a guide. With someone acting as guide, I may be able to track the killer. I would have to see the body... clothing is probably better if the body’s been cleaned up.”

Gibbs and Hotchner exchange unreadable looks.

“Let’s try this,” Gibbs said. “How do you want to do this?”

“Need a guide first.” Harris looked at each of them before turning to Spencer. “You want to give guiding a try?” Harris asked.

“Yes,” Spencer answered.
"I need a bit of time to give Spencer the how to be a guide class. Then I should be good to see whatever evidence you feel you can show me. Before that, a restroom break would be great."

Xander gave a mental sigh of relief. Things were going better than he hoped. The agents were taking him seriously. It probably helped that the information was being substantiated by one of their own. They still had doubts. Xander could see it in their faces and body reactions, even if some of them were very good at hiding it.

His two baby Sentinels would now know what was happening to them when they came online. Neither felt urgent to his growing awareness, just close. He could not say when. He would leave them with his number. At least two strong Guide candidates were among them, and recognizing Guides without Harley present was sharpening his tools in his box of tricks. He would have Spencer, the Guide who would benefit the most with hands on experience, trained on the basics in a short time, as well as give him experience in acting as an anchor. Tim, Xander felt, would pick it up from watching Spencer and ask questions later if needed.

When he got through this, Blair would want to know about his new developments.

While Tony escorted Harris to the bathroom, Gibbs turned to Tim.

"Get me the information on the paper, it's writer, and subject," Gibbs said.

"On it, Boss," Tim said before dashing to his desk.

Gibbs huffed then addressed Hotchner.

"Seen anything like this before?"

"No," Hotchner answered.

Gibbs gave the agent credit. He was straight forward and not playing power games once he got his team included on the case. He and his team knew their stuff and stood their ground about what they knew, but were not trying to direct the case. Hotchner was turning out to be one of the few people that Gibbs did not mind working with – to his own surprise.

"New one in my books too," Gibbs said. "Not sure how to write this one up."

Hotchner smirked.

Xander and Spencer followed Tim and Gibbs to the basement of the building. The glass doors opened at their approach. The older medic was standing by a table setting out his instruments.

"Nothing new for you, Jethro," the Scotsman said.

"Wasn't expecting any, Ducky. I need to see Jenkins' body," Gibbs said. It was the least aggressive tone Xander had heard from the man. He would almost categorize it as doting.

Ducky turned around and noticed the group accompanying Gibbs.

"Hello there," Ducky said. He removed his gloves and disposed of them. "Has new evidence come
up in the case?” He headed to the units where the bodies were stored.

“Sort of,” Gibbs said. He motioned for the others to follow him.

Ducky opened the metal door and pulled the slab out. On it was the dead girl covered with a sheet. Ducky reverently folded it down from her face.

“You have visitors, my dear,” he said to her.

Ducky looked curiously at the group.

“Ducky, this is Xander Harris,” Gibbs introduced. “Harris, Dr. Donald Mallard, our medical examiner.”

Xander shook the doctor's hand.

“Nice to meet you, Dr. Mallard,” Xander said.

“Call me Ducky, Alexander,” Ducky insisted. “Xander is short for Alexander, is it not?”

Xander confirmed it was and was going to ask to be called by the shortened form, when Tim waved and whispered, “Don't bother.” The movement caught Ducky's attention as well.

“Something the matter, Timothy?” Ducky ask.

“Nope, everything’s good here,” Tim said.

Gibbs gave an amused huff. Calling people by their full name must be one of Ducky's quirks. Gibbs drew them swiftly back to why they were there and ordered Xander to do his thing.

Xander stepped up to the body.

“Place your hand on my arm,” Xander instructed Spencer. “I need you to talk about something, doesn't matter what like I told you earlier. I'm going to use your touch and the sound of your voice to keep me from getting lost in sight and smell. If I don't respond for five minutes, pinch me or slap me will be the easiest things to try. Oh, or try whispering or shouting. The change in your volume or talking pattern can alert me to possible danger and pull me out.”

Spencer nodded, and rested his hand on Xander's arm. The rest of the group watched curiously. Xander familiarized himself with Spencer's touch. It was slightly cool, and his hands were dry. Spencer started talking about something math related. Xander smiled, as it reminded him of Willow. He let Spencer's soft calm voice fill him and take hold. Then Xander focused on the body. He started with smell, since that was what triggered this adventure. His nose flared as he inhaled, trying to catch the particles left by what he suspected was the Re'uuk. He had to push his senses farther than he would have on his own to find it, but the stench was still there after she had been washed. It was strongest around her neck where he could see light bruising.

Xander moved the cover so the could see an arm. He sill listened to Spencer talk about the significance of the formula's application. The smell was on her arms with more light bruising probably where he moved her after choking her to unconsciousness. There was heavier bruising in spots, maybe from when he grabbed her.

The legs were next. The stench was only just there. Probably not a lot of contact with the Re'uuk. Xander stepped back and pulled his senses back to himself.
“Thanks, Spencer. I'll have to tell my friend about that. I'm sure she'll be interested.”

The easy acceptance of such advanced babble took Spencer by surprise, but Xander deemed the genius was also pleased by it. Then Xander addressed the waiting crowd.

“It's the person who killed her, I'm sure. The smell is strongest at her neck where she was strangled just enough to knock her out.”

“That is correct,” Ducky said.

“Her arms also still carry traces of his scent where he grabbed her and moved her around. Her legs not as much contact, so not much there. So it wasn't an animal or person after the fact. If it was someone she was close with, the scent would be more...” Xander waved his hand up and down the body as he searched for the right words.

“Evenly distributed,” Tim offered.

“Something like that,” Xander said.

“So the person that's caused your concern and the killer we are after are the same person,” Gibbs summarized.

“Yep,” Xander agreed.

“That makes things more complicated,” Gibbs grumbled. “Come on. Tony should be back with lunch by now.”
The picture clears

Chapter Summary

The team follows the leads to the killer but someone else gets there before them.

DC Park

Xander stood where the body had been found. Spencer shifted nervously beside him. Tony, Tim, and Hotchner were close by.

“Last time I was here, I could only follow his scent to where his car was then lost it,” Xander said.

“Where was that?” Tony asked.

Xander lead them to where the trail went cold last time. It was close to where the ambulance had been. Xander scanned the ground to find the trace of tracks that were there before.

“Here,” Xander said. “If you look closely, you can just make out the imprint of the tires in the dirt in spots.”

Tony moved closer, camera in hand. He scanned the ground.

“It's hardly there,” Tony said.

“Do you have a magnifying lens,” Xander said.

Tim pulled out a different lens from the bag he carried and handed it to Tony. Tony switched them out with the swiftness of practice. He handed the regular lens to Tim and focused the camera on the ground.

“Gets me more detail. Maybe enough Abby can work her magic on it.”

Tony snapped several pictures while Xander searched for a better imprint. He found a few spots for Tony to photograph. Hopefully that would be enough for their tech to work her magic on.

Xander beckoned Spencer over and instructed him to place his hand on his back this time. Once more Xander cast his senses out farther and more focused than he had before. A bouquet of aromas blossomed around him. He sorted through them one by one and pushed each non-target smell to the background. Then he found the Re’uuk's trail. He started walking.

The others followed. The group walked through the park and to the east gate. Xander followed the trail north for only a few feet before it was scattered. Xander stood by the side of the road and pushed his sense of smell deeper into the layers around him. He caught a molecule or two of the target scent. He pushed again and then...

Spencer followed Xander through the park. He studied each movement and hesitation. The Sentinel and Guide thing was fascinating. He wished now that he could get his hands on Sandburg's paper for
all of it. Maybe he could contact the detective and convince him to talk to him about it. If his suspicion was correct about Xander, he had met Sandburg and his Sentinel when he was in Cascade. Maybe Xander would put a good word in for him.

They exited the park and turned left. Xander stopped there. He watched Xander intently study the road before him. There was a shift. There was nothing obvious that changed from one second to the next, but Spencer knew that Xander had zoned. He moved closer to Xander's side and placed his hand to Xander's cheek. He gave it a few sharp pats.

“Xander, come back. You've gone too far. Follow my voice back,” Spencer said.

He repeated the action again and knew that Xander was coming back. Xander blinked his eye several times and focused on Spencer. Spencer let his hand drop now that Xander was back with them.

“I pushed too hard and zoned, didn't I?”

“You did,” Spencer confirmed.

“It was creepy the way you weren't responding,” Tony said.

Xander took a deep breath and sighed. He looked like he was mentally pulling himself together.

“I've heard that before,” Xander said. “That's why I never push too far without a safety net.”

“What happened?” Hotchner asked.

“The traffic has deteriorated the trail. I could only find a hint of it in a spot or two.”

“It's a bit more information than we had before,” Tony said. He lifted the camera. “Between the tracks and the direction, we may be able to find him on the traffic camera footage.”

NCIS Office

Tony sent Abby the pictures as soon as they got back to the office, and reported to Gibbs what they found. Tim was already pulling the video feeds they would need to go through now that they knew which exit out of the park the killer took.

Tony was not sure about the whole Sentinel thing. The kid could be pulling all their legs, but he was sure good at it if he was. Then there was the fact that Tony's gut was telling him the kid was on the level. He had been reading through the information that Tim had found while Xander taught Spencer how to be a guide. It was a good thing he did with today's adventure.

He pushed the button for Abby's floor with the hand that did not have a large Caff-Pow. He was headed down to see what she had found.

While the NCIS team ran around doing what they do, Xander sat in the conference room; because Gibbs was a paranoid old goat who did not want Xander chasing the killer down on his own. Xander had to give Gibbs some slack, because his paranoia was not misplaced. He would be out there trying to locate the demon for the coming Slayers.

That reminded Xander that they should be in DC any time now. He had not spoken to Giles or
anyone from Cleveland since he got up at the knocking of Tony and Ziva, who were kind enough to let him get dressed before escorting him down here. He pulled out his phone to see if he had missed any calls. He had missed one call from Giles about the time he was rushing around to get dressed. More importantly, he had several texts from various members of the group.

Xander extended his senses to do a head count. Derek was talking with Tim and on the phone with his team's tech gal explaining what they were doing. Tony had left the floor a few minutes ago. Hotchner and Gibbs were in the Director's office giving both their bosses updates on the case. Ziva was still going through the files from the previous cases looking for connections and muttering to herself. Spencer was working on his computer in the conference room with Xander.

Xander opened the oldest text. It was from Giles.

○ *Found information, called Faith and organized troops.*

Xander was glad of that. The rest were from Faith.

○ *Hope you're five by five. Talked to G-man. Much research happening.*

○ *Things are coming together on our end. Red can't come, but some of her friends are, and helping with the travel arrangements.*

He was glad to see Faith and Giles had not gone into specifics since he was sure the agents could access his texts if they were suspicious. With the witches helping, they could bring everything they needed with them and not have the hassle of the airport or the wasted time of driving. That also meant, that it was a serious threat – close to apocalyptic.

○ *Group just left* was from Robin.

○ *All five by five. Looking for good hunting ground.* Faith sent thirty minutes ago.

○ *I had guest this morning. I suggest starting at the park, closest to Giles then take a walk. North side is always good.*

Xander hoped that his reply text made sense to Faith without him telling her east end of the park and go north. He wondered who she brought with her.

○ *Already headed that way.* Faith replied.

Xander put his phone away and did another sweep of the team. Tony had returned. There was a conference call between Abby, Tim, and Garcia. Garcia was running the plate numbers of cars that would match the tracks and that were northbound from that night and feeding the names to Abby who pulled up their backgrounds. Tim was focusing more on the hope that the killer came and went the same way; so he was looking for the same car going south, then north in a short amount of time. He threw the plates to Garcia when identified. There was a lot of data they were shifting through as quickly as they could for time was running short.

**DC Park**

Faith put her phone away. The witches tracking spell had latched onto the evil residue left at the murder scene and were headed to the east entrance already. They were tracking the Re'uuuk back to its lair. They needed to stop the ritual already in progress. It unfortunately was not a “make me a full blooded Re'uuuk” kind of spell, but more “give me the power to take over the world” kind of spell.
Giles and his team had found only a couple rituals where twelve sacrifices were required. One of the tech savvy members searched for killings that matched the one Xander found. There were ten in total. They were grouped in threes, one week apart, and two weeks between each group. Each group were sacrificed at a directional cardinal point. Giles' books said that was used as boundary markers for the area the caster wanted to control. It was not a small area according to Giles.

Faith was ready to kick evil dude's ass along with her two trainee Slayers. He needed taken down. The witches were there to counter any magical defenses and strip him of the ritual power that he had amassed to this point.

**NCIS Office**

“Found him!” Tim announced to the room.

“Are you sure?” Gibbs asked.

“Yes,” Garcia and Abby answer in tandem through the phone.

“Give us the rundown,” Gibbs said.

All members of the teams gathered around the large screen. Tim explained that they had found a car, belonging to Ryan DeRuth of DC, that entered and left the park during the correct time frame. Abby and Garcia tracked his movements over the past three months and had found purchases on his credit card at Fredericksburg, Strasburg, and Boonsboro during the time of the killings.

DeRuth was raised by his maternal grandfather who had passed away a year before. There was no record of his father. His mother died when he was a teen. He had been in a few fights but otherwise seemed to keep his nose clean.

“Where does he live?” Gibbs asked.

Tim gave the address.

“I've already submitted the request for a warrant,” Tim said.

“Let me know as soon as we get it,” Gibbs ordered.

**Outside DeRuth's Home**

Xander did not have to extend his senses to smell the evil cesspit odor of the killer. He staggered under the assault. Spencer was at his side immediately asking if he was alright. Spencer was going to be a great guide as soon as Aaron came online. There was no doubt in Xander's mind that they were a matched set, just like Tim and Tony.

“It's him and it's knock you off your feet without trying strong,” Xander told the group gathered several blocks away from DeRuth's home.

Xander turned down his sense of smell and focused on catching the sounds coming from the house. He couldn't help but grin when he heard Faith let out a string of cuss words with her unique flair.

“He's there,” Xander confirmed. “He has company at the moment who are not very happy with
him.”

Gibbs scowled and started ordering everyone into their places to enter the building, despite Xander's advice to wait. Granted he was lackadaisical in his warning, because he knew they would not believe they could not handle it. Xander figured, by the time the agents got in, the Council team would have things in hand.

The agents stationed themselves at the home's entrances. They declared their presence before bursting in. Xander, with hands in his pockets, followed at the back of the BAU groups.

The sound of fighting and blades clashing filled the house. The furniture was toppled and shredded. Faith barked out directions to her underlings to get the hostage, while she took on the supercharged half demon.

The NCIS team stood in the large doorway into the long room on the west side of the home. The BAU were in the back door from the kitchen. Both seemed momentarily shocked at the scene before them. A humanoid demon with orange scales and claws lashed out at Faith who dodged. She sent him flying into a wall with a punch. Xander eased around them and into the room while they were distracted. The minion Slayers saw the two groups and had a quick exchange of words. April carried the hostage to the NCIS group. She thrust her at Gibbs. He fumbled with putting his weapon away to take the woman suddenly pushed upon him.

“Here, get her to safety,” April ordered.

Karri grabbed a double headed ax from the discarded weapon bag on the edge of the room.

“Xander, catch!” Karri called.

Xander stepped forward, caught the handle with years of practice, and swung it up to rest on his shoulder.

“Watch over the witches while I help Faith,” Karri said.

In one corner there were three witches huddled together chanting. Xander moved to stand guard to let them work. All three Slayers were now taking on DeRuth. He was giving as good as he got. April was slammed into a wall. She shook it off quickly and was back in the fray.

Gibbs had passed the victim off to Ziva to get her out of the house. He looked ready to demand what was going on at any moment. The chanting behind Xander rose. The power made the hairs on the back of his neck stand on end. Wind whipped around the room. Xander braced himself against the wall knowing guard duty was suspended for the moment. The agents in the doorways were pushed back by the wind. DeRuth roared as yellow spheres floated out of him. The witches kept chanting and the spheres popped. Waves of heat hit Xander as the sacrificial power was returned to the earth where it should have originally gone.

A now human looking DeRuth crumpled to the ground. The wind had stopped but the chanting continued. DeRuth glowed green for what felt like several minutes. The chanting stopped. Andrew heaved out a large sigh.

“That's done,” he announced. “Hey, Xander. He's all ready for your feds to take.”

The Slayers watched DeRuth to be sure he was down.

“Hi, Andrew. What did ya do?” Xander asked.
The agents were cautiously entering the room with guns drawn.

“Removed the amassed power and bound his ability to do magic. He can try the ritual again, but it won’t work for him. That's what took us so long to figure out. Otherwise we would have been here this morning,” Andrew casually commented.

Xander let out an appreciative whistle.

“You've come a long way with your studies,” Xander said.

Andrew grinned at the praise.

By now, DeRuth was being cuffed. The remaining agents were warily watching the Slayers. Gibbs marched up to Xander.

“What in the blazes is going on here?” Gibbs demanded.

“These are friends of mine that I called yesterday. We specialize in such cases,” Xander answered with a grin.

“And you didn't think I should know about them!”

“Exactly. You wouldn't have believed me that you were facing a half demon, and it was best for you to stay out of it. Better to let you be in the dark until it could be proved.”

Gibbs was not happy with any of it.

“So you send in a bunch of teenagers!”

“Hey,” Kerri said getting between Xander and Gibbs. She grabbed Gibbs by the front of his jacket and lifted him off the ground and above her head. “We ain’t just a bunch of teenagers. We are gifted teenagers that fight things you would not believe in order to keep everyone safe. It's thanks to Xander and his friends that we don't have to do it alone anymore. So don't give him crap for protecting you and your men from a demon that would have happily killed all the agents you brought with you today.”

The tension of the agents had ratcheted up when Kerri lifted Gibbs.

Xander put a calming hand on Kerri's shoulder.

“Put him down, please. I'll run them through the 101 class. You help the others.”

Kerri put Gibbs down not as gently as she could before stomping away.

“Would he have kept trophies of his kills?” Hotchner asked moving things back to making an airtight case.

“Oh, most definitely,” Andrew answered. “The ritual required it for him to anchor the power of each sacrifice to himself.”

Hotchner nodded. “Derek and I will search for the evidence to tie him firmly to the murders, while you take care of... this.”

Gibbs agreed with the division of work.

“Start talking, short version,” Gibbs demanded.
Xander did. In ten minutes he explained vampires and the purpose of the Slayer, and how he and his friends had changed that to keep the world from an apocalypse. Now they protect the young Slayers and made sure they have back up and needed resources.

“If I hadn't seen it, I wouldn't believe it,” Gibbs said.

Xander shrugged and said, “Usually the case.”

Gibbs rubbed his face and grumbled, “Don't know how to write this up.”

“Best to leave my friends out of it,” Xander said. “We came, we entered, we captured.”

Gibbs glared at Xander but shook his head. “I'll talk to Vance.”

Tim and Tony were taking statements from the girls and the witches. Andrew was happily telling Tim all about the ritual and what they had to do to stop it. The others returned with the trophies.

Faith slid up to Xander and bumped their shoulders together.

“Xan-man, good work,” she said.

“Thanks. Same to you.”

She looked around the room checking on her people.

“You know since we got here, I noticed the place reminds me of Sunnydale,” she said. “The others didn't notice it.”

“Feels like a hellmouth?” Xander asked.

Faith squished up her face.

“Sort of, but not quite... it's hellmouth lite. That's what it feels like. Not a big one like Sunnydale or Cleveland, but the vibe is there in less intensity.”

Xander pondered that.

“Can't say I noticed either, but I've had a lot of other things distracting me since I got into town.”

Faith nodded her head at that. Then she caught him with her eyes.

“You feel different too,” she challenged. “Noticed it in Cascade.”

Xander rubbed the back of his head.

“Something happened in Africa. Giles knows. I haven't told the others yet. Wanted to get a better understanding on it before I did.”

“Two of your agent friends feel the same as you do,” Faith pointed out.

“Yeah. I'll tell you soon.”

Faith let it go at that.

“Got to go. Don't want to get tied up anymore with this bunch.”

Xander nodded his head. Faith moved to where the others had grouped together with their things.
She took her spot and gave him a wave. The witches cast a transport spell, and the group was gone before all the agents' eyes.

“Damn it!” yelled Gibbs.
NCIS Office

DeRuth was locked up and prosecution proceedings were set in motion. Xander had returned to his hotel, and Tim was still reeling from the craziness of just one day – Sentinels, Guides, demons, Slayers, and magic users who did not use wands and were not hiding from the rest of the world. The last thing was what hit Tim the most as he was from a branch of squibs. He had cousins that lived in the secret magical world and attended magic school. His mother would take them to visit her sisters in the magical world, so they grew up knowing it existed. In fact, other than his uncle who married a non-magical, most of his mother's family lived in the magical world. That is why people think his sister and father were his only living family.

Tim had witnessed his cousins practice their magic many a time, but he had never seen anything like what the three did in the room today. Maybe he should visit his Uncle Thaddeus in Boston soon.

Tony made sure the suspect was secure before heading back to his desk. He had been trying to take everything in stride, but it was too much. He was failing to pull up one of his beloved movie references for the situation. He had talked with the Slayers to take down their statements. He was not sure how to write up the report and not sound like he needed to take a vacation in a padded room.

*Three super strong girls were engaged in a fist fight with the suspect upon arrival. The suspect was monstrous with orange scales and retractable claws. Both suspect and girls were thrown into walls leaving dents and got up immediately to return to the confrontation without any injury. The trio of magic users were chanting in the corner and caused a wind to whip around the room. Then they took the suspects ill gotten super powers from him and turned him back to human looking.*

That would go over so well.

Faith had been smoking hot in the leather pants and skin tight top. Warning bells went off when he first set eyes on her. He knew better than to hit on her at that point. The little demonstration from the kid that lifted Gibbs into the air was enough to cement his first impression.

Tony would check with Gibbs and see how they wanted to play this before he wrote up his report.

Aaron and his team returned to the conference room at NCIS they had been using as a base of operations. Derek looked confident as he swaggered in, but he could see the unease of what they learned about today was weighing on him. Spencer, on the other hand, looked excited and energized with the possibility of new things to learn. As for himself, the revelations were swirling around in his mind. He would prefer to close the case and push them all in a box to never be opened again. He had work and his family to occupy his time. He did not need to worry about things that went bump in the night on top of the human monsters they tracked down everyday.
Xander returned to his hotel and took a long shower. The day had gone very well. He had feared more yelling and accusation, and having the witches alter the agents' memories. So having everyone in the know was a great end to the day. His baby Sentinels and Guides have been exposed to the idea of what they are and how to handle it. They have his name for when they do emerge.

Faith's comment about the area feeling hellmouth lite, did concern him a little. That was something to worry about tomorrow. Tonight he would need to report to Giles and Faith how things were wrapped up, and give Blair and Jim a call to update them on his newest tricks.

End Part One

Chapter End Notes

That's the end of part one. Thank you everyone who has commented and left kudos. I hope you have enjoyed it. Thank you grrrmouse for beta reading the last half of the story.

Part two is in the works, but several factors have slowed it down. RL threw me a curve ball at work that took the time, energy, and drive for writing. Hopefully after the holidays things will slow down, and I can focus on pulling part two together. My goal is to start posting part two in March.

If anyone out there likes bouncing story plot ideas around, let me know in a comment. I could use someone to help me keep the multiple story lines from becoming too tangled, convoluted, or boring. I have an important story line or two that are key for plot movement but stagnating when I attempt to outline or flesh out as narrative.

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!