Trouble In Paradise

by LadyRa

Summary

The NID are after Jim and Blair, and SG-1's on their way to Kelowna. This universe went AU after S2P2. This takes place a couple of months after Sentinel School ended, which follows A Gathering of Sentinels.

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Glory and praise to the creators for making such fun characters to play with. You guys rock!! Thanks to my betas: Susan, Hawthorn, Annie, Jillsjourney, and Joolz. And a special thanks to Trisha for buying this story in the Moonridge Auction.
EPISODE SPOILERS: None, nada, zip. Oops, I lied, I forgot Stargate. Spoilers for Meridian, although never mind, because I change everything. LOL. I even screwed around with the dialogue, some of which I snitched. Besides, haven't you all been totally spoiled by now, anyway???
NOTES/WARNINGS: Mystical guide/sentinel stuff and lots of spirit animal frolicking. If you hate that kind of thing, run away. You probably need to read the first two stories for this to make any sense. It went crossover with Stargate in the second story. There is also a very oblique mention of child abuse. Vague and unspecific.

This story is a sequel to: A Gathering of Sentinels and The Sentinel School

Trouble in Paradise
"Will someone shut that kid up?" Wednesday protested, hands over her ears, her visible piercings: eyebrows, bridge of her nose, both nostrils, upper and lower lips, quivering with dismay.

The kid in question was the newest Sentinel, a two-year-old named Melanie, who spent most of her time crying inconsolably. Several people had started calling her Melancholy behind her back.

Simon eyed Wednesday with distaste. Yeah, Melanie was a pain in the ass, but Wednesday was a Guide, and she could at least try to help. Although, to be fair, Blair was the only one who seemed to make a difference, and he was off on a trip with Jim and Louis, looking at more children who'd been labeled autistic, and wouldn't be back until tomorrow.

He had to admit that he didn't like Wednesday. He hadn't liked her when she'd shown up, all Goth and piercings and drama, or the way she had to be the center of attention. He suspected she was responsible for a number of the younger Guides and Sentinels ending up in tears.

Of course, when she first showed up, her name hadn't been Wednesday. It had been Denise, or Debbie, or something that started with a 'D', but she'd decided to change her name and wouldn't answer to anything else. Simon thought she'd watched the Addams Family a little too often.

Her ID said she was nineteen, but Simon had his doubts. And as long as he was listing off the things that bothered Simon about her, it bothered him that she seemed completely uninterested in choosing anyone to be her Sentinel, unless, of course, that Sentinel happened to be tall, blue-eyed, and answered to the name Jim.

Blair and Jim had been exceedingly patient with her, but Simon knew their patience was wearing thin, especially Blair's. Simon had absolutely no doubt that the love and bond between Jim and Blair was true and that nothing could get between them, but Wednesday had taken it on as a life mission, it seemed, to do her best to do just that.

She'd actually tried to crawl into Jim's bed three nights ago, naked but for a robe that she'd slipped out of when the door shut behind her, while Blair was still sitting with Melanie trying to calm her down enough to finally drift off. Jim had been fast asleep but, according to Blair, had known the instant someone--other than Blair--had entered their small bungalow.

He'd slapped the lights on and given Wednesday a death glare, totally ignoring her feminine wiles to the point where she'd put her robe back on and left in a huff. Upon meeting Blair on the way out, she'd made it clear she was naked under the robe, doing her best to insinuate that she and Jim had just had sex. Blair had rolled his eyes at this part, knowing she was lying, but Simon knew it had bothered him deeply.

Simon thought it was time to have a come-to-Jesus meeting with her and tell her to shape up or ship out. She didn't care about Sentinels, she didn't care about what they were trying to do here, and the very fact that she didn't care about Blair was the most worrisome of all.

Everyone cared about Blair. He was the lynchpin of the entire school. He could work with every Sentinel, and all the Guides seemed to hang on his every word. The spirit animals couldn't get enough of him, and all the staff they'd brought in looked to him for direction, sometimes to Simon's annoyance. But Simon knew that he, too, was here because of Blair. And Jim, certainly, but it was Blair who was the school's emotional heart.

Getting back to the immediate task at hand, Simon frowned with sympathy at Melanie's tear-stained face. He had hoped the swinging chair would help with her tears, but it had clearly been a flop. He'd set it up in the front lobby where he and Laverne could keep an eye on the little girl. On her non-tearful days, she happily spent hours swinging in that very spot, as there was plenty of
traffic going through the area to keep her entertained. Today, it had worked for about five minutes before the crying had restarted. Wednesday had arrived just when Simon had picked her up, deciding on a plan B. Not that he had a plan B, but he'd come up with something.

He glared again at Wednesday as she picked at her black nail polish, and Simon patted Mel's back in commiseration. At that same moment the front door opened and Jack O'Neill poked his head in.

"Hey, honey, I'm home," Jack called out.

Right behind him was Daniel Jackson. As if they put out some instantaneous Pied Piper siren call at their arrival, half a dozen of the children Sentinel and Guides came running, latching themselves to the two men's legs. Even Mel put her hands out and wailed.

"Oh, Mellie," Daniel said, limping over, somewhat handicapped by Vivian, another one of the school's younger Sentinels, who was sitting on Daniel's foot, arms clasped around his shin. With a grin, Daniel took Mel out of Simon's arms, and she immediately turned the waterworks off and began babbling at Daniel.

Simon rolled his eyes. "How do you do that?" he asked, exasperated. Not that he really needed to ask. Daniel was like Blair, in that all the Sentinels were drawn to him.

There was more commotion at the door, and Simon looked up to see at least a dozen military personnel file in. "What's going on?" he asked Jack.

"Jim didn't tell you?" Jack asked. "I called yesterday to tell him that we had more Sentinels to drop off along with several Guides who asked to go AWOL."

"No," Simon said with a frown, "he didn't tell me. Do me a favor," he added firmly to Jack, "next time, call me."

"You got it," Jack said agreeably enough.

More of them kept coming in including, to Simon's surprise, two women. They were the first females who had shown up through the military. "Sentinels or Guides?" he asked Jack.

"One of each, I think," Jack said. He glanced around and then rolled his eyes.

Simon looked at where Jack had just glanced and saw Wednesday now doting on Melanie, no doubt to suck up to Daniel. She had the hots for Jim, but it was very clear she'd settle for Daniel, despite the fact he wasn't a Sentinel at all. With Mel happily settled in Daniel's arms, Wednesday was doing her best to lean on Daniel as she pretended to care about the little girl. "Unbelievable," Simon muttered under his breath.

"Want me to push her through a wormhole?" Jack asked.

"Please," Simon said, "someplace cold with monsters." He'd been given clearance to know about Stargate Command and it still took his breath away on a regular basis. Jack and Daniel had been to dozens of other worlds. And Teal'c was an actual alien. Teal'c and Samantha had come once with Jack and Daniel to see the school. Of course, at that point, Simon hadn't known about any of the science fiction stuff; Simon had naively thought the Sentinel stuff was as weird as his life could get.

The doorbell chimed, and one of the military men still milling in the lobby opened it up. A man and a woman came in, followed by three children. They looked around frantically, as if trying to see whom they should talk to.
Simon pushed his way through the throng and put out his hand. "I'm Simon Banks, the administrator here. Can I help you?"

The husband took his hand and shook it, while the wife said tentatively, "Blair said you'd be expecting us?"

Thinking of all the ways he was going to maim Jim and Blair when they got back, Simon smiled at them. "Who's the Sentinel?"

"My wife and daughter," the man said. "My name is Jonathan Stokes, my wife is Janet, and that's Judy, Johnny, and James," he added, pointing to the kids.

"Uncle Simon," someone said to his right.

He turned to see Andrea there, Amelia's sister and Guide. "Hey, Andrea," Simon said. Turning back to the new family, he said, "I'll need a little time to get something set up for you. It's been a little crazy." He gestured at the now thirty people who were crowded into the lobby. In addition to the newcomers, some of the current residents had joined the chaos to see what was going on. And of course, the spirit animals were just as nosy.

Daniel's crow suddenly came flying in to land on Daniel's shoulder, cawing loudly at Wednesday.

Simon watched as Wednesday attempted to make nice with the crow, but it pecked at her and with another loud caw, flew over to Jack, to land on his shoulder.

"I don't blame you," Jack said to it. "If I thought I could get away with it, I'd do the same thing."

"Uncle Simon," Andrea said again, tugging at his arm. "I need to tell you something."

"Hold on," Simon said. "Laverne?" he shouted. She'd stepped out of her office a while ago, and he couldn't tell if she'd come back or not. He needed some help to deal with the bedlam. It was too loud for him, and he could see Sentinels wincing all around the room. Not that any of them would leave. It seemed as if bullheadedness was a typical Sentinel trait.

First Lieutenant Delmar Hayes, a very solid fellow in Simon's estimation, joined the group. He and his Guide had stayed on at the school after they'd bonded. He'd requested to be stationed there and, at Jack's request, had been reassigned to the school. "Want me to take some of these folks off your hand, Captain Banks? Show them where to stash their belongings?"

"Please," Simon said, grateful. "Just keep track of where you put them, would you? That way we can track them down later and get their particulars."

"If you give me the paperwork, I can get them started on filling out stuff," Delmar offered.

"Uncle Simon," Andrea said again. "It's important."

Simon glanced down at her, prepared to put her off again, until he saw the look on her face. "What is it?" Stalling her for a second he looked at Delmar. "Get the paperwork from Laverne, would you?"

Delmar nodded, saying, "Yes, sir." He made his way across the room to Laverne's office.

Turning his attention back to Andrea, Simon said again, "What is it?"

"There was this guy at school," Andrea said, "trying to talk to anyone who lived here."
Simon didn't like the sound of that. "And?"

"He talked to me, asking me all sorts of questions about the kids here."

"Why was he at your school? Why was he allowed access to you children?" Simon was trying to figure out whom he could call to give them a piece of his mind.

"He looked like a kid," Andrea said.

"Was he?" Simon asked.

"I don't think so," she answered. "He wasn't asking kid questions. He said that he was real curious about the school, and that he would pay me money if I told him stuff. He wanted to know about Randy, too."

Amelia had joined her sister at this point, her hand sneaking into her sister's, her face scared. "They're not going to take Andrea away, are they?"

Simon still remembered Blair taking him to see Amelia, locked up in her room under the dubious guardianship of Mr. Smith. Just the thought of it made Simon's blood boil. "No, honey, they're not taking Andrea anywhere." On the other hand, he thought, they might have to think about pulling all the kids--the one or two Guides who were going, and the siblings and children of the Sentinels and Guides currently at the school--out of the public school system. It wasn't something Simon wanted to do because it helped them keep a pulse on what was going on in the town, and it let these kids have a semblance of a normal life.

He looked up to find Jack standing next to them.

"Did you hear that?" Simon asked.

Jack nodded. "Let's do a head count."

"You think there's something going on?"

"You willing to risk that there's not?" Jack countered.

"No," Simon said. "Damn." He'd really been hoping it was just a curious kid with too much time on his hands asking questions. Jack's caution made him think it more likely that it was someone trying to get access to the school. "Delmar," he yelled.

In a few seconds, Delmar was front and center. "Yes, sir," he said to Simon and Jack. To Jack, he saluted.

Jack waved him off, then put up a finger telling him to hold on. "Daniel," he called.

Daniel instantly turned, frowning at whatever he was feeling from Jack. Melanie still in his arms, he crossed the room until he was standing with Jack. "What's wrong?"

"Find Major French," Simon said to Delmar, "and have him bring a few of the other military Sentinels."

"Yes, sir," Delmar said and raced off.

"We need a head count of the kids," Jack said to Daniel. "And find Randy."

"I'm on it," Daniel said. Turning to Andrea and Amelia, he said, "Want to help?"
Wednesday, who had tagged along, said to Daniel, "I can help."

"Good," Daniel said, and he handed Melanie to her. "Take care of her."

Simon had to bite his lips to keep from laughing at the disgruntled look on her face.

"Is everything all right?" Jonathan Stokes asked.

"Everything's fine," Simon said calmly, believing it for the time being. He'd fill all the new arrivals in at the next family meeting, although given the population of their school these days, it was more like a town meeting. He sighed. There was no way they'd fit in the staff lounge anymore; they'd need to use the cafeteria or the basketball court. In the meantime, he said, "Are you hungry? We have a cafeteria here with cooks who know just how to prepare food for hungry Sentinels."

Janet Stokes smiled. "That sounds lovely."


The man swung toward Simon and then effortlessly made his way across the room. "What can I do for you, Simon?" he said with a smile.

"Could you show our newest family, the Stokes, to the cafeteria? We need to get their rooms set up, and I need to take care of all of this." Simon gestured at the crowd.

"Sure thing," Clifford said good-naturedly. "This way."

With a wave at Simon, the family took off after Clifford, and that was one less thing Simon needed to deal with now.

Delmar came racing back, John French right behind him. Simon glanced up to see that Jack was organizing the military arrivals. "Delmar," Simon said, "you help Colonel O'Neill get these folks settled. John, we need a head count of all adults here on the property. If anyone's missing and unaccounted for, please let me know immediately. Dr. Jackson's handling the children."

"Is there a problem?" John asked, even as Delmar walked off to assist Jack.

"I don't know," Simon said honestly. "First things first. We need to make sure everyone's safe."

"Delmar's got everything under control," Jack said, suddenly standing in front of Simon. "I think I'll take a walk around the property, make sure all our guards are on their toes."

Simon was annoyed with himself that he hadn't thought of that first. "Thanks, Jack," he said sincerely. "I'm glad you chose now to drop on by." There'd been more than one occasion when Simon had been glad to have Jack on board. He took the safety of everyone in this school, especially the kids, very seriously. And seeing as he and Daniel both had easy access to the President of the United States, something that amazed Simon almost as much as aliens and traveling to other planets, it got the school some serious protection.

Jack strode off, and Simon took a look around. Delmar was separating the military by branch, assigning a team leader to each section, and helping Laverne hand out paperwork. The Stokes were out of sight, on their way to a relaxing lunch. Daniel and John were doing head counts, Jack was checking on security, and Simon let out a long breath.

That was until he heard Melanie crying again, and saw that Wednesday had deposited her in her
swing and was nowhere to be found. Sighing, Simon scooped her up again, deciding as soon as Blair and Jim got back, he wanted a bonus.

"Yes, Simon, I'm sorry, Jim is sorry, we're all sorry, and we're coming home first thing tomorrow," Blair said penitently. "We'd come home tonight but there's too much fog and our pilot says he won't get clearance. He's going to call us the moment we can leave."

Jim watched Blair talk to Simon. He'd listened in to the first part, as Simon first chewed them out for not calling him to tell him that there'd be some people dropping in, and then regarding Andrea's news.

Once Blair started groveling on behalf of both of them, Jim tuned out. He wished they could go home tonight. If they were close enough, Jim would rent a car and drive, but they were half way across the country.

They'd only seen two children on their list of ten; their plan was to start on the east coast and work their way back. One of the children assumed to be autistic was a Sentinel, but they'd run into a snag trying to get him released.

Jim missed the doctor in Virginia, Dr. Raymond Oliver, who had just handed Hilary over to them because he'd done his homework. The hospital in Rhode Island wasn't as eager. The boy was the lone survivor of an automobile accident that had killed the rest of his family. There was a large trust fund that was paying for his hospitalization, and the hospital administrators were reluctant to part with it. Oh, they had come up with lots of other reasons why the boy should stay, but Blair had seen right through their lies.

Louis Nichols, livid, had called the Sentinel School's attorney before his feet had gotten off the stairs outside the hospital. Jim had no doubt the boy would be in their custody in a matter of days.

At some point they had to go see the rest of the children on their list, but Jim needed to be back at the school. The Sentinel School had become his tribe, and the thought that they were being threatened, any of them, made him restless and frustrated with the urge to see for himself that everyone was fine.

The only consolation, well, two consolations, were that Jack was there at the school, and Blair was here with Jim. If Blair had been back at the school, Jim would be going nuts. And while Simon would die before he'd let anything bad happen to any of those kids, Jim implicitly trusted Jack's military background and instinct for danger.

"Hey," Blair said. "You okay?" He sat down next to Jim, leaning into him.

Jim slung his arm around his partner. "I could ask you the same thing," he countered.

"It could be worse," Blair admitted. "Everyone's accounted for, Jack and Simon will make sure everything's secure, and Daniel's there."

Jim smiled at that. While he always thought about everyone's security, Blair never stopped thinking of the Sentinels. He knew if Daniel was there, that any Sentinel who spiked because of the chaos going on would be taken care of by Daniel's soft voice and touch.

"Does Jack know who the guy was who approached Andrea?" Jim asked, chagrined he'd forgotten to ask Blair to ask Simon.

"No," Blair said. "He, John, Clifford, and one of the other military guys, I forget who he said,
anyway, they went to the school to see if they could find him, but school was out for the day, and no one was around. They'll go with Andrea in the morning to see if she spots him."

"Should we be letting the kids out?" Jim said, dubiously.

"They won't let her out of their sight," Blair assured him, "and no, we'll be keeping everyone in for the next few days. Randy had no idea why anyone was asking after him."

"He was one of the ones the NID tried to kidnap," Jim mused. "Maybe they figured out his name, and now they're trying to find out stuff about him."

"Why?"

"I have no idea," Jim said with frustration. "I'm grasping at straws here."

"Man, poor Simon," Blair said. "Like he doesn't have enough to worry about." He grinned ruefully, "I can't believe we both forgot to call him." Snickering, he put his forehead on Jim's shoulder. "He says he wants a bonus."

Grinning, Jim said, "All he has to do is write himself a check." The grin slid off his face. "How are we going to keep them all safe without keeping them a prisoner in that school?"

"This is the first threat we've faced in a few months, Jim," Blair said consolingly, lifting his head up. "And we don't really know for sure if it was a threat. It could have just been a reporter or someone trying to get a scoop. The last time the NID hit, they didn't waste time talking, they just tried to help themselves to a Sentinel or two."

That was true enough. "I still don't like it," Jim said. He turned in the bed so he could take Blair in his arms.

"I know, and I don't like it either," Blair agreed, "and the sooner we can get home the better." He sighed, leaning against Jim.

Once again, Jim was very glad Blair was here with him. He vowed to do his best to never have them be apart. "Is Louis staying here when we go home?"

Blair nodded against his chest. "He doesn't want to leave; I think he's afraid they'll spirit the kid away. Our attorney will be here tomorrow afternoon, and they can all duke it out. Chad'll bring a Sentinel/Guide pair with him in case they're needed."

Louis was in the same hotel but in another room, no doubt on the phone to his son, Laverne, or Chad. Chad Watson had been another amazing find. He'd been one of the Guides that had shown up at their door and within a week he'd signed on as their attorney. He was a shark, and Jim was glad to have him on their side.

Jim kissed Blair on the top of his head. "Time for bed?"

"Yeah," Blair said. "I'm exhausted." To prove his point, he yawned, cracking his jaw.

Kissing him again, wishing he had the energy for some lovemaking, Jim got up and pulled Blair up along with him. "Come on, Romeo, let's hit the shower and then go to bed."

"Hmm, Jim," Blair said with a sleepy smile, "the way you talk."

Jim laughed as he smacked Blair on the ass as they headed for the bathroom.
"Has anyone else been approached?" Jim asked everyone assembled in the cafeteria. Three days had passed, and no one had reported anything, but it never hurt to ask.

No one raised their hand, but Blair didn't feel relieved. It could be that they had only talked to Andrea because she had been around the longest. Not everyone who'd recently arrived would be noticeable right off the bat as being associated with the Sentinel School.

As Jim and Jack started in on security issues, Blair spread out his awareness to encompass everyone in the room, another new trick he'd just recently learned. He sensed a reasonable amount of fear, indignation, and protectiveness; nothing to make him unduly anxious. The last thing they needed was to set this town Sentinel against civilian. They needed to stay clear about who the enemy was, and it wasn't your average Joe on the street.

His eyes physically swept the room, astonished at the number of people the school had acquired. He wondered when the military would run out of possible Sentinels. So far, there had been a never-ending steady stream of them. And the more Sentinels they had, the stronger the call for Guides, which meant they were showing up regularly now.

The next largest group of people was the families. Many non-military Sentinels had come with a family in tow. They were still finding the Randys and Hilarys, the children abandoned by their families for one reason or another, but the number of families was growing.

Tom and Augusta could barely keep up with the demand for housing. As soon as they got a section done, either a private bungalow or a suite, or even the barracks they were using as a staging area for the new military arrivals, it filled immediately. It would be easier if the military could stay in barracks, but most of the military that showed up were officers, used to their own space, and besides, too many of them were unstable enough with their senses that privacy was essential to get through a day.

"What do they do in schools down in Malibu or New York?" Daniel asked, pulling Blair's attention from his thoughts. "They have high-profile children they have to keep safe." Daniel and Jack had spent the last couple of nights. They had a bungalow of their own that they slept in whenever they stayed over.

Simon nodded. "As soon as I can, I'll be setting up a meeting with the city's school superintendent to discuss security. I'm hoping they'll let us provide it."

"So there might be a sudden increase in groundskeepers in the school district?" Blair asked with a snicker, thinking of covert operatives undercover.

"The grounds will have never looked so good," Jim said back to him, one corner of his lips curling up in a lopsided grin.

The meeting was adjourned with general admonishments for everyone to keep their wits about them, and people started slowly leaving or talking in small clusters. Blair noticed that Hilary was sitting near Chad again. Neither she nor Randy had been chosen by a Guide. For Randy, Blair suspected it was because he was painfully shy, and tended to avoid anyone who wasn't in the original group of people he'd met and come to know.

Blair had seen several Guides giving Randy looks, but the young man hadn't returned them. Blair wasn't entirely sure what Randy would do if a Guide actually did approach him and ask him to be his or her Sentinel. Randy still acted as if someone was going to take all of this away from him if he did something wrong. And now that someone had been asking questions about him, Randy was jumping at ghosts.
Not that Blair could blame him. The kid had been abandoned by his entire family, and it still made Blair angry enough to get the spirit animals all riled up. He purposely took a few deep breaths.

On the other hand, Hilary was a puzzle. No Guides had gone near her, not even the younger ones. Several child Sentinels and Guides had paired off, becoming instant best friends, regardless of their ages. The sharing of blood was done as painlessly as possible, with pin pricks instead of scalpel cuts, and the bondings seemed to happen regardless.

When Chad had shown up, though, Hilary had started following him around. Blair had to snicker at the thought of the two of them: an eight-year-old precocious child with blonde ringlets, and a twenty-eight-year old cut-throat lawyer with laser sharp brown eyes and no-nonsense dark brown hair.

Chad had noticed Hilary; it would be hard not to, when every time he turned around he was tripping over her, but he rarely talked to her, and did his best, despite Hilary's efforts, to maintain his distance. Not that his avoidance did anything to dampen the pull Blair felt between them.

"Chad," Blair called, trying to get the man's attention.

Looking his way, Chad stood, walking over to him. "What's up?" he asked. "I've gotten the hospital to release Robert," he added.

"Good," Blair said with a smile. "Thanks."

Chad shrugged as if it had been nothing, and to him it probably was nothing, skill-wise, but Blair was grateful nonetheless.

"Can we talk for a minute, you, me, and Jim?"

"Of course," Chad said. "Someplace private?"

Blair glanced at Hilary who was stealthily inching closer. "Yes," he said, intending to take this conversation to one of the three soundproof conference rooms that had been completed. Even Jim couldn't hear what was going on in one of these rooms.

Because they also came in handy to help soothe an over stimulated Sentinel, the decorations were sparse. Simple wood furniture, sanded to a Sentinel-approved smoothness, and some peaceful art, mostly nature scenes, snow-topped mountains, fields of flowers, or flowing water. They were actually some of Blair's favorite places, and he often used them to meditate.

The three of them entered one of the rooms, and Blair had to close the door on Hilary. "Go play, Hilary," Blair suggested kindly but firmly. "Or better yet, go find Jack and tickle him," he prodded with a grin.

Hilary looked like she wanted to make a fuss at being left out, but then she grinned back and raced off.

Thank God Jack adored kids, Blair thought. He shut the door and locked it, then sat down, only to find Jim and Chad staring at him. The two of them must have spoken briefly to establish that Jim had no idea what this conversation was going to be about.

"Now that you've got us here," prompted Jim.

"It's about Hilary," Blair began, noting the alarm that brief sentence caused in Chad's eyes.
"I can't," Chad said, hands up as if to ward off anything else Blair might say.

Confused, brows drawn, Jim said, "Can't what?"

"Be Hilary's Guide," Blair explained. "You want to be, don't you? She sure wants to be your Sentinel."

"She's eight," Chad snapped out, as if Blair maybe hadn't noticed.

"So?" Blair said.

"I'm twenty-eight," Chad offered.

"So?" Blair said again. "There are age differences between a lot of the Guides here and their Sentinels. Don't misunderstand me, Chad, I'm not asking you to do anything you don't want to, here, but I can feel the pull between the two of you."

"She's eight," Chad reiterated loudly, his hands placed carefully on the table in front of him.

"Are you thinking about how Sentinels and Guides are often sexually involved?" Jim asked slowly.

"No!" Chad yelled at him, clearly appalled.

"Good," Jim said, relaxing. "So, what's the problem? Jason is a lot older than Latisha."

Chad let out an exasperated sigh. "Latisha has been around the block a few times, if you know what I mean. And Jason, he's... he's a good guy."

Blair studied Chad for a moment. "And you don't think you are?"

Chad made a few equivocal head movements, yes, no, maybe. "It's not that I'm a bad guy, per se, but I've been very sexually active, and my ethical stance on a lot of things is, well, let's just say it's flexible."

"And?" Blair pushed.

"Won't she see that stuff? From what I've heard, when a Sentinel and a Guide bond, you guys can read each other's minds, right? She's eight," Chad finished up as if that explained everything.

Blair sat back, chewing the inside of his cheek. "Huh," he said. He glanced at Jim. "What do you think?" Everything Chad said was true. Blair didn't think he and Jim could keep secrets from each other without both of them agreeing to respect the others' privacy.

Jim turned to Blair. "You saw some bad shit in my head," he mused. "How did that feel to you?"

Blair thought about it for a minute. It was true that he'd seen all of what Jim had done, the killings he'd done for the military, Jim's questionable ethics when it came to his dick, but somehow it had been so colored by Blair's love and understanding, that it had all been labeled Jim without the need to dissect anything. But would an eight-year-old be able to do that? Could a child have seen the things Jim had done and possibly been traumatized? "Maybe we need to talk to Hector about this," he finally said, "although he hasn't stopped any of the children from bonding. I know he said that many of the Sentinels in the villages he knew were bonded as children."

"To other children," Jim countered.

"From what we know," Blair said. "Maybe he remembers a time it happened." But then he wiped a
hand in the air as if to negate that. "No, I think we need to trust the process. Everything we've seen about bondings has been about trust and healing and love. I don't believe it could hurt someone. So," he continued to Chad, "I think the real question here is do you want her as your Sentinel? You're busy here, I know that, and she will demand a lot of your time."

"I could talk to her and tell her that she has to look elsewhere," Jim suggested. "She won't like it, but she'll do it eventually, if we tell her you're not interested."

"I'm sure she'll find someone else to choose her," Blair said blithely, both enjoying and feeling sorry for Chad, as his eyes narrowed and his face darkened at the thought of Hilary being chosen by someone else.

Jim shot a look at Blair then glanced at Chad. He obviously saw the same thing Blair had seen, probably even more clearly with his senses, and he bit back a grin. "It's up to you, Chad."

"Fuck," Chad said vehemently. "An eight-year-old?"

"Destiny likes to fuck with people, sometimes," Blair said philosophically. "Trust me, she can be a real bitch."

"You're enjoying this, aren't you?" Chad asked Blair darkly. He turned suspiciously to Jim, and his eyes narrowed even more at the innocent look he found there. He let out a loud dramatic sigh. "I need to think about it."

"Fair enough," Blair said. Earnestly, he leaned forward, and said, "I know we're giving you some shit here, but we really will abide by your decision, and make it as painless for you as we can. Please don't feel pressured into this at all if you're not truly feeling called to bond with her."

Chad rolled his eyes, sort of sneered at them both, and stalked out of the room.

Blair grinned at Jim as the door shut behind Chad. "He's so hosed."

"I think they'd make a great pair, actually," Jim said. "He's as tough-minded as Hilary, and she'll need someone like that. Although," Jim added, his face scrunching up, "what happens if they do bond, and somehow she doesn't manage to get a mindful of Chad's dubious moral choices and sexual adventures, what happens when she hits puberty, and wants to explore her own sexuality, and decides Chad's just the guy for that? No way in hell am I allowing underage sex here, bondings or no bondings," he said firmly.

Blair put his hand on Jim's arm. "Jim, nobody will condone that. Not to sound like a broken record, but I think we need to trust the bondings. Trust that they'll know each other inside and out, and that she would respect his boundaries."

"And how do we know what his boundaries are? He's the one who just said that his moral code is flexible."

"Don't you think we have enough troubles for the day without borrowing trouble eight years down the line?" Blair counseled. "I'm sure we're going to come across every odd situation we can with the Sentinels and Guides under our care, and we'll deal with them as they come up. Mating isn't an imperative. Hector and Nathan haven't had any trouble; it certainly hasn't been an issue with Jason and Latisha. Chad may come to look at Hilary as a daughter or a little sister. And yes, assuming they do bond, they could possibly fall in love. When she's eighteen, he'll still be only thirty-eight."

"Twenty years is a still a big age difference, especially between someone eighteen and thirty-eight," Jim pointed out.
"Yes, for two normal people," Blair argued. "Not for two people who will know each other better than anyone out there can know someone. They'll **know** each other. Fears, worries, joys, sad�nesses, odd quirks, everything. He won't be a dirty old man trying to get into some young girl's pants."

"I know," Jim said, backing off. "It's hard to remember that everything that goes on between Sentinels and their bonded Guides can't be looked at the same way as regular people. I just don't want anything bad to happen to Hilary because she bonds with an older man. If nothing else, odds are he'd die significantly before her."

"Yeah, and that would suck, but if their pull towards each other is as strong as I think it is, it won't factor into their decision making," Blair said. Not that it would for Hilary anyway, he thought to himself; she was too young to be thinking about death like that. She just knew what she wanted.

Jim pursed his lips and then nodded. "God knows I fought it as hard as I could, and look where it got me." He grinned at Blair.

Blair wrinkled his nose at Jim. "You were a total asshole."

"I was," Jim said agreeably.

Shifting until he was sitting on the table directly in front of Jim, Blair put his hands on Jim's shoulders. "You've made up for it, though," Blair said fairly. He could feel Jim's love for him in his mind and heart, and it warmed him through and through.

Jim scooped him off the table onto his lap. "I don't know," he said suggestively. "I might still have some making up to do."

"Then you better get at it," Blair said sternly. Then he laughed, "But not in here. Every Sentinel who comes in here will know what happened for weeks."

"Sentinels," Jim said scathingly. "No privacy at all."

Hugging Jim tightly, laughing merrily, Blair stood and encouraged Jim to stand as well. "Come on, you've got some sucking up to do. Years of being an asshole to make up for."

Jim ran his fingers through Blair's hair, closing his hand into a fist, holding tight. "Seems to me, I remember some sour milk you never apologized for."

"How remiss of me," Blair said sadly. "I say we leave this room and run for our bungalow before anyone sees us and asks for anything, or smells the fact that we're totally hot for each other. Once we get there, we can have make-up sex."

"I like that plan," Jim said, cupping Blair's ass, "but I think everyone already knows that we're totally hot for each other."

"Then let's just run to keep anyone from bothering us. Ready?"

Jim grinned, nodding, moving to stand right behind Blair. "Go!"

Together they got the door open and dashed out, running down the hall, laughing like loons.

As they neared their bungalow, Blair felt someone briefly touch his mind. He glanced around to see if anyone was looking for them, but didn't see anybody. He felt for the touch in return, but it was gone. He hadn't sensed anything bad about it and dismissed it as one of those weird things that happens when you live in a Sentinel School surrounded by mystery.
Jim got to the door before him, but Blair's momentum had them stumbling inside. In seconds they were tumbling down onto the bed and into each others' arms.

The next morning, Jack decided to go into town to see if he could find whoever it was who had been asking questions. To that end, he took Amelia, Andrea, and Daniel with him. Seeing as it was Saturday, the town of Hillsboro was hopping. While they waited to be seated in the best breakfast joint in town, according to Delmar--and Jack took everything Delmar said seriously--Jack bought a newspaper.

"You see him anywhere?" Daniel asked Andrea.

Andrea looked around the restaurant and out the window. "No," she said.

Not that Jack had actually expected the guy to be having breakfast at the same place they were, although that would have been nice. After breakfast, they’d take a walk through town, maybe letting Andrea appear as if she were on her own. She wouldn't be, of course; Jack would make sure of that.

Jack had begun to flip through the local newspaper when their name was called. After getting seated, Andrea next to Jack, and Amelia next to Daniel, the girls across from each other, Jack closed the newspaper up and settled it next to him.

In a few minutes, their orders taken, Daniel happily drinking his first cup of coffee of the day, Jack sat back, taking a good look at the citizens of Hillsboro.

No one was giving them a second glance. Jack knew the school was a hot topic, but no one seemed to be looking at them and identifying them as related to the Sentinel School.

"Hey, Andrea," a young girl said as she walked by the table with her parents.

"Oh, hi, Nadine," Andrea said back with a smile.

"These your dads?" Nadine asked.

"Nadine," her mother said in a hiss, an apologetic smile on her face as she shot a quick look at Jack and Daniel.

"Nope," Jack said with a smile, seeing no censure on her face, just embarrassment at the thought of her daughter assuming they might be gay. "But I'd be proud to be."

"He's our Uncle Jack," Amelia said with one of her cherubic smiles.

"I'm Daniel," Daniel introduced himself.

"He's our dad," Andrea lied with amazing skill.

"Your dad's hot," Nadine admitted, with an admiring look at Daniel.

Daniel choked on his coffee, while Nadine's mom hissed at her again in despair, and then pushed her past the table. "Nice to meet you," the mom threw over her shoulder as she did her best to get her daughter out of talking range.

Jack started to snicker as Daniel threw a look at Andrea. "Your dad?" he asked.

"Hey," Andrea protested, "I thought it would be cool to have a hot dad."

"Eww," Andrea said with a grimace, presumably at the thought of chopped liver. Then, ever practical, she added, "You told her you weren't our dad. So now," she said in satisfaction, "I have a hot dad and a hot uncle."

"Okay, then," Jack said, mollified. "So, dad," he directed to Daniel, "how's the coffee."

"She a friend?" Daniel asked, ignoring Jack.

"Yeah, I like her," Andrea said. "She's funny."

Their food arrived, and they all dug in, the table growing quiet with their concentration on breakfast. The food was pretty good, Jack had to admit. Not the best he'd had, but then again, it wasn't like he could just go through the gate to the Land of Light and ask Tupelo to whip him up some of those amazing eggs that half-rooster, half-platypus thing laid.

"I wish we were eating one of Tupelo's breakfasts," Daniel said across the table to Jack.

"I was just thinking that," Jack enthused.

"Who's Tupelo?" Andrea asked.

"A good friend who lives far away," Daniel said. "He's a great cook."

Satisfied, Andrea went back to her pancakes.

Jack took another look around, and that was when he noticed the man sitting by himself across the restaurant, turning the page in his newspaper, methodically folding it so it wasn't unwieldy, with a skill that spoke of years of eating breakfast and reading a paper. "Crap," Jack said, grabbing for his paper.

Daniel eyed him with concern. "What?"

Rather than answering, Jack folded back the newspaper to reveal the quarter page ad that he'd seen across the room. "Look." He showed it to Daniel.

Amelia read it out loud. "Have you seen this boy?" She let out a gasp. "It's Randy."

"It's Randy," Daniel agreed, his voice concerned, taking the newspaper for a closer look.

It wasn't a great picture of him, and probably someone who didn't see him regularly might not have identified him by the grainy photo. Under the picture was a telephone number, begging anyone to call with information.

"Who'd be looking for him?" Daniel asked. "His family maybe?"

Andrea shook her head. "Not his family," she said stonily. "They kicked him out of the house when he was fourteen and then they moved without telling him."

Jack had heard the story, and it totally pissed him off. Randy was one of the nicest kids he'd ever met; he couldn't imagine doing something so hurtful to him.

"We're his family now," Amelia said staunchly.

"Yes, we are," Daniel said, even as he continued to look at the ad. "Is it possible they've had a
change of heart?"

"Do we care?" Jack asked hotly.

"They are his family," Daniel said thoughtfully.

Jack thought of Daniel's grandfather; how the old fart had left his very alive grandson, Daniel, to the mercy of the foster care system while he gallivanted around the world digging up stuff about dead people. Daniel, because he was that kind of guy, forgave him, even though the bastard had then willingly abandoned Daniel again when he'd found his freaking giants. "Not everyone looks at family the way you do," Jack said as kindly as he could.

Taking the newspaper back, Jack put it by his side. "I'll call on a secure line. See if I can figure out what's behind this." It seemed an unlikely NID scheme. Some of their minions had already seen Randy and knew he was at the school. They wouldn't need to be running an ad to find him.

"How would someone know to run an ad here?" Daniel asked.

"The guy who owned the garage where Randy used to live knows where Randy is," Andrea said, "so it wouldn't be him. They write to each other sometimes. He liked Randy just fine," she added with a huff, decrying Randy's real family.

"Anyone with a brain in their head likes Randy just fine," Jack said. He was glad someone else besides them cared about Randy. It seemed a crime that out of everyone in the world who should care for him, there was only a too short list. "Think he might know who's looking for Randy?"

"That might be a good place to start," Daniel acknowledged. "If someone knew Randy had been at the garage, that's really the only place they could go to get reliable information."

"What if it's like Lemony Snickets, A Series of Unfortunate Events?" Andrea asked nervously.

Jack raised his eyebrows. "The whozey what?"

Andrea giggled. "It's this movie where these three kids are orphans, and they get sent to stay with Count Olaf who is their third cousin four times removed or their fourth cousin three times removed." To Jack, she added, "That's from the movie, I'm not mixed up."

"I am," Jack complained.

With another giggle, Andrea continued, "Anyway, all he wants is to figure out how to get their money."

Jack tickled Andrea's side. "Randy strike it rich all of a sudden?"

She giggled, shaking her head.

"He found a dollar yesterday," Amelia said helpfully from across the table.

"Well, then," Jack said. "If anyone comes to the door claiming to be Randy's ninth cousin sixteen times removed, we'll tell them to get lost."

Reassured, Andrea and Amelia finished their breakfast, while Daniel and Jack sent each other troubled looks across the table.

"You left a message?" Blair asked tersely late that morning after Jack and Daniel met with them in
one of the conference rooms. He was unhappy that one of the children he was responsible for was being singled out for some purpose.

Jack nodded. "Gave him my cell phone number. It's secured. They won't be able to get any information out of it. Even the GPS chip is blocked."

"Did you get the name of the garage Randy worked at?" Daniel inquired.

Jim held up the piece of paper. "I called earlier and left a message there as well. I gave them my cell phone number which is not secured, and I'm assuming my GPS chip works just fine," he added crisply. "Is that going to be a problem?"

"Who the hell knows?" Simon said irritably. "We don't have any idea who's looking for Randy or why. We don't even know for sure if they really want Randy, or if he's a smokescreen to get us to reveal something, even if we have no idea what they might be looking for."

Blair felt something touch his mind again. Glancing around, he searched for the source.

"You all right?" Jim asked, touching his arm.

Blair almost told him but, again, he sensed nothing troubling, just the same curiosity. "Have any of you picked up on one of our Sentinels or Guides being able to..." He tried to figure out how to describe it. It wasn't like they were listening in. They couldn't, not with the soundproofing. Although maybe it was a Sentinel trying to find a way around that. That seemed like such a sensible explanation, Blair shrugged. "Never mind."

"You sure?" Jim asked.

"Do you think a Sentinel could get in someone's head and listen to their thoughts as a way to get around a soundproofed room?" Blair blurted out. It didn't sound quite as sensible out loud.

Four sets of blank looks stared at him.

"Stupid?" Blair asked. Now that he'd said it, it really didn't make much sense. It's not like Sentinels could hear thoughts in your head, except the Sentinel you were bonded with.

"You mean hear thoughts in your head?" Jim asked, unknowingly echoing Blair's thoughts, one head cocked to the side as if he was studying some heretofore undiscovered creature.

"Some people might think that someone who could do the things you do would be impossible," Blair reproached.

"What even made you ask that?" Daniel queried.

Whatever it was that had touched his mind was gone, and Blair could barely remember the sensation. "Just someone dancing on my grave, I guess," he said lamely.

Jim shot him a look that said they weren't done with the conversation, but then Simon said, "Louis called. He's on his way home with Robert. The hospital gave him crap about it up until he got Robert in the car and slammed the door in their faces."

"Thank God for Chad," Blair said in relief. There was a knock on the door.

Daniel got up and opened it and found Randy on the other side. "Hey, Randy, what's up?"

For a second, Blair wondered if it had been Randy touching his mind. He shook his head as fast as
he'd thought it. Randy would never do something like that. Maybe a Sentinel who wanted a Guide? Wanted Blair as a Guide? Didn't know any better and was looking for a Guide through mental touches? It didn't sound any crazier than some metaphysical calling going out when five or more Sentinels were gathered in one place.

"Hilary's crying, and she won't stop," Randy informed them, looking miserable about it. "Ya'll need to come."

"What happened?" Blair said, standing up and moving toward the door.

"I don't know," Randy said, wringing his hands. "We were watching TV, and something made her cry."

"What was on TV?" Simon asked.

"Dumbo," Randy said, sounding embarrassed that he'd been watching it along with the younger kids. "It was the part where Dumbo's mom's in jail, and Dumbo goes to visit her. You know, where she swings him in her trunk?"

"Man, that part always makes me cry," Blair said understandingly.

"Dumbo's mom was in jail?" Jack asked. "The elephant with the big ears? The flying one? Why was his mom in jail? Did she go out boozing or something?"

Daniel shrugged. "Sorry, I never watched it."

Jack sent him a pitying look. "You never watched Dumbo?"

Daniel screwed his face up at Jack. "You're the one who thinks his mom is going boozing in a Disney film. I hardly think you're in a position to cast stones."

"His mom," Simon said sternly, "spanked a kid who made fun of her son. The carnival owners locked her in a train car with signs saying 'Mad Elephant' all over it."


"I thought you saw the movie?" Daniel prodded unkindly.

"I did," Jack protested, "but I don't remember that part. I mostly remember the crows, and that pain-in-the-ass mouse that kept egging Dumbo on."

Daniel patted him on the shoulder. "If it was sad enough to make Blair cry, Jack, no doubt you repressed the memory."

"Blair, hell," Jack said contrarily, "Hilary's way tougher than Blair. If it made her cry, I definitely don't want to remember it."

Blair snickered as he led the way to where Hilary was. She was curled in a chair, crying inconsolably. "Hey, Hilary," Blair said, sneaking into the chair and resettling her on his lap. "What's wrong?"

She sobbed into his chest, soaking his shirt.

Blair looked up at Jim, asking him silently if he had any ideas.

Jim shook his head. He sat on the arm of the chair and stroked Hilary's blond curls. "Did the movie
make you sad?"

She nodded quickly and her crying grew even louder.

"Was it about Dumbo's mom?" Blair guessed.

There were footsteps trotting hurriedly their way and Blair looked up to find Chad entering the room. He frowned when he saw the way Hilary was crying. Randy was following him into the room so Blair guessed he must have been the one to go get Chad. Randy may be shy and still a little gun-shy, Blair thought to himself, but he was as smart as they came.

"Did you feel sad for Dumbo?" Blair tried again, hoping to narrow things down.

"May I?" Chad asked, looking down at them.

Blair didn't need to answer as Hilary frantically looked up when she heard Chad's voice and moved as fast as a monkey to get in Chad's arms, narrowly missing launching herself from Blair's family jewels.

"She ever done this before?" Chad asked them as he held her.

Blair, Jim and Simon all shook their heads. "Never," Jim said.

"Baby doll," Chad said. "I need to ask you a question. Can you stop crying for a moment?"

She shook her head, but her eyes were on Chad.

"Don't do this just because she's crying," Blair said seriously.

"I'm not," Chad assured him. "I'd already made up my mind. I need to do this now; there's something wrong. I could feel it across the school. I was already on my way here when Randy found me."

"What do you mean?" Jim asked tersely, all business. "What's wrong?"

"Does someone have a knife?" Chad asked. Then, refocusing on Hilary, he said, "Will you let me be your Guide?"

To Blair, it sounded as if two questions were being asked, not just being a Guide to her Sentinel, but also if he could help her with whatever was tearing her apart.

She nodded vehemently, holding Chad so tightly, it was a wonder he wasn't wincing.

Jason magically appeared with one of his scalpels. He looked excited at the thought of a bonding. No doubt word was going out and the room would be packed shortly. No one, if they could help it, ever missed a bonding.

"Would you do the honors?" Chad asked Blair.

"Of course," Blair said, standing up. "Hold out your hand."

Chad held his out at the same time as Hilary's much smaller hand shot out as well.

Blair bit back a smile. She might be falling to pieces but a part of her was completely present to what was going on.
He cut into the meat of Chad's palm, underneath his thumb. Then, very carefully, Blair nicked the same area on Hilary's hand. "Repeat after me," he said to Chad.

"I know what to say," Chad said firmly. To Hilary he said, "I pledge my life to thee, your enemy is my enemy, your friend, my friend." His voice was clear and true, and Blair saw nothing but affection and concern in Chad's eyes as he watched Hilary. "Can you say it back to me?" Chad asked Hilary softly.

Still sobbing, she nodded.

Chad coached her. "I pledge my life to thee."

"I…I…p…pled," she hiccuped, "edge m…my lif…ife to thee," she finished between gulping sobs.

Blair could sense a crowd gathering, and more and more spirit animals were popping in as well.

"Good girl," Chad praised. "Next line?"

She nodded, her free fingers wrapped around his tie. "Wha… what… i…is…i…it ag…again?"

"Your enemy is my enemy," Chad coached.

"Your en…e…enemy i…is…my…en…e…my," she sobbed, the misery on her face fighting for dominance over her determination.

Blair loved her so much right then. "You're doing great, Hilary," he said soothingly. "One more line, okay?"

"O…kay," she said shakily.

"Your friend is my friend," Blair prompted her.

"Your," another wrenching hiccup shook her body, "friend i…is…my fri..end."

A light burst from their clasped hands surrounding the two of them; then, like golden fireworks, sparkled out to cover the room, settling on everyone present, people and spirit animals alike. Hilary's bear and Chad's alligator, a spirit animal that generally stayed out of sight because he tended to startle people, joined in another blinding flash of light.

As always, it warmed Blair's heart and soul and he put his hand out, trusting that Jim would be there, needing to connect just as much with Blair as Blair did with him. He smiled when Jim's hand slipped into his, and Blair had to close his eyes to keep his own tears from falling. Instead, he sent that overflowing love to Jim through their bond, relishing the love that came back to him.

There was always a period of silence after a bonding, partly out of respect for the mystery that had just occurred, and also to give the newly bonded pair a moment to discover each other.

When Blair opened his eyes, he took one look at Chad's face and, after an apprehensive glance at Jim, started quietly shooing people out of the room. People went agreeably enough, with just a few worried looks back at the newly bonded pair. Chad tended to make people nervous as well, but Hilary was a favorite at the school.

Chad sat down, Hilary now firmly in his lap, still crying her heart out.

"Can you share what's wrong with her?" Blair asked softly. That was when he got a closer look at
Chad's thunderously angry face. "Chad," Blair said. "What's wrong?"

Chad kissed Hilary on the top of her head and took a deep breath. "She was upset at Dumbo's mom, because she hit a kid."

Blair was relatively certain, all of a sudden, that he didn't want to hear the rest of this. He and Jim had never found out what kind of early childhood Hilary had had. They only knew that the doctor in charge of her care had been quite definite that she was better off without her family.

It looked like it was taking everything Chad had to stay in control. "You know that line, your enemy is my enemy?" he finally asked.

Blair nodded.

"Her family?" Chad asked, his voice quietly furious. "They're my enemy now. They better hope they never run into me."

Blair didn't doubt him for a second. "Had she forgotten? Why now? Did the movie trigger her memories?"

Chad nodded yes. "When's Louis back?"

"Later today," Blair said. "I'll notify him that he'll have some work cut out for him."

Nodding one more time, Chad stood, holding Hilary in his arms. "I'm going to take her into one of the soundproofed rooms, if that's all right?"

"You don't need to ask," Simon said. "Should we get her a drink?"

A small smile curled up one side of Chad's mouth. "And a cookie," he said, shaking his head in admiration at whatever Hilary was silently communicating to him. "She'll be all right," Chad said firmly. "She's resilient."

"So are you," Blair said.

"So am I," Chad agreed.

Blair touched his arm. "Any of that stuff you were concerned about happen?"

Chad shook his head. "No. She wasn't interested. And even though she's falling apart, she totally understood that there were some places she shouldn't go. Yet," he added with a wry smile. "I have no doubt she'll be rooting around in there someday." Some of that smile was directed to Blair. "You were right. The bonding takes care of its own."

Blair looked at the two of them, saw the aura that surrounded them. "Individually you were already people to be reckoned with," Blair said, tapping into his own power to make this prediction. "Together, you'll be unbeatable, and you will right some serious wrongs. Those who would do harm to the world better watch out."

"First I need to get her to stop crying," Chad said drolly. "Then we'll tackle the world." He let out a snicker then kissed Hilary again. "Come on," he said, unnecessarily, as she was still in his arms. "Let's be alone, okay?"

She nodded, her tears still coming, and her small body still shaking with the aftermath of crying, but she was finally starting to calm down. The two of them walked off.
"Fuck," Jack said. He and Daniel had been the only two to stay, besides Jim, Blair, and Simon.

"No kidding," Simon said sadly.

"The world sucks sometimes," Blair commented as he helped himself to a hug from Jim.

"I told you Dumbo's mom was boozing it up," Jack muttered to Daniel.

Daniel smacked him on the arm. "This isn't funny," he scolded.

"I know," Jack scowled in return. To Jim and Blair, he asked, "Do we know what happened?"

"No, but I could probably find out," Blair said with a wince, not looking forward to making a phone call to that doctor in West Virginia.

"Chad knows what happened," Jim reminded them all. "And while she's torn up, and will no doubt need some therapy, she knows she's got someone pretty tough in her corner now who's going to protect her. If we need to know what happened, Chad or Louis will tell us. Otherwise, we treat her the way we've always treated her."

Blair gave him a hug of gratitude. "Good advice." With a smirk, he added, "And someone better get those cookies to Hilary."

"I'll get them," Daniel said. "Then we need to pack. We have to head back this afternoon."

"We hate to leave," Jack said apologetically, "but we have a mission to someplace called Kelowna. We already had to put them off once, and the powers that be aren't happy campers. Hammond called today and said we're on for tomorrow."

"You'll call if you get a response from that phone call?" Simon asked.

"You betcha," Jack said. "And keep us posted on everything else, too," he added with a meaningful look in the direction Chad and Hilary had walked off in. "I can find out where her family is, you know."

"Let's avoid that for the time being," Jim advised. "I'd just as soon not have Chad serving several consecutive life sentences for cold-blooded murder."

"Oh, I wouldn't give him the address," Jack said menacingly.

Daniel let out a dramatic sigh. "Okay, Zorro, let's go get the cookies." To the other three, he said, "We'll say goodbye before we leave."

"Well, that took the glow right off that bonding," Simon complained after Jack and Daniel left.

"I think the thing to focus on," Blair said, "is that they are bonded, and somehow she knew she needed him, and clearly, he knew she needed him, too, and together, they'll get through it. Nothing like having an alligator to watch your back," he added with a small smirk.

Jim let out a silent chuckle, but his smile was fairly wan.

"I'm concerned that it was Hilary and Randy that the NID came in contact with when they showed up the last time, and now it's like bad things are happening to both of them," Simon mentioned, his brow furrowed.

"To be honest," Blair said self-reproachfully, "I forgot all about what that doctor had said. She always seemed so happy and settled here; I forgot that her early childhood sucked. We probably should have had her in therapy from the moment she got here, once we had Louis on board."

"I forgot, too," Jim said, running a hand down his face, looking tired. "I'm more worried, though, now that Hilary has Chad, about what's going on with Randy. I want to know who's looking for him and why."

Blair sighed. "No kidding."

Jim tugged on his hand. "Nothing we can do until either Jack or I get a call back."

"I hate this," Blair complained.

"Maybe tomorrow we'll have more answers," Jim said sensibly.

"Why are you so calm?" Blair asked. "Usually when things are like this, you're the one who's nuts. I'm usually the calm one."

Jim shrugged. "I don't know. I think things will work out."

"Are you getting some sort of psychic sense about the whole thing?" Blair asked curiously.

"I don't think so," Jim said slowly. "I just trust that Chad is going to take care of Hilary, and I trust us that we can take care of Randy. Whatever happens, we'll deal."

"I can hardly argue with that," Blair said with a small grin. "What were we doing before Jack and Daniel interrupted us?"

"You were bothering me in my office," Simon chided them.

"Right," Blair said, smirking. "Guess we could get back to that," he suggested to Jim.

"I'll pass," Simon said quickly. "I need to check on Daryl, get his dates for spring break. Hopefully things will be calm enough around here for him to still visit."

"That's not for a few weeks," Blair said. "Hopefully we'll have figured out who's been looking for Randy long before then." To Jim, he said, "What's on our agenda?"

"We should probably make rounds," Jim said. "There are bound to be questions about the bonding. We can help stop any rumors before they get started. I really don't want people giving Hilary looks when she's out and about again."

"Good idea," Blair agreed. To Simon, he added, "You're off the hook for the time being. Don't get too used to it, though, I'm sure we'll be back bothering you in no time."

"Then I better get some work done while I can," Simon said in mock alarm. "See you two, later." With that he strode off.

"Alone at last," Jim said, pulling Blair close. He lowered his head and took his time exploring Blair's mouth.

When Jim pulled back, Blair let out a happy sigh this time. "Thanks." He rested his head against Jim's chest. Whatever was facing them in the days ahead, as long as he had Jim, he'd be fine.
As Jack and Daniel walked back to their bungalow to pack, they passed Randy, who was sitting against a tree, looking very glum. "What's wrong?" Jack asked, helping himself to a spot of ground next to his favorite kid. He ignored the creaking in his knees as he sat down.

Daniel gestured toward the bungalow. "You guys visit; I'll go pack."

Jack nodded in agreement, grateful for Daniel's tact, not to mention his packing skills. "What's up?" he asked again.

Randy shrugged.

"And?" Jack prompted.

Randy mumbled something so softly Jack missed it entirely. "Run that by me again," he pleaded, hoping Randy would.

"I want a Guide," Randy said, his voice shaky. He finished it off with a sniff and wiped his nose vigorously with his index finger. "Now Hilary has one, and…" He shrugged again.

"And you don't," Jack said.

Randy nodded. "No one's even asked me," he said, his lower lip trembling.

Jack shifted until he could get his arm around Randy's shoulder. He totally got the waiting thing. It sucked. While it was a different sort of thing, waiting for Daniel to get around to asking him, even if Jack hadn't had any idea that Daniel could ask him, sucked the big one. Jack had hated every second of it. He tried to figure out what he could say to the young man.

"If I was a Guide, I'd totally choose you," he threw out. "And if it worked that way, me and Daniel would choose you together."

A sad sort of smile touched Randy's lips. "Thanks," he mumbled.

"Listen," Jack said, as inspiration struck. "Maybe no one's asking you because they can sense that you have a Guide already and they just haven't shown up. It sort of seems like the Guides know that kind of stuff, you know?"

Randy was watching him seriously, listening intently. "You think?"

"Sure," Jack assured him. He'd have to talk to Blair about that, see if he could be right. He really didn't want to be blowing smoke up the kid's ass. "I bet your Guide shows up any day."

"Suppose I don't like them?" Randy asked, still barely mumbling, but fortunately, loud enough for Jack to hear this time.

"Then it wouldn't be your Guide," Jack said matter-of-factly. "If it's your real Guide, you will like them."

"What if they don't like me?" came the shaky voice, as Randy voiced a concern that was probably closer to the heart of the matter.

"Who wouldn't like you?" Jack protested loudly. "You are a terrific kid. I wish you were my son," he blurted out.

Randy's eyes opened wide. "Really?" he asked in astonishment.
"Yeah," Jack said. "I do."

"Wow," Randy said. He buried his head on Jack's shoulder.

Randy's family, Jack thought to himself darkly, along with Hilary's family, needed to meet Teal'c in a dark alley somewhere. "You ever need to talk," Jack said, "you call me. I can't always answer my phone, but I'll get back to you as soon as I can, I promise. And trust me, whoever your Guide is, they'll be damn lucky to get you as their Sentinel."

Randy sniffed again. "Do you have to go?" he asked pitifully.

"I do," Jack said sympathetically. "I'm sorry. You know," taking a stab in the dark about something else that might be bothering Randy, "just because Hilary has a Guide now, doesn't mean she won't still want to hang out with you."

Sitting up, Randy wiped his eyes. "You think she'll still want to be friends?"

Despite the difference in their ages, Hilary and Randy had been thick as thieves ever since they'd met. "I'm sure of it," Jack assured him. "She needs a little time now with Chad, but once they work things out, I'll bet the first person she comes looking for is you." He glanced up to see Daniel holding out his arm and looking pointedly at his watch. "Hey, buddy, I gotta go. Hang in there, okay?" To Daniel he said, "Got a piece of paper that I can write my number down on for Randy?"

Daniel handed over a card with all of Jack's particulars on it.

Jack frowned. "Since when do I have cards?"

"Since we started being involved with the school," Daniel informed him.

"Sweet," Jack said, standing up, pulling Randy along with him. "Better?" he asked the young man, hoping he was, wishing he had more time to spend with him.

Randy nodded. "Yeah, thanks." He sniffed again. "When will you be back?"

"I'm not sure," Jack said. "But I'll call you when I can." He hoped like hell this mission was a short one. "And if you need to talk when I'm not around, go to Blair. He loves you to pieces, too, you know."

Reddening a little, Randy nodded. "Yeah, I know."

Jack gave him a quick hug. "You're a good kid, don't you ever forget that."

"Okay," Randy said, sounding somewhat less than convinced.

Jack hoped his Guide showed up soon. With one last pat on Randy's arm, he and Daniel headed for Simon's office to say their goodbyes.

Blair was woken up in the middle of the night, sure that someone was in the room with them. "Who's there?" he demanded, sitting up.

Jim woke up immediately. "What's wrong?" he asked sharply.

"Is there someone here in the room?" Blair asked quickly.

There were a few seconds of silence, no doubt while Jim extended his senses not only in the room,
but the whole bungalow and the area outside. "No. Nothing."

Blair sagged back down on bed. "Jeez, it must have been a dream. It was really weird. I could have sworn something was in the room with us. Something creepy."

Jim turned the light on and did a visual sweep, probably more to calm Blair down than because he might have missed something. "Nothing's here, Chief." With a teasing grin, he added, "Want me to check under the bed?"

Blair nodded, adding, "Then I want you to check under the covers."

Obviously deciding that under the bed could wait, Jim went for under the covers first.

**Stargate Command**

"Well, sir," Sam said to Hammond, early Monday morning, "as you know from our initial reports, Kelowna is one of three major countries on 4C3. What we've learned since our initial contact is that they appear to be at a similar stage of development to that of the United States in the 1940's. Geopolitically, there is obvious mounting tension between the nations."

"Sort of like a cold war, sir," Jack threw in.

Sam continued, "The Kelownans discovered their Stargate approximately 15 years ago, unearthing it along with a number of Goa'uld artifacts in what appears to be an ancient temple."

"Their knowledge of the Gate is still limited," Teal'c commented.

"But their interest is strong," Sam argued. "When we told them what we could offer, they were eager to share any technologies they were developing that could potentially be offered in exchange."

Hammond nodded. "What time will your team leave?" he asked Jack.

With a scowl, Jack tapped his watch, saying, "0400. That gets us there just in time for breakfast."

"Sounds like you have a go for 0400," Hammond said.

That worked for Jack. As much as it would suck when his alarm went off at 0200, an early mission meant an early return, and he and Daniel had some catching up to do. Between the Sentinel School and their respective jobs at the SGC, it had been way too long since he and Daniel had spent any quality alone time together, and Jack was more than ready to make up for lost time.

**The Sentinel School**

"Something's watching us," Blair said to Jim Monday night, after they'd made love, and were just lying in bed holding each other.

"Here?" Jim asked, incredulous, that someone would invade their privacy that way. He focused his senses listening for someone outside, the whir of a camera shutter, the hum of a recording device.

"No," Blair said, running a hand up and down Jim's chest as if to calm his senses down. "I can't explain it, but I've been feeling it more and more."

Jim sat up, giving Blair a stern look. "More and more? You've felt this before?" At Blair's sheepish
nod, Jim, growing annoyed, demanded, "Why is this the first time I'm hearing about this?"

The stroking continued but Jim didn't feel like being calmed down, not if Blair was feeling something 'more and more'. He scowled.

Blair nodded, "You're right, I should have told you. I would have told you, but I didn't know how to describe it. At first it seemed curious; I thought it was a Sentinel or a Guide. Maybe a spirit animal."

Jim nodded. "Go on."

Screwing his lips side to side, Blair seemed to give the whole thing some thought. "It started feeling a little pushy in the conference room the other day."

"Pushy?" Jim repeated, eyebrows up. Pushy he could handle. He'd push whatever it was right back to wherever the hell it came from.

"Yeah, like trying to get into my head," Blair said. "Not in a bad way, it never hurt, but sort of…" He stopped, clearly stuck on a word.

"Pushy," Jim offered.

Blair grinned at him. "Yeah, pushy."

Jim wanted to lean forward and kiss that grin but he was determined not to get sidetracked. "Then?" he prompted.

"That's about it. It really wasn't anything that alarmed me, Jim," he added earnestly, "or I would have told you. With all the mystical shit we have going on here, having someone try to poke into my head a couple times a day didn't even ping on my radar, you know?"

"But something's pinging now?" Jim said, his annoyance shifting to vigilance as he began to think that maybe this wasn't as harmless as Blair thought it was.

Nodding, Blair said, "Yeah, something's pinging now. Whatever it is, I'm starting to get a sense that it's a little too curious about us, you and me," he finished with a wince, as if he knew how thrilled Jim would feel about that.

Jim's hands fisted and his jaw locked at just the thought of someone or something trying to come between them. "And it's watching us now? Can you tell who it is? What it is? Is it another Sentinel like John or a Guide like Wednesday?"

Blair made a face. "Let us not forget that it is your form that Wednesday is warm for." When Jim opened his mouth to tell Blair how amazingly insane he was to be the tiniest bit jealous, Blair patted his chest. "I know. I know it's stupid to be jealous. It's a fact of life, though, that we're the grand poobahs, and all the unbonded Guides want you--"

"And all the unbonded Sentinels want you," Jim growled out, leaning down to clamp his teeth around Blair's Adam's apple as if marking his claim.

"Hey, hey," Blair said laughing. "Back off, Tarzan." Although, he mostly just shifted under Jim so they could kiss.

Jim enjoyed himself for a minute, and then pulled back. So much for not getting distracted, he scolded himself. Refocusing, he asked, "Can you tell who it is? Where it is?" That was maybe the
"No," Blair said, a flash of frustration crossing his face. "Every time I try to push back it's gone. Whatever it is, it's strong," Blair cautioned. "At least as strong as me."

"I don't like the sound of that," Jim said unhappily. Blair was their ace in the hole when it came to all the mumbo-jumbo stuff, and if Blair couldn't deal with this threat, Jim wasn't sure how the hell he was supposed to. Other than finding the source and punching the hell out of it. "So, what do we do?"

"I don't know. I need to meditate. See if I can get centered enough to learn more about it. Maybe Hector can help me."

There was only the slightest twinge of jealousy, soon dismissed, which Jim was glad of. He knew he had nothing to fear from Hector. He'd never met a more honorable man, and the longer Jim knew him, the more he liked him. Besides, Hector and Nathan, while not involved romantically, had become the best of friends, and were seldom apart.

"Now?" Jim asked.

"It can wait until morning," Blair said. "I'm not sensing anything evil, exactly. And I don't think it can actually do anything to me." He reached up to pull Jim down to his side. "I'm sleepy, and I'll think better tomorrow. Plus, I don't want to disturb Hector."

Jim was all for going after this dirtbag now, but it was Blair's call, and he was sleepy, too. "First thing in the morning," Jim countered.

"First thing," Blair murmured, eyes closing, snuggling into Jim's warmth.

Wrapping his arms around Blair, Jim swore he'd keep him safe, no matter what.

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**Kelowna**

Crack of dawn, actually, way before the crack of dawn, Jack stepped through the stargate with his team. They were met by someone who was kind of like a mayor that Daniel sucked up to, and then they were being walked through an underground tunnel into a different building. When they walked through the entrance to that building, a young man was waiting to greet them, as well as a dozen armed soldiers. The young man smiled brightly, stepping forward. "This is incredible. It is a pleasure to meet you. I'm Jonas Quinn; I'm a special advisor to our High Minister."

Jack glanced around at the armed men. "Security's a little tight around here, I noticed."

"As you have undoubtedly been told," Jonas explained proudly, "this is one of our most secret and important research operations."

Daniel held out his hand. "Daniel Jackson," he said.

Jonas smiled brightly again, and Jack found himself irrationally wanting to punch that smile off his face. He watched as Daniel and Jonas shook hands.

When that touching moment was over, Jack gestured at himself. "Colonel Jack O'Neill," then the rest of his team, "Major Sam Carter, and the tall, silent one is Teal'c."

Another bright smile. "Well, your arrival on our planet is an extraordinary event. It's my honor to
show you around this facility. Please, follow me."

They headed down the hall, Daniel, naturally, chatting with Jonas as if he was the most interesting thing in the history of ever, and Jack had to force himself to stop grinding his teeth. It's not like he had anything to fear. He and Daniel were more than married. They were bonded, and all he could feel from Daniel as he spoke to Mr. Smiles-way-too-much was curiosity.

Jack knew he had nothing to be worried about, but he still felt a sense of dread slither down his spine, and he caught himself looking around.

"Something wrong, sir?" Carter asked him, apparently catching on that things might not be copasetic.

"I don't know," Jack said. "Just stay alert."

Carter nodded, and went off to whisper to Teal'c, no doubt passing the warning along, regardless of its ambiguity.

Jack sped up, catching up to Jonas and Daniel in time to hear Daniel say, "If we could have access to the site where the Gate was discovered and see the artifacts, we have this process called carbon dating. If I could determine the age of the temple, we might be able to figure out how it was destroyed."

"I'm sure that can be arranged," Jonas said. "Our archeologists believe they have only begun to uncover the full extent of what may be buried. There were extensive alien writings."

"Teal'c and I could help with the translation," Daniel offered quickly.

Jack rolled his eyes, as Daniel, as usual, started to give away the farm. "Daniel," he said cautiously.

Jonas smiled at them, saying, "I understand from our leaders that your knowledge and expertise will come at a price, Colonel. That is why you're here, right?"

It bothered Jack that Jonas was quick enough to pick up on what Jack's caution to Daniel meant, like his friendliness to Daniel was nothing but an act. "Well, don't get me wrong," Jack threw out, "we want to help out as much we can. It's just that we've been burned a little bit in the past."

"We're not questioning so much what you have to offer in return," Daniel interrupted, with a look at Jack as if his zipper was open and he had spinach stuck in his teeth.

"We just want to get to know you better first," Carter finished.

Deciding he was not going to win here, Jack smiled weakly, saying, "That's it."

Jonas studied Jack for a moment, then turned to Daniel, no doubt realizing he was the easiest mark among them. "Hopefully we'll have much of value to offer in exchange. This way."

They ended up in an observation room overlooking a lab. Several men in radiation suits were working below them. A light in the room changed from red to blue.

"We can go in now," Jonas said. He moved to one of the men. "This is Tomis Leed. He is chief physicist overseeing the development of our most critical project. Tomis, this is SG-1, of the planet Earth."

"My pleasure," Tomis said with a half bow.
"What is this?" Carter asked, looking at what Tomis had been working on.

"The core of this device was uncovered in an ancient temple of a race of people we believe were called the Goa'uld," Tomis answered. "It's a mineral substance found to have highly unstable radioactive properties. This experiment seems to indicate the potential for great bursts of energy. We call it Naquadria."

Jack checked out just about then, already bored to death. He glanced around the room, looking for exits, sussing out anything dangerous. For some reason, he couldn't shake the belief that they were in danger. He heard Carter's voice rise and could tell she was excited. Jack hoped that they were going to bring something fun home for Hammond. He hated to disappoint the guy.

Twenty minutes later, the tour was over, and two invitations were thrown out: one from Jonas to see their library, and another from Tomis to see more scientific experiments. No surprise what Daniel signed up for. Jack was tempted to go with Carter, but he didn't want Daniel out of his sight; so the team split up.

The next hour, as they toured the library, was as dull as Jack hadn't hoped for, the only thing making it bearable was checking out Daniel's ass and occasionally sending a particularly dirty thought through their bond. The looks he was getting from Daniel in exchange promised dire retribution, and Jack couldn't wait.

The Sentinel School

At first Jim thought he was having a nightmare. He was being buried alive; he couldn't breathe, couldn't move. His body burned as if it were on fire. Just the thought of turning his head made Jim afraid it would explode. Jim tried to call for Blair but his lips wouldn't shape the words, and his vocal cords couldn't force a sound out.

He tried to make himself wake up; he'd had some success at that before, but he was paralyzed, both physically and mentally. There was a brilliant flare in his mind that was both excruciating and liberating as he sensed Blair. But before he could communicate in any way, he heard Blair scream his name in terror and then there was nothing.

Immediately after, while the pain in Jim's head still hurt beyond description, he found he could move. Relief shot through him as he realized it must have been a dream. Surprised that Blair wasn't cuddled close the way he usually was, Jim swept an arm out to touch Blair. All he found was an empty bed.

Slowly, as it hurt to let any light in, Jim opened his eyes. They confirmed for him that Blair was indeed not in bed. He listened attentively, determining if Blair was somewhere else in the bungalow.

Nothing.

Frowning, fear unexpectedly crawling up and down his spine and churning in his gut, Jim turned inward to contact Blair. For a moment he grappled in his mind, as if he were falling and reaching out for anything to catch his balance, but just that quickly, in horror, he realized his connection to Blair was gone. His bond was gone.

Jim hadn't realized how all encompassing that steady presence had been until it was missing. The nightmare he'd woken from was back, except now he knew why he'd felt that way; because someone had been ripping Blair out of his mind. He couldn't stop searching for the bond, like
someone newly blind might keep trying to open his eyes, sure that this time some light will come through, that he will see.

But, there was nothing--just an overwhelming sense of loss. Jim kept looking, unwilling to believe there wasn't a trace of it, something to prove to him that Blair was alive, that Jim would be able to find him through their bond.

He dug deeper, panicking, refusing to believe this meant Blair was dead. There had to be something there. Heedless of anything but the need to find Blair, all of Jim's focus and energy turned inward.

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**Kelowna**

Jonas and Daniel headed back to the laboratory, back to the Naquadria experiment, Jack trailing behind, thinking how happy the suits would be if they could get their hands on the stuff. Suddenly, Daniel's crow appeared, letting out a painfully raucous caw, flying at Jack, then at Daniel, then at Jack, leaving no doubt that he needed their attention.

Jack grabbed Daniel, told Jonas, "Excuse us for a second," and shoved Daniel around a corner.

Daniel put his arm out and the crow landed for a second, but then took off, extremely agitated, cawing unceasingly, flying down the hallway and then back.

"What is it?" Daniel asked, flashing Jack a concerned look.

"I'm guessing we need to go that way," Jack said as the crow, once again, flew down the hallway.

Jonas, apparently, unable to contain his curiosity, poked his head around the corner. "Is everything all right?"

"No," Jack said. "We have to go. Sorry."

"Jack," Daniel protested, out of habit, to be polite, most likely, as he was already walking in the direction the crow was flying.

Jack opened his mouth to harangue Daniel if necessary when suddenly Blair's wolf and Jim's jaguar were in the hallway as well, equally agitated. The animals were in bad shape, almost staggering, the wolf howling pitifully, the jaguar spitting in anger.

"Okay," Daniel said quickly, anxiously. "Let's go."

"But I have so much more to show you," Jonas protested.

"It's gonna have to wait," Jack said, yanking Daniel down the hall, and when Hector's snake showed up, he started to really move, Daniel running as well.

"Sir," Carter said as she and Teal'c were suddenly coming at them from the other direction. "We saw the crow," she blurted out. "He's upset."

"Yeah, we gotta go," Jack said. "There are other spirit animals here and they're all freaking out. Stargate room," he ordered, working around a raccoon and fox, Randy's rabbit, and Jesus, Hilary's bear. "Something's really wrong at the school."

They were all running now, and Jack was relieved that no one was trying to stop them, other than Jonas, who was keeping pace with them and attempting to get an explanation.
"Jonas," Daniel finally yelled over his shoulder. "I'm sorry, but we've just been alerted to an emergency situation back on Earth, and we have to go. We'll be back, I promise."

Somewhat mollified, Jonas continued to keep pace, but now he started to help, yelling for people to open doors and move out of the way. In minutes, they were back in the Stargate room, Earth was being dialed up, and Jack, Daniel, Teal'c, and Sam, along with a couple dozen spirit animals, were sprinting into the event horizon.

The Sentinel School

"What's wrong with him?" Simon demanded of Hector.

"I am not sure," Hector said worriedly, staring down at Jim, who was laying on his bed, staring into nothing.

"It looks like a zone," Simon said, wanting this fixed and fixed now. "And where the hell is Blair?"

They had already tried to bring Jim out of it, to the point of pinching his skin hard enough to leave bruises and putting ammonia sticks under his nose.

Simon had put the place on lockdown, security doubled, and every Sentinel was on his or her toes. Despairing, Simon thought it was closing the barn door after the horse had escaped. Something bad had happened here; he'd stake his life on it.

Hector shook his head. "He is focused on something, but I do not believe it is anything external. I have seen this before in my village when a Guide died unexpectedly. The Sentinel lost himself searching for their bond.

"Blair is not dead," Simon snapped out. "He's missing."

Putting up a placating and sympathetic hand, Hector said, "I am simply relating a memory to you. I believe Jim has gone deep within. Whether because he has lost his connection to Blair, or because it is the only way Jim can stay connected to him, I cannot say."

Simon ran his hand over his face, thinking furiously. "How did they get to Blair without alerting Jim? Without alerting all of you?"

"We all heard him yell," Randy said, looking freaked enough for all of them. "He yelled Jim's name and it woke me right up."

It had woken everyone up. Every Sentinel had heard Blair's scream, and everyone who wasn't a Sentinel had been woken up by the resulting commotion. Scowling, Simon asked, for about the hundredth time, "And nothing else? None of you heard anything? How did they get Blair out of here? Wouldn't you have heard people taking him? A vehicle? Something?"

The Sentinels in the room, Hector, Randy, Major John French, and Lt. Clifford Janz, looked miserably back at Simon.

"Yeah, I know," Simon said, ashamed for making them feel guiltier than they already did. "Shit."

Every Sentinel and Guide on the grounds wanted to be in the room, but Jim and Blair's bedroom wasn't that big, and besides, Simon knew the last thing Jim would want was to be gawked at by a crowd. Delmar was standing outside the bungalow, keeping all the residents as calm as possible.

Jason and Marilyn were in the room as well, having examined Jim, finding nothing physically
"I don't even know where to start," Simon confessed. He'd swept the room, looking for clues, but there was nothing. The front door had been unlocked, but Simon didn't know if that was because that was how Blair had left the bungalow, or if Jim and Blair felt safe enough here to keep it unlocked. In any case, there was no sign of a struggle, and after that yell of Blair's, Simon found it hard to believe that Blair would have just walked out the front door without leaving some sign behind.

With Jim out for the count, they couldn't even be sure that Blair was still alive. Nor could they take advantage of Jim's connection to Blair to find him.

His phone rang, interrupting the frustrated silence permeating the room after his announcement. "Banks," he barked into it.

"What the fuck's going on?" Jack yelled. "Every spirit animal just showed up through the looking glass, totally freaked."

"Is Blair's wolf there?" Simon demanded, pointedly ignoring Jack's code for off-world, having too much to worry about without imagining all the spirit animals on another planet.

"Yes," Jack said, "but he's not doing that well, and Jim's jaguar looks like he's gonna snap. I got crows, bears, rabbits, raccoons, snakes, and God knows what, hissing, yelping, and making enough of a fuss that I had to abort a mission. Talk to me."

"Blair's gone missing, and Jim's in some sort of Sentinel coma," Simon said as succinctly as possible. "We don't know how the attack came, who it was, or how they did it."

"We're on our way," Jack said and hung up.

"Blair's wolf is alive?" Hector asked hopefully.

Simon nodded. "A bunch of spirit animals went after Jack and Daniel for some reason. He could kick himself, now, for not even thinking about using the spirit animals to answer some questions. The complete absence of them should have tipped him off. The wolf and the jaguar are there, although Jack says the wolf isn't looking too good."

"But if his spirit guide's alive that means Blair's alive, right?" Randy asked anxiously.

"Yes," Hector said firmly. "Blair is alive."

"So where do we find him?" John said, his usual relaxed stance gone, all six feet of military bearing bristling with the need to do something.

"Search the grounds," Simon said. "There has to be something. He didn't just fly out of here." At least he didn't think Blair could fly, or be flown, as the case might be. Not that Simon would put it past the man. If he wanted to fly, he'd figure out a way to do it. But one thing Simon knew for sure, he'd never leave Jim in this shape. If Blair could be here, he would be.

Within minutes, a dozen of the military Sentinels were systematically sweeping the grounds, while Hector was meditating in Blair and Jim's room, looking for something a little more intangible. Nathan had joined him, one hand on Hector's back, something Simon knew helped Hector focus above and beyond his already impressive talents.

Simon had to fight back the urge to pace, knowing his footsteps would simply add to the sense
onslaught Hector was fighting his way through. He'd never realized how hard it was to stay completely still and silent.

Hector opened his eyes and looked up at Simon. "I smell something that doesn't belong here."

"What is it?" Simon demanded.

"It is an herb, a very rare herb."

That sounded bad, Simon thought to himself. "What does it do? Did someone poison Jim with it?"

"No," Hector said. "If I am correct, it was used on Blair. It..." Hector looked frustrated for a moment, obviously searching for the right words. "It hides, it conceals. It fools the senses. When I was a child, I saw it used once on a Sentinel who was out of his mind from his senses. It allowed him to rest for a while."

"They'd give it to the Sentinel?" Simon asked, not understanding.

"Yes," Hector replied.

"So, what would it do to a Guide? Why did they give it to Blair?"

"I'm not sure," Hector said. "Perhaps to conceal him," he finally added reluctantly, "so he could be spirited away. I have never heard of it being used that way, but I have no other explanation. I believe magic has been done here, something to hide Blair from all our senses and to prevent Blair from fighting back."

"Great," Simon spat out. Of course it was magic. God forbid it be something they could shoot.

When Jack and Daniel arrived, Simon sat with them in one of the conference rooms to fill them in. Their half eaten breakfast trays had been pushed to the side.

"Magic?" Jack said with a scowl. "I hate magic."

"So says the man with a spirit animal on his shoulder," Daniel said dryly, chin pointing towards the crow that was keeping a wary eye out perched on Jack's shoulder.

"He doesn't count," Jack said staunchly.

The corner of Daniel's lips almost curled up into a grin. "Actually, it makes sense that it was something associated with magic."

"It does?" Jack asked unhappily.

"Think about it, Jack," Daniel said. "If the NID is behind this, they've seen what Blair can do. They know he can read their minds, force them to tell the truth, and certainly communicate mentally with Jim. They'd be right to assume that, normally, there'd be no place they could take him that he couldn't be found, even if they kept him unconscious. Jim could find him wherever they took him."

Jack knew that was true; he always had a sense of where Daniel was. "Yeah, but magic?" he said disparagingly.

"After everything you've seen," Daniel pointed out, "how can you still doubt that there are things in this world, this universe, that are unexplainable? There are people out there who practice magic: hoo doo or voodoo practitioners, shamans, people who can do things that normal people can't. I can
see the NID finding someone like that for the express purpose of capturing Blair and keeping him hidden."

"So how do we find him?" Simon insisted.

Daniel shrugged. "I don't know. His wolf isn't talking, at least not to me or crow. Maybe Hector can get something out of him."

"Nothing on the grounds?" Jack asked Simon.

"No," Simon said disgustedly. "No sign of anything." He spread his hands. "We've got nothing. A big fat fucking zero." Actually, that wasn't true. They had less than nothing. They'd found footprints, two sets, leading from Jim and Blair's bungalow to the driveway. There'd been no sign that Blair was struggling, the footprints even and measured. "Shit," Simon sighed.

Blair woke suddenly and had only a moment to wonder where he was when a blinding headache made itself known, along with a gut-churning nausea. He searched for something to throw up in, but he was lying on the floor in an empty room.

Unable to stop himself, his stomach spasmed, and he threw up on the floor, and then again and again, until his stomach muscles ached, and his throat was raw.

It felt like hours before Blair could draw a breath without it being accompanied by an immediate need to vomit. The stench and appearance of what he'd already brought up wasn't helping. He moved as far away from it as he could, placing himself in a corner, sitting down with the safety of abutting walls supporting his back, knees drawn up.

Ignoring his headache, which hadn't abated at all, he searched inside for Jim. When he found nothing, he fought hard against the rising panic. He searched again, desperately. It was as if they'd never bonded.

Frantically he tried to imagine what could have happened. The last thing he remembered, he'd been in bed with Jim. They'd fallen asleep thinking they were safe. That had clearly been a mistake. He should have told Jim sooner about whatever it was that was poking around in Blair's mind. They should have gone to speak with Hector right away.

Blair let recrimination wash through him, but then pushed it aside. He had to remember what else had happened and how he'd ended up here. Knuckles pressed into his eyes to both help with the headache, and in a vain attempt to help him think, Blair tried to remember anything about why he was here, and why his bond with Jim was gone. The possibility of Jim being dead wasn't something he was willing to consider.

It took a while, but he remembered waking up, sure that someone was again in the room with him and Jim. But before he could wake Jim up, to make sure it was only another nightmare, he'd felt something surround him, a mist, or maybe something more substantial than that. It felt as if he'd been wrapped in invisible thick cotton batting, cocooned in wool.

Someone had told him to get up, and he had. Someone had told him to walk, and he had obeyed. It wasn't until he was walking out the front door that a very small part of him began to realize that something was dreadfully wrong. It took every ounce of strength he had to get out one mental shout, and that was the last thing he remembered.

"Jim," he said quietly, despairing. He couldn't be dead. He forced the panic down, knowing if he allowed himself to believe, even for a minute, that Jim was dead, that any capacity Blair might
have for figuring out what was going on would disappear in a chasm of grief.

He felt for Jim again, then for his spirit guide. Nothing. Frustrated, Blair took a deep breath, trying to calm himself. When he was as calm as he could be, given the circumstances, he tried again. This time, he still couldn't feel a connection, but he could sense something else was there, something blocking his ability to reach out.

He pushed against it, testing its strength and the ache in his head grew worse. Ignoring the pain, he pushed again, searching for a way around it, once he determined he couldn't push through it. His head throbbed in counterpoint, and the nausea swelled again.

Blair stopped trying, drawing some deep breaths, in no mood to start vomiting again. Despite his initial inability to contact Jim, he actually felt buoyed by the thought that something external to him and Jim was responsible for the silence of his bond. It made him sure that Jim was alive, because why else would they need to cut him off from his partner?

Once he rested a bit, and hopefully when his head didn't feel like it might blow up into a million pieces, he'd try again to push, in hopes of figuring out who had brought him here and why. Blair knew he had powerful friends who would be moving heaven and earth to find him as well. He'd use this time wisely and try to conserve his strength. Wishing Jim were here with him, or even the comfort of his wolf or Jim's jaguar, Blair curled on the floor, cushioning his head on his arm, and closed his eyes.

"What's wrong with Jim?" Wednesday asked Delmar. Delmar was still keeping watch over the traffic coming in and out of the bungalow. Everyone at the school knew something bad had happened to Jim and Blair, but no one was calling a town meeting to give out any facts.

"Not my place to say," Delmar said.

Wednesday rolled her eyes. He was such a stooge. All the military guys were; they couldn't think for themselves. She ignored the fact that Jim had been in the military; that had been a long time ago, according to the stuff she'd found out about him.

And yeah, Daniel worked for the military, but he wasn't actually in the military. He was just really smart, smart and hot. Not as hot as Jim, but too hot for that O'Neill guy. He was just another stooge. She sometimes wished Blair was in the military so she could write him off, too.

He might be a Shaman, and one of the heads of the school, but he was only a Guide, just like she was. There was no reason she couldn't have ended up being Jim's Guide; it was just bad luck Blair had found him first. The only reason he slept with Blair was because they were bonded. No way was someone that hot, gay. If she and Jim were bonded, he'd sleep with her in a New York minute.

"Can I go see him?" she asked.

"Sorry," Delmar said in his usual tool-like way. "No one goes in or out unless Captain Banks, Dr. Jackson, or Colonel O'Neill says so."

"Listen," Wednesday said hotly, "I'm an unbonded Guide, I can probably help him. You know he likes me."

Delmar shot her a look that she couldn't read and then shook his head. "Captain Banks, Dr. Jackson, or Colonel O'Neill say you can go in, you can go in."

Rolling her eyes again, Wednesday stomped off. She'd figure out some way to get in there to see
Blair had lost complete track of time. It could have been six hours or twenty-four, or longer. He'd finally had to give in to the urge to pee, so he'd added that charming smell to the odor of his vomit, and had been working hard to ignore the stench. He hadn't seen anyone, or even heard anything. Either the room had excellent soundproofing, or he was alone.

He wasn't sure which idea was more disconcerting.

The block was still there, and to go so long without feeling Jim was making him despair, even though he was trying not to give in to it. He hadn't known how much he had taken it for granted, always feeling Jim with him. His absence left a clawing hole in his heart and mind.

He pressed against the invisible presence once again, trying to reach Jim, or his wolf, or any of his powers, and this time, unlike the last hundred times he'd tried, something fought back.

Blair grimaced in pain and, determined, he struggled back, thinking that maybe the unexpected mental fight was a sign of the other's weakening. But, as if enraged, whatever it was battled back, stronger than ever, and it felt as if insects were taking over Blair's brain, oozing out into his circulation system, until his entire body was on fire.

In the back of his mind, he heard someone moaning, like an injured dog, and realized it was him, but the pain was too sharp to turn away from, to get some space where he could wrap his arms around it and accept it. It kept getting worse and worse, like the sound of a badly tuned motorcycle as it gets closer and closer until you can't even believe the noise it's making as it rattles your cells and you want to stand up and scream.

The fairly benign presence he'd felt for days before he'd been kidnapped, felt benign no longer. Along with the pain was a sense of anger, of entitlement, as if everything Blair had was an insult to this being, or maybe that it wanted what Blair claimed for his own.

Frantic, feeling as if this battle was the most important he'd waged in his life, Blair closed his eyes, marshaling every ounce of internal strength he'd tempered over his years traipsing all over the world with Naomi, meditating from one end of the globe to the other, and then, pulling the memory of the power he could yield when it was available to him, he held on and pushed back as hard as he could.

"Well, crap," Jack said, leaning back in disgust. He and Daniel were using Simon's office, calling everyone they knew, from the President on down, to try to find whoever was responsible for taking Blair. They'd been at it for twenty-four hours, with a short break for sleeping, and they'd had no luck.

"It's getting worse," Daniel said worriedly. It didn't take a genius to look at Jim and tell that the continued absence of Blair was taking a toll. Even with Jim unconscious, it showed.

"I don't know what else we can do," Jack said, equally worried and pissed the hell off.

"You had the best security here that you could," Daniel reassured him, as if he knew that Jack would feel the responsibility for whatever had happened here.

"Lot of good it did," Jack said with a scowl.

"It wasn't your fault," Daniel insisted.
Jack scowled again. He didn't like it when things got fucked up like this, especially to people he liked. "You talk to Hammond?"

"Yeah," Daniel said. "They can't get a lock on the Kelowna address. They were going to send Sam and Teal'c back with Ferretti and a few more science folks to check out the laboratory tests they were doing on the Naquadria, but they can't get through. Sam's asked her dad to see if the Tok'ra can send someone to see what's wrong."

Jack shrugged his shoulder. He could care less about the Kelownans right now; he was just glad they'd gotten off the planet. If the gate had locked while they'd been there with all the spirit guides going animal crackers, Jack would have gone nuts. "So, what do we do?"

"With Kelowna?" Daniel asked.

"No," Jack said with a hand wave, dismissing Kelowna, "with Jim and Blair?"

"I wish I knew," Daniel said, sagging back in his chair, dispirited.

Marilyn had finally started an IV on Jim to keep him hydrated, and Simon was beginning to think they might have to move him to a hospital. It had only been a total of about thirty hours since they'd found Jim like this, but he had no idea how long this ordeal might last.

"Fuck," he muttered under his breath, angry at his helplessness.

Hector and Nathan walked into the room just as Jim, suddenly, began thrashing on the bed, a low growl coming out of his mouth, making the hairs on the back of Simon's neck stand up. "What's happening?" he demanded of Hector.

Hector hurried to Jim's side, trying to put his hand on Jim's body, but every time he almost made contact, Jim shied away, as if the touch hurt. Somberly, Hector replied, "I believe it is his bond with Blair; it is in danger, or it is gone."

As if summoned, the room was filled with spirit animals, including Jim's jaguar and Blair's wolf. The jaguar had the wolf pinned to the ground, not fighting with it, more as if to keep it from running away.

The other Sentinels came running until the room was full of them. Amelia, Latisha, John French, Randy, Hilary, a dozen others Simon couldn't find the wherewithal to come up with a name for, and then Wednesday was pushing her way into the room, along with some of the other Guides.

Simon was about to yell for them to leave when the noise Jim was making picked up.

"What's happening to him?" Randy asked, his voice thick with unshed tears. He was holding his rabbit so hard, if it had been flesh and blood it would have been squashed. Hilary was crying, hanging onto Randy's hand equally hard.

"I don't know," Simon said with a full helping of frustration and anger.

"He needs to bond with someone else," said Wednesday, who had managed to squeeze through the crowd and end up next to Jim.

"No one is doing any bonding," Simon snapped out.

"Look at him," she demanded. "It's gotta be his bond with Blair. It's breaking."
Jim almost looked like he was having a seizure. His head was snapping from side to side, his jaw was tight, and he was keening in pain.

Simon sent a 'help-me' look John French's way, and John started encouraging people to leave the room. It was hard enough to breathe as it was without two dozen people crowded into the none-too-large bedroom.

Delmar arrived to help out the lieutenant, and within minutes, the room was clear of everyone but Simon, Hector, Nathan, Randy, and Hilary. She had climbed up onto Jim's bed and was sobbing her heart out. Chad arrived and found himself with an armful of crying Sentinel. He held on to her and got an arm around Randy, too. Chad had easily reconciled himself to the fact that Randy was part of the Hilary package.

Simon could hear Wednesday bitching as she was led out against her will. "You saw him," she called back. "He needs to bond with someone. I'm an unbonded Guide. I'll do it."

Simon let out a mirthless laugh at her willingness to sacrifice herself. She was still on her campaign to get herself into Jim's bed.

Then, Wednesday was back at the door, pointing at Hilary. "How come she gets to stay?" Her voice was dripping with indignation.

Delmar grabbed her arm, and with an apologetic look at Simon, dragged her away.

"We have to do something!" Randy said vehemently.

"You'll get no argument from me," Simon said. "We don't know what to do." He hated telling Randy that, to let him know that with all the adult resources among them that they were clueless. "I guess it's time for a town meeting," he admitted. It wasn't fair that so many people to whom Blair and Jim meant the world, didn't even know what was going on, had nothing to cling to except for the rumors that were no doubt flying.

To Randy he said, "Could you pass the word along that we'll meet in an hour?"

Randy nodded eagerly, as if desperate for something useful to do. "I'll get everyone rounded up," he said, bolting from the room.

Simon sighed, wishing he still had that youthful energy. He could have used some right now. To Marilyn, who had shown up and remained behind when the room had been cleared, he said, "Should we give him some pain medicine or something?" Jim looked miserable, although his thrashing had decreased. "I wish to God we knew what was going on."

"I'm not sure we should give him anything," she said in muted tones. "Suppose he misses the chance to connect with Blair because he's sedated?"

"Damn it," Simon bit out through clenched teeth. This sucked big time.

Chad leaned in and spoke quietly to Simon, "I know it's premature, but I have instructions from both Jim and Blair what's to happen in the event of--" He cut off, no doubt sensitive to the fact that Hilary would be listening to every word.

"Let's not go there yet," Simon said brusquely.

After the town meeting, morale was at an all time low. No one knew what to do, except for
Wednesday, who was sure all Jim needed was a new Guide. She proved impervious to all the glares shot her way.

Simon put a 24 hour guard on Jim's room, just because Wednesday was freaking him out with her non-stop whining. He wouldn't have been at all surprised to find her in Jim's room with a scalpel. Delmar was organizing the military Guides and Sentinels into rotations.

All the Sentinel and Guide pairs were sticking close to each other, evidence that the bond could be disrupted disconcerting to all of them. Jack found himself needing to see Daniel, even though he could still feel him through the bond. He and Daniel were walking the perimeter of the property, needing to stretch their legs but not go far.

"Okay," Jack said. "Let's try this again."

Daniel sighed but gamely said, "We're pretty sure the NID is behind this."

"Right," Jack agreed. "The question is, what are they trying to do?"

"Obviously not kill them, or they would have done it while they were here. If they could get Blair out of here without Jim being any the wiser, they certainly could have killed them both," Daniel said.

"Exactly, so what's the goal?"

"I'm guessing they took Blair to try to bond him with someone else, so they could get someone into his mind."

Jack scowled. "If they tried that, what would it do to Jim?"

"We might be seeing what it would do to Jim," Daniel pointed out. "I think if this goes on much longer, Jim's going to die. His jaguar isn't even moving anymore. He and Blair's wolf just lie next to his bed, barely breathing."

"Suppose you're right," Jack said, playing it out. "What are they going to get out of Blair's head? It's not like he's sitting on a lot of state secrets."

"He knows about the Stargate Program," Daniel threw out.

"So does the NID," Jack argued. "So what? They know about the school. Do they want to understand how bondings work? Or why Blair has the ability to read minds and use his voice to make people do things?"

"Maybe," Daniel said with a shrug.

"For what?" Jack grumbled. "They're not going to find some magic formula in his brain. Blair doesn't know how he does things half the time. He doesn't take drugs or draw pentagrams on the floor. What are they going to find?"

Daniel shook his head, and they walked a while in silence. "I have no idea. But maybe they have someone who does. Maybe it's like one magician going to watch another magician and knowing how all the tricks are done. Maybe their shaman can figure stuff out once he or she gets in his head."

"So they can do what?" Jack groused. "They know about Sentinels, so they can get their own. They might not know about Guides, but it's not like they couldn't find out. With the NID's connections, I
can't believe they don't already know everything we do. So what do they want to know?"

"I can't help but think it's about Blair's ability to read people's intentions, to force them to tell the
truth. Not to mention the," Daniel made air quotes, "invisible monsters that attacked them. They
may think Blair did that, too."

"So someone screwy thinks they can pull a shaman 'how to' manual out of Blair's mind?" Jack
asked skeptically.

"Nothing else makes sense," Daniel said practically. "It's not about killing them, it's not about the
program, it's not about turning Blair to their side. They want information. That's what they always
want. Information and power. Or maybe they want in there so they can burn the ability out of Blair.
Disarm him. Although, I think it's more likely the former; if they wanted Blair's power gone, they'd
have just killed him."

"And when they have what they want?" Jack asked darkly, knowing the answer.

"They kill him," Daniel said tightly. "And Jim dies as a result."

"So, what we need to know is how long will it take to either get what they want, or realize they
can't get anything?"

"That," Daniel said unhappily, "is the million dollar question." He kicked at a pinecone lying in
their path.

When they arrived back at the front door it was to find two new military Sentinels and one Guide
arriving, and Jack called for Delmar to get them settled.

Blair had no idea how long he fought that mental battle, but when it was done, he was lying on the
floor, sweating, laboring for breath, and aching from head to toe. "Fuck," he said, exhausted,
absolutely sure that if he had to go another round right now, he'd totally lose. He could only hope
that whatever he was battling against was equally worn out, and in need of recovery.

The most frustrating thing was that Blair had no idea what he was fighting to protect. His sanity, of
course, that was a given. But he couldn't help but feel that this thing, this person, entity, whatever,
wanted something, but it was too nebulous a feeling to put a name to it.

With all his being, Blair wished he could sense Jim. Even more, to be with him, but he'd gladly
take just the presence of him in his mind. Not to mention that if the bond was there, Blair could
draw on it for strength. He might even be able to win against this thing fighting him.

He lifted his head wearily, hoping some water or food had miraculously appeared. To his immense
surprise, there was a tray by the door. He struggled to his knees and crawled over, ignoring all the
twinges. Picking up the plastic cup, like something you'd get at a fast food restaurant, lid and straw
included, he lifted the lid and took a sniff.

It smelled like ice tea. Blair deliberated as to whether it would behoove his captives to drug him.
He finally decided it didn't make any difference. He hadn't eaten or drunk in too long; it was part of
why he was so drained. He had to have some sustenance.

Putting the lid back on, he took a long sip. He'd wait a few minutes and see if he started feeling
particularly woozy before having any more. There was a food item as well, and Blair took off the
wrapping and discovered a fried chicken sandwich with lettuce and tomato, soggy with some sort
of secret sauce.
He took a single bite and then put it down, with the same intention of waiting a few minutes. He inched to the wall to lean against it, trying to make sense of everything that was going on.

As the minutes passed, Blair was feeling no different than he had when he'd first taken a sip and a bite, but he was still coming up empty for explanations. He reached for the tray, and decided to go ahead and eat.

Wednesday walked across the grounds to Jim's bungalow. A soldier she didn't know was at the door. "Hi," she said. "I'm here to sit with Jim."

"I don't think so," the soldier said, eyeing her black outfit from hair to boots. "No one goes in except--"

"Yeah, yeah," she interrupted disgustedly. "O'Neill, Banks or Daniel."

"That's right."

"So who are you?"

"My name's Mike Valderama," he informed her.

"I haven't seen you around before," she said accusingly.

"I just got here a couple hours ago, me and two others. Colonel O'Neill decided to just put me to work, so here I am."

"Look," she said, trying again, "all I want to do is sit with him. If you were sick, wouldn't you want someone to sit with you?"

"Sorry," Mike said. "No can do."

Rolling her eyes, she muttered, "Tool," and walked away.

Hector shook his head. "No, I do not believe a new Guide is what Jim requires."

"If Blair dies, won't he die?" Wednesday protested.

"It is possible," he said somberly, responding to her words, not the avaricious gleam in her eyes, "but we have no way of knowing what Blair's condition is." Then, he added as kindly as he could, "And I believe, if Blair did die, that Jim would not agree to being your Sentinel."

"Why not?" she said hotly.

"Because you're a bitch," Chad said, walking by. "And you've dissed Blair, and as soon as you did that, you lost any chance of even being friends with Jim, let alone anything else."

She shot him a nasty look. "Fuck you," she blurted out.

"No thanks," he said airily.

"That's right," she bit out, "you're too busy with that eight-year-old of yours."

Chad got in her face. "You ever say anything like that again, I'll see to it that your stuff gets packed and you're on the streets. You are so damn ignorant of how any of this works, and that's why no
Sentinel would ever agree to bond with you. Get over yourself."

Furious, speechless, Wednesday strode off.

Hector pursed his lips and considered Chad. That wasn't how he would have handled the girl, but he could appreciate everyone's growing frustration with her.

"Sorry," Chad said, chagrined. "She pisses me off. Especially because this whole thing with Blair and Jim seems to be all about how she can work it to her benefit."

"She is young," Hector said in her defense.

"She is dangerous," Chad corrected him. "There's a difference."

Hector remembered John with sadness. He didn't want Wednesday to turn into something like that. Maybe he should try to spend more time with her. "How is Hilary?" Hector asked, changing subjects.

Chad grinned. "Bullheaded as ever, but I love her to death. She's part sister, part daughter, and part pain in my ass," he added with a chuckle. Then, sobering up, he asked, "How's Jim? Any change?"

Hector shook his head. "The same, if not worse. I wish I knew what to do."

"You and everyone else here," Chad consoled him.

The soldier on duty snapped to attention when Jack and Daniel reached the door to the bungalow. "At ease," Jack told him.

He relaxed his posture at once.

"What's your name?" Daniel asked.

"Mike Valderama, sir," the soldier said.

"You don't have to sir me," Daniel advised him kindly. "I'm not military."

"You still on door duty?" Jack said.

Mike shrugged. "I don't have much else to do. First Lieutenant Hayes was supposed to relieve me, but Simon Banks needed him."

"Anyone else in there?" Daniel asked.

"That nurse and the black guy," Mike answered. "I don't remember their names."

"Jason and Marilyn," Daniel told him. "Do you know where Simon is?"

"He left about fifteen minutes ago, sir, along with Lt. Hayes," Mike informed him. "I don't know where they were going."

"You really don't need to sir me," Daniel tried again.

"Habit, sir," Mike said with a rueful smile.

"Better safe than sorry, right?" Jack asked.
"Yes, sir," Mike agreed.


"I will, sir," Mike promised.

With that, the two of them headed off in search of Simon.

Jack was depressed; he was eating one of Marilyn's chocolate chip cookies and it wasn't even taking the edge off. He was beginning to doubt the capability of the entire United States armed forces. How could they not find one simple Guide? That the NID had hidey-holes that were this impossible to locate was a frustrating thought.

Simon was giving them until tomorrow morning, and then he was transferring Jim to the local hospital. At that point they'd be over forty-eight hours into this shitty situation and Jim would need nutrition. Without a doctor on site, something they were going to have to do something about, his needs would be beyond Jason's and Marilyn's qualifications.

Wednesday was getting moodier by the minute and sharing every chance she got, and Jack was making a point of being wherever she wasn't. Randy wasn't much better, because despite having Hilary back as his constant companion, he was still freaking out that he didn't have a Guide. On top of that, with Blair still missing, instead of being with Jack, Daniel was busy soothing ragged Sentinels.

His phone rang, and he took a look to see who was calling. Not recognizing the number, Jack frowned. "Hello?" he snapped into it, just hoping it was some asshole telemarketer on his super-duper security phone so he could get the company in trouble.

"Um, hi," a young girl said.

"I think you have the wrong number," Jack said as kindly as he could growl out. He was disappointed it wasn't some idiot whose career he could ruin.

"Um," said the girl again. "Someone called this number and I was calling them back."

"I didn't call anyone," Jack denied. At least not someone who sounded like this.

"Um," she said.

She was persistent; he had to give her that.

"I was looking for Randy," she blurted out.

That got Jack's attention. "This is that number?" he asked. He looked at the readout; it wasn't the number he'd called. "Who is this?" he demanded.

"I'm Randy's sister," she said quickly. "I've been looking for him. Do you know where he is?"

"The sister who moved away with his mom and left no forwarding address?" Jack said meanly.

She started to cry.

Crap. "I'm sorry," Jack said. "It was just hard on him, you know?"

"I didn't want to go," she cried. "I yelled and yelled at mama, but she wouldn't listen. I tried to
leave him notes in the house, but she found them and threw them away."

Jack chewed the inside of his cheek, thinking this through. "What's your name?"

"Susan," she said, sniffing. "Do you know where he is? Is he okay?"

"Does your mom know you're calling?"

"No," she said, sounding teary. "When she found out I was looking for Randy, she kicked me out of the house, too."

"Where are you?" Jack asked, standing. "How old are you?"

"Fifteen," she said shakily. "I just want to find Randy."

"How did you know to put an ad in the paper in Oregon?" Jack said, still not entirely convinced.

She sniffled a few more times. "My cousin talked to the person who took Randy in at that garage and found out Randy was in Hillsboro, even went there to try to find him. He hates my mama," she added in a whisper. "My mama says me and Randy have the devil in us, but my cousin says she's Lucifer himself."

Jack was starting to like this cousin.

"But, Benny, he's my cousin," she explained, "he said that he couldn't find hide nor hair of Randy when he got out there, so he put the ad in the paper, and we were just hoping someone would call. He said that if Randy was someplace safe, that maybe I could come stay with him and be safe, too. He says I shouldn't be anywhere near my mama because she's nuts. He says that someday she might take a butcher knife to me trying to cut the devil right out."

Jack blinked at the phone, temporarily speechless. Finally, he managed to query, "Where are you right now?"

"I'm with Benny in North Carolina," she said. "But I really want to be with Randy. He's my brother," she said, starting to cry again. "I miss him like crazy. He was the best brother, you know?"

Either she was the best child actress in the world or she was telling the truth. Seeing as Jack was already standing, he strode off in search of Randy.

"So do you know where he is, Mister?" she pleaded with him.

"Yeah, I do," he said, spying Randy outside with little Cliff, teaching him how to shoot hoops. "Randy," he yelled. "Phone call."

"Oh, my Gosh!" he heard through the phone. "He's there? He's right there? Oh, my Gosh!"

Jack couldn't help but grin when he handed the phone off to Randy.

"Who is it?" Randy asked, his brows furrowed.

Jack just gestured for him to get to it.

"Hello?" Randy said cautiously.

From three feet away, Jack could hear the shriek. He watched Randy's face, saw his expression go
from confusion to fear to sheer, unadulterated joy.

"It's my sister!" Randy told Jack in exultation. "She didn't wanna go with mama. She made her go."

"I know. She told me," Jack said, smiling broadly, feeling a little bit of the world click properly back into place.

Blair had finally fallen into a light sleep when the battle began again. It was deadlier this time; whereas Blair felt weaker. "Jim," he pleaded quietly, as he knuckled his eyes in despair. "Please, help me." Just the mention of Jim's name filled him with determination not to give up, not yet, and he closed his eyes and struggled back.

Wednesday snuck around the bungalow when it was good and dark, and was thrilled when she didn't see anyone out front playing guard dog. She didn't care what anyone said; she knew Jim needed someone new to bond with, and there was no one out there who wanted him more than her. He was probably going to die anyway, she'd heard Simon and Jason talking, so it's not like it could hurt.

She patted her pocket where a new scalpel rested, and felt the crumpled note with the words she had to say. Wednesday wasn't sure if it would work if Jim couldn't say the words, but she'd worry about that at the time.

Moving to the front door, she looked around cautiously to see if maybe whoever was playing guard dog had gone somewhere to lift a leg. Seeing no one around, she pushed the door open. She thought she heard a voice for a second and stopped, her heart in her throat, but when she didn't hear anything else, she walked into the living room.

For a brief moment, she thought about leaving, but she was sick and tired of getting grief from everyone and that would stop if she was bonded to Jim. Then she'd be the top Guide, and everyone would have to listen to her. With that vision firm in her mind, she walked to the bedroom.

Opening the door, she peeked in and saw a man by Jim's bed. She cursed, annoyed that she'd have to wait until later, but then she realized what she was looking at. The guy had a knife. He had already cut Jim's hand--she could see the blood--and was busy cutting a slice in his own. When he clasped his hand with Jim's, Wednesday let out a yell.

"Hey," she hollered, "what the hell are you doing?" She couldn't believe some asshole had gotten there before her. Then, louder, hoping every Sentinel in the place heard her, she screamed, "Someone's attacking Jim! Come help!"

"Shut the fuck up!" the man cursed at her.

It was then that she realized it was that guy with the stupid last name. Valder something. "Hey, you're one of the soldiers," she protested.

The guy was breaking out in a sweat, but he ignored her and focused back on Jim. "I pledge my life to thee," he said quickly.

"Forget that shit," Wednesday said furiously, and she barreled into the guy, knocking him away from Jim. No tool was going to get Jim instead of her.

As he hit the floor, the front door burst open and then, like a flood, Jack, Daniel, Simon, and what looked like every Sentinel in the school was tumbling into the bedroom. "It was him!" Wednesday
crowed, pointing at the guy on the ground.

"What was he doing?" Hector asked, moving to Jim's side. There was blood dripping onto the sheets from the cut on Jim's hand.

"He was trying to bond with him," she said viciously. "He cut both of them, took his hand, and said: I pledge my life to thee. Then I hit him."

"Thank you," Hector said sincerely.

"Could he really have bonded with Jim?" Simon asked.

Jack located Delmar and barked, "Get everyone out of here, and get somebody to pick up this trash." He glowered at Valderama, infuriated that it was one of their own. Fuck.

Lieutenant French came in with another Sentinel, someone whose name escaped Jack, and they manhandled Valderama out of the room, while Delmar was shooing out everyone except those who Simon said could stay. That left Simon, Jack, Daniel, Hector, Jason, Wednesday, and Nathan.

Jason went into the bathroom to get a towel to wrap around Jim's cut. When he returned to the bedside and touched Jim's hand, Jim let out a cry of agony and started convulsing. Jason let go of his hand, and backed up, looking at his watch, then clearing away anything Jim's flailing limbs might hit.

"Shit," Simon said, flipping open his phone.

"Wait," Daniel said.

Simon stared at him. "He needs to go to the hospital," he objected.

Jack put a hand on Simon to keep him from calling. "What are you thinking?" he asked Daniel, willing to trust him for the moment.

"I had this conversation with Blair once, when he was trying to explain what type of Guide I was." He moved to the bed and sat on the edge, near Jim's hip.

"And?" Jack prompted impatiently.

"And he used the word midwife," Daniel said, reddening a little.

"Given how many babies you've delivered," Jack said, "I wouldn't dare argue the point. But what does that have to do with helping Jim?" he added. Jim was still convulsing but his movements were weaker, more as if he just didn't have the resources to keep shaking so hard, rather than the seizure coming to an end.

"Just trust me," Daniel said. "Scalpel?"

"I left it in my other pair of pants," Jack said sarcastically.

Jason handed one over.

"No fuckin' way," Wednesday protested. "I'll do it. I've been telling you someone needed to do this for days and you all ignored me. I want to be Jim's Guide."

"He has a Guide," Daniel said firmly as he cut his hand.
"Yeah, and you're my Guide," Jack said anxiously. "Remember?"

"You're not a Sentinel," Daniel said absently, as he placed his and Jim's hands together.

"Yeah, well, he's sure as hell not going to be your Sentinel," Jack accused hotly, totally freaking at the thought of Daniel bonding with someone else.

"Trust me," Daniel said imploringly to Jack.

"Shit," Jack said. "I hate it when you say that." He waited for Daniel to say those words that he'd said to Jack, and it felt like his heart was fucking breaking into a thousand pieces.

"Jim," Daniel said, "I honor your bond with Blair. I know it's strong and true. But accept my help in finding him."

Jack began to breathe again, as Daniel once again reminded him that he was as trustworthy as they come.

"My enemy is your enemy," Daniel said, holding their clasped hands to his chest. "My friend is your friend. Let me help." He closed his eyes.

Wednesday started bitching again, and Simon showed her the door, asking Delmar to make sure she stayed outside.

Blair didn't think he could last another second. His skin felt shredded and flayed; he'd lost the ability to see or hear anything. Inch by inch he was losing ground, as whatever this thing was mercilessly tore his mind apart. At times he wasn't even sure who he was anymore, or why he was fighting. He struggled to keep his memories of his life and of Jim clear in his mind.

Jim heard Daniel's voice, the first thing he could remember hearing in what felt like forever. He had felt an intruder at first, someone trying to force a bond with him, but all he felt now was Daniel's quiet presence. He latched onto Daniel like a lifeline and held on with everything he could.

As Jim stopped convulsing, Daniel stiffened, and Jack was behind him in an instant, giving him support. Daniel slumped back against him, and as his body grew lax, Nathan grabbed their clasped hands that had started sliding apart and held them together.

"Is he okay?" Jack demanded of Jason.

Jason did a quick check of Daniel and Jim and sort of shrugged. "I don't know what you want me to say. Jim isn't seizing anymore, they're both breathing, and their heart rates are steady." He held up his hands as if to say their guess was as good as his.

Jack ran a hand down Daniel's face, promising himself that he'd exact hours of pleasurable retribution from Daniel for this. "Come on," he urged, although he wasn't sure who he was saying it to.

Jim started battering at the wall that was keeping him from Blair, using Daniel's strength added to his own. A crack formed and, for an instant, he could sense Blair. With renewed vigor, he smashed at the barrier until it shattered into a million pieces.
He had a second to relish the feeling of his connection to Blair before he realized that Blair was in deadly danger. He sent everything he was through the bond to his Guide.

Just when Blair thought he had no choice but to submit, in fact couldn't imagine why he hadn't already, Jim was there, surrounding him, holding him, loving him, and Blair could sense Daniel there as well. Not that it mattered, because all he needed was Jim to turn the tide. In a matter of seconds, the battle was over as Blair used their combined power to pummel the enemy back. He pounded at him like punishing waves crashing on a cliff face, until his enemy tried to turn tail and run.

But Blair wouldn't let him. He caught him, getting into his mind, reading all his secrets, ripping them out of his psyche. It wasn't until his enemy was quiescent, with nothing left to engage, that Blair let him go. Then he burrowed into Jim's love, letting it melt away the fear and anguish of his captivity and battle.

Jim's eyes opened wide and he found himself on his bed, Daniel sitting by him looking like he was asleep, Jack holding Daniel, and Simon, Hector, Nathan, and Jason staring at him.

"Hey," he croaked. "What's going on?"

Jack chuffed out a quick laugh, shaking his head. "Is Blair okay?"

Nodding wearily, Jim nodded. "He's fine."

Relieved sighs were let out all over the room.

"Where is he?" Jack asked.

Good question. Where are you? Jim asked through the bond.

I have no idea, Blair answered. I'm in a room and it's locked. I don't know if I'm alone or not. You'll have to find me. Can you?

Yes, Jim said. "We need to find him," he told the group. He tried to sit up, only then realizing that Daniel was still holding his hand. "What happened?"

"Don't ask me," Jack said. "More mystical mumbo jumbo courtesy of Daniel Jackson. You can ask him when he wakes up." He tapped Daniel's cheek lightly a few times. "Wakey, wakey." Then, to Jim, he added, "Do you need his hand anymore?"

Jim shook his head. "I didn't know I needed it in the first place." But, then, furrowing his brow, he said, "Wait, he got in my head, didn't he?"

Jack nodded. "He did the whole bonding thing except he said different stuff. He said he needed to play midwife." He tapped Daniel again. "You in there, Jackson? Open those baby blues."

Jim gently worked his hand free, and as soon as he did, Daniel's eyes opened. He saw Jim and smiled. "It worked."

Jim smiled back. "It did. Thank you," he said in grateful sincerity.

"Is Blair all right?" Daniel asked.

"He's fine, but we need to find him." Jim swung his legs around to the side of the bed where there
wasn't a crowd. "I'm stiff," he complained. "How long have I been sleeping?" He was wearing a pair of pajama bottoms that he knew he hadn't put on.

"Too damn long," growled Simon.

"And I'm wet," Jim said, appalled, as he realized that he was soaked with his own urine. At least there was a pad underneath him so he hadn't soiled the mattress.

"You had a seizure," Jason said in explanation. He held out an arm for Jim to grab. "I'll help you up."

"You sure you're okay?" Simon asked.

Jim nodded.

"Okay, then," Simon said, "we'll clear out so you can change, but don't take long."

"Don't worry," Jim assured him. "I haven't forgotten Blair." All he wanted was Blair in his arms, but he couldn't go out like this. "Pull a car around, would you? It will take me too long to walk to the driveway like this." He felt weak as a kitten.

As if glad to have something to do, Simon strode off. Jack helped Daniel stand, and Jason wrapped the towel he'd gotten for Jim around Daniel's hand.

"Thanks," Jim said to all of them, not knowing the particulars yet, but knowing that all of them had been watching over him.

"You are welcome," Hector said with a grin. "We are just glad to have you back with us, and will be even gladder when we can return Blair to your side."

"You and me both," Jim said fervently. He was moving easier now and moved to the dresser to grab some clothes.

Hector and Nathan left next, and Jim took one last moment before heading for the shower to say, "Daniel, I don't know how to thank you enough. I don't know what you did, but you helped me get through to Blair. We saved his life. I think if I hadn't gotten to him then, he would have died."

"So he's not in danger now?" Jack insisted.

"He's alone, he said," Jim answered. Then, not wanting to wait another second, he went into the bathroom.

---------------------------------------------

"He's alone?" Jack asked Daniel when Jim closed the bathroom door. "What does that mean? Who was hurting him?"

"It wasn't a person, per se," Daniel said, his face screwed up. "Someone was in his head," he tried to explain.

"Like what we talked about?" Jack clarified.

"Probably," Daniel said, "but it was over so fast, I couldn't tell much."

"We're not worried that whoever is behind all of this isn't going to decide that they might as well just shoot Blair if he's not going to give up all his secrets?" Jack asked irritably. It wasn't enough that Jim was awake; things wouldn't be right until they got Blair back.
"Jim will find him, and even if someone comes for Blair, he now has Jim's strength to pull on."

"That won't help him dodge a bullet," Jack argued.

"No," Daniel said, "but it might help him keep the door closed. Plus with all his Shaman powers back, he can probably talk someone out of shooting him." He tugged on Jack's sleeve. "Let's leave him some privacy to get dressed."

Jack begrudgingly let Daniel drag him from the room. Then, remembering, he said brightly, "Hey, guess who was the one trying to find Randy?"

"Who?" Daniel asked, looking like he wanted to be worried but was thrown off by Jack's smile.

"His sister Susan who, apparently, never wanted to leave him. When I last saw Randy, he was blabbing away on the phone with her." Jack patted his pockets, frowning, "On my phone." He needed to remember to get that back.

Hector must have overheard part of what he'd said, because when Jack got outside he asked, "So Randy is safe, then?"

Jack sniggered at himself for thinking that maybe Hector overheard. He still wasn't used to being surrounded by Sentinels who could hear your stomach gurgle. "Yeah," Jack said happily. That was two down, one to go. Jim safe, Randy safe, all they needed to complete the set was Blair.

As if reading his mind, Nathan said, "All we need is Blair and we'll have them all safe."

"Amen to that," Daniel murmured.

"You all right?" Jack asked.

"I'm fine," Daniel said, removing the towel Jason had wrapped around his hand. "Ow."

"Serves you right for scaring me to death," Jack bitched. He knew, rationally, that Daniel wouldn't just go bond with someone else, but Jack hadn't liked him flirting that close to disaster.

"Jack," Daniel said tenderly. "I never would have done anything to harm our bond."

"I know," Jack said irascibly.

"I told you I'd do it," Wednesday announced sullenly from behind Jack. "I don't know why he got to do it."

Rolling his eyes, Jack said, "Empty your pockets."

"What?" she said.

"Empty your pockets. If there's not a knife or a scalpel in your pockets, then I'll maybe consider thanking you for saving Jim's life."

She glowered at him, but then turned and walked away.

"Thought so," Jack yelled after her.

"Jack," Daniel chided.

"She was going in there to do the same thing Valderama did," Jack said hotly. "And if she had,
she'd have probably killed him. Jim would have seized just like he did with Valderama, and there'd have been no one around to step in like you did. The fact that she was there to stop him was just lucky timing."

Daniel looked like he wanted to argue but there really wasn't anything to say. Jack was right. And if he had anything to do with it, she'd be gone.

Jim stepped out the bungalow door at the same time Simon arrived, driving Jack's SUV over the lawn.

"Hey," Jack objected, patting his pocket for his keys.

"You left them in the ignition," Simon said out the window.


"I thought this would be better than driving my sedan over the lawn," Simon continued.

"Yeah, yeah, whatever," Jack bitched. "Let me drive."

Simon obligingly opened the driver's side door.

"Let me drive," Jim said.

"I don't think so," Jack said. "You've been in a coma for two days. You can ride shotgun." Looking less than thrilled at the prospect, Jim did as told, while Simon and Daniel got in the back.

"Where am I going?" Jack thought he'd ask, as he drove the SUV back to the driveway.

"That way," Jim said, pointing south.

South it was.

The rattle of a doorknob woke Blair from an exhausted sleep. Fear shot through him until he sensed Jim and then, exhaustion gone, he raced to the door. "Jim?"

"Blair?" Jim said back, although the bond blazing between them made it clear to both of them.

There was the sound of a lock disengaging, and then the door was open and Blair was in Jim's arms, swearing he wouldn't leave them for at least as long as he'd been locked in this room.

"Jesus, you feel good," Blair said.

"You do, too," Jim said. "Even if you do smell," he added with a teasing lilt.

"Shut up," Blair said happily, nuzzling closer, knowing Jim didn't care; in fact, he was probably soaking up every molecule of eau d'Blair he could.

Hearing footsteps, Blair tensed momentarily, but when Jim seemed concerned, he relaxed again.

"Anyone?" Jim asked.

"Some really old dead guy," Jack said, "with tattoos all over him."

Blair winced, realizing he'd probably been responsible for the man's demise, but then he forced himself to let it go. It had been a battle to the death, forced on Blair against his will, and Blair had
won. He'd deal with the philosophical ramifications of killing someone later when he was stronger, and after he'd had a chance to meditate and talk to Jim about it.

"No one else?" Jim pushed.

"Nothing," Jack said. "And I mean nothing," he added in disgust. "You can sweep it with your senses if you want, but there's nothing here for my ordinary senses to notice."

Jim nodded, looking happy where he was, holding Blair. Blair was just fine with that.

"Any idea who kidnapped you?" Jack asked Blair.

"No," Blair said. "I never saw anyone. Whoever it was brought me a meal once, but they came when I was sleeping. No one talked to me. And can we leave this room because it stinks?" Blair had no desire to hang out in the room he'd had to use as his toilet.

Jim answered by walking away, keeping Blair tucked under his arm. He shut the door behind them. Blair felt immediately better. "Thanks."

Jim kissed the top of his head.

Pulling back a little, Blair glanced up at his bond mate. "You look like shit," he observed. Jim looked like he hadn't slept in a week. "Not that you don't look perfect to me," Blair added honestly. "I was so afraid you were dead."

Looking somewhat shamefaced, Jim confessed, "I've been out of it for two days. I guess I zoned trying to get to you. I couldn't even help find you," he added bitterly. "Instead I was lying on our bed, and--" Surprisingly, Jim reddened.

Jack slapped him on the arm, "Yeah, Jason had to clean you up, buddy, get over it. It's not like you could help it."

"Oh, Jim," Blair said, hugging him harder. He knew Jim would hate the thought of being dependant on others to take care of his body's needs. He hated even getting sick and having Blair make him soup.

"Who was the guy?" Daniel asked. "And what happened to you?" he inquired of Blair.

"He was a Shaman," Blair said in disgust. "He didn't know much except what he was here to do. I have a picture in my head of who he spoke to, though, if that will help figure things out. How they found a Shaman with his kind of power is beyond me," he added, appalled that someone with so much power would abuse it like that in the pursuit of more power. The hunger he'd felt sickened him. "He fought me in my mind, on some kind of astral plane," Blair said, turning a little to face the other three men, but not leaving the haven of Jim's arms, knowing Jim needed the contact as much as he did. "He kept trying to get into my head." He looked up at Jim. "He would have killed me, I think, or maybe worse, if you hadn't shown up. I was forgetting who I was."

Scowling, Jim held him hard enough to hurt. "I wish I could take the credit for it," Jim said irritably. But, then, gratefully, he added, "It was Daniel who helped me get to you."

Blair smiled thankfully at Daniel. "I felt you there, somehow. Thanks. How'd you do it?"

"Oddly enough, I got the idea from someone who was trying to force a bond on Jim," Daniel said.

Blair didn't like that idea at all and felt for the bond; it was as true and strong as always.
"Although Wednesday had the idea first," Daniel added fairly.

"Wednesday," Jack said scathingly, "didn't come up with anything except what she thought was a sure-fire way to end up in Jim's bed. That girl is a menace."

"Maybe," Daniel said thoughtfully, "or maybe she really did understand what needed to happen to help Jim, but just projected her own needs onto it. It might be worthwhile to have her study closely under Hector and see if she has some instinctive skills worth encouraging."

Jack rolled his eyes and muttered, "Do-gooder." Then, to Blair, he added bitingly, "Before you enroll her in Guide 101 classes, let's talk."

Blair had every intention of talking to Jack, to both of them. While he wasn't inclined to be too charitable toward the girl, Daniel might be right. That was when he noticed the bandage on Daniel's hand. Apprehensive, he reached for Jim's hand and saw a bandage there, too. He hadn't realized it had gone that far.

As if reading his mind, Daniel said, "I didn't touch your bond. I just made myself accessible to Jim so he could..." he shrugged. "I really don't know what I did; I just thought it might help."

"It did," Jim said.

"It did," Blair said at the same time. "I always knew you were different," he said to Daniel with a grin. He couldn't wait to speak to Daniel at some length about the entire thing. There was so much still to learn.

"Do you want to see the tattoos?" Daniel asked. "Would they tell you anything?"

"They might," Blair said reluctantly, as the last thing he wanted to look at was a man he was responsible for killing. "I know where he's from, but he might have some sigils of power on him that might be useful to study."

"I'll take pictures," Jack offered, patting his pockets for his phone. He scowled. "Or not," he added. "Randy still has my phone."

Daniel handed his over.

"How is everyone?" Blair asked, Randy's name reminding him that he hadn't even asked about anyone else. "How is Randy?"

"Randy's fine," Jack told him. "It was his sister, Susan, who was looking for him," he announced. "Randy's ecstatic."

"Really?" Blair asked, equally delighted.

"I bought a plane ticket for her," Jack continued, "and she'll be here in the morning. I was hoping I could pick her up, and now that we've found you in one piece, I can."

"Is Randy going with you?" Blair asked.

Shaking his head, Jack said, "He wanted me to go get her without him. He wanted me and Daniel to fill her in on him being a Sentinel and about the school, so I could make sure she really was okay with it. I don't think he could stand the thought of seeing the same look on her face he must have seen on his mom's. And man, does she sound like a piece of work." He twisted his face up in disgust.
"She's not coming, too, is she?" Blair asked in alarm.

"No," Jack assured him. "She kicked Susan out of the house because she was trying to find Randy." He shook his head in dismayed amazement.

Blair was so glad they'd found the young man. That anyone would toss him away like yesterday's newspaper still revolted him. "Who was trying to force a bond on Jim?" he asked in dread. He'd tried to push that image aside, but it kept coming back.

"Guy named Valderama," Jack said. "It wasn't a bad plan, as plans go," Jack said in reluctant admiration. "They somehow come in and steal you away," he said to Blair, "and I still don't understand how that happened, but, in any case, with you gone, you aren't around to suss out anything when they send in another shipment of military Guides and Sentinels, one of them a plant for, presumably, the NID. In fact, we were all so busy we barely paid them any attention. Delmar did his usual checking them in."

"While you're under attack here," Jim picked up the narrative, "I'm out of commission at the school."

"They take out both leaders," Jack finished up, "undermining the school, maybe hoping they'd have both of you under their control, or at least get all your secrets, and they'd have what they want."

"But why?" Blair asked. "I mean, they could be a part of this openly. Why are they sneaking around and trying to steal things? Why didn't this Valderama guy just come openly as an NID Guide? All he'd have had to do is bond with a Sentinel and the NID would have a bonded pair."

"The NID doesn't like anything they don't understand and that they can't control," Jack said snidely. "They also don't like playing by anyone else's rules, so they don't want to go legit. They think, in some twisted way, that they have the moral high ground in the fight to protect Earth, and that they can get the job done faster, by whatever means necessary, if they don't have to go through bureaucratic channels. It's much more expedient for them to sneak around and get what they want through cheating and lying and worse."

"They're like a bunch of schoolyard bullies," Blair complained.

"Yeah, except with guns and bombs," Jack pointed out. He jerked a thumb over his shoulder. "I'm gonna go take pictures, then let's get this show on the road. There's a bunch of people eagerly waiting for us to get back, and it's already way past bedtime for a lot of them."

"I just want to sleep for a week," Blair admitted, burrowing his face in Jim's chest.

Simon patted him on the shoulder. "All you have to do is swing by, let everyone take a look at you, and then you can escape."

Blair nodded wearily, exhaustion starting to creep up on him now that the adrenalin rush and excitement of seeing Jim was starting to fade. "That's about all I'll be good for," he said. "And I'm taking a shower first," he insisted.

Jim snickered. "You smell wonderful to me," he said, sniffing deeply.

Chuckling against Jim's chest, Blair let himself sink into his warmth and strength and love, and decided to let himself drift until someone told him it was showtime.

Showtime was mercifully brief, and Jim had never been so glad to open the door to his bungalow.
Someone had come by to clean, airing the place out and putting fresh linens on the bed. When he smelled the chocolate chip cookies and saw a covered plate of them on the kitchen counter, Jim guessed that Marilyn was the culprit, and he reminded himself to thank her later.

He shepherded his exhausted bond mate into the bedroom and quickly stripped him. When they'd first gotten back, Blair had taken a quick shower, so there was no need for that. All Jim had to do was strip his own clothes off, which he did post haste.

He knew Blair was beyond tired; Jim was exhausted himself. Their bodies were trembling with fatigue. Jim felt badly at pushing Blair for more, but he had to feel Blair's naked body against his before he could go to sleep. They'd reconnected in their minds and hearts, and now they had to reconnect through touch.

"Blair," Jim whispered in his ear.

"I know," Blair said lovingly. "I know you need to touch me." He grinned softly up at Jim. "Just don't mind me if I sort of doze off now and then."

Jim should have known that Blair would understand. "I love you," he said, meaning it more than anything he'd ever said in his life.

"I know," Blair said with certainty. "And I love you right back." He took Jim's hand and crawled into bed. "Oh, my God, this bed feels so good."

Jim couldn't agree more now that Blair was in it with him. He lay down next to him, running his hand down Blair's chest. Suddenly aware of the fragility of the body lying next to him, he asked, "How can I protect you when someone can come into our bedroom and steal you away?" It made him feel helpless, and Jim hated feeling that way.

"You did protect me," Blair said, holding Jim's hand tightly. "You might not have been able to get to me, but just knowing you were out there kept me strong, kept me fighting."

"Without Daniel," Jim said unhappily, "it wouldn't have been enough."

"Jim," Blair said consolingly, "I know you don't like having to rely on other people, but there's a reason Jack and Daniel were brought into our lives, why all these people became a part of it. We're a part of this amazing community that takes care of its own. Maybe this time Daniel helped and maybe another time it will be someone else. We're a family, and family helps each other."

Jim knew it was true, but having Blair taken from his mind so easily spooked him.

"Besides," Blair continued, "Jack said that now that the NID knows this sort of thing won't work, they won't try it again. They have no idea that someone had to help you to get to me. All they know is that the strongest Shaman they found lost when he took me on. And once we were through whatever it was that was keeping us apart, I saw what he'd done, didn't you?"

Jim nodded. He had figured it out as soon as he was through the wall.

"I don't think they could keep us apart again, do you?"

Jim shook his head. "No."

Blair grinned. "So, just suck it up big guy," Blair said shrewdly. "I know it's a pain in the ass to have friends like Jack and Daniel around, but you'll just have to deal, okay?"
"Okay," Jim said with mock irritation. "That's enough out of you." To stop the man from talking anymore, Jim leaned down and kissed him.

At once, as if it had only been jury-rigged together up to now, their bond snapped securely into place, and Jim forced his tongue into Blair's mouth, fiercely glad when Blair instantly capitulated, opening his mouth, welcoming all of Jim. He encouraged Jim to lie on top of him, opening his legs, so Jim's thighs rested between his.

"When I couldn't feel you in my mind," Jim said shakily, "it was like my world had ended."

"Me, too," Blair said with a gasp, as Jim bit at one of his nipples, following it up with a lick and a kiss. "Get inside me. Now," he ordered. He flailed out toward the bedside table, grasping for some lube.

Jim complied quickly, lubing himself up, and then quickly preparing Blair. He usually liked to take more time than this, exploring his lover's body, driving him slowly insane, but the need for completion was too strong, and their exhaustion was demanding attention, even if desire had put it temporarily on the back burner.

He pushed inside, holding Blair's legs over his shoulders, wanting to get in as deep as he could. Jim let out a groan when he could feel his balls slapping against Blair's ass. "Don't ever leave me," he said hoarsely to Blair, his eyes drinking in the sight of Blair so open to him, feeling his cock slide in and out, Blair's eager body taking him back in each time.

"I won't," Blair promised him. "I'll never leave you," he added so fiercely it brought a sting of tears to Jim's eyes.

The wonder of their relationship, their love, the man who somehow beyond all reason loved him, adored him, all overwhelmed Jim, and he could feel his balls tighten as his body neared orgasm. He wrapped his hand around Blair's erection, his eyes drawn to the curve of Blair's neck as he arched back in pleasure. Letting Blair's legs drop enough to wrap around his waist, Jim thrust in one last time, leaning down so he could kiss Blair as he came deep inside, feeling the creamy liquid from Blair's orgasm coat his fingers.

"Don't ever leave me," he whispered again, slipping out of Blair's body, resting his head on Blair's shoulder. "I can't live without you. I can't."

Blair held him tightly, whispering in his ear that he wouldn't, that Jim was stuck with him, that he loved him, and Jim took all those promises into sleep with him.

The second Jack saw her, he knew it was Susan. She had the same color hair, although it was much curlier than Randy's. She also had his freckles and smile. Jack could also see why Randy had glommed onto Hilary. There was a similarity in the girls' faces and the way they moved.

"Susan?" he asked.

"Are you Jack?" she asked back. When he nodded, she smiled again, then looked behind him. "Is Randy here?" She looked up at Jack in confusion when Randy was nowhere to be found.

"He's waiting for you back at the school," Jack said. At her disappointed face, Jack moved her to one of the seats lining the small airport baggage claim area, and sat them both down. "Listen, I know it wasn't your fault that your mom took you away, but you have to know how much it hurt Randy."
She nodded, her eyes pooling with tears.

"He doesn't blame you, and he's so excited to see you he's driving everyone nuts," Jack quickly said, wanting to forestall any tears before they started. "But, he's scared, too. He wanted me to explain what he is, and what he can do, and explain about the school, because if it's too much for you, he didn't want to see it on your face. He's afraid you won't want to stay. That you'll agree with your mom, and--"

"I don't!" she blurted out. "I never did."

"I'm just trying to explain why he didn't come," Jack said kindly. "It's not that he doesn't want to see you. He just needed to protect himself this little bit more. Are you able to understand that?"

A tear slipped down her cheek. "Yeah," she said sadly. "I get it. But can we go now? I just want to see him. I don't care if he sings to banana trees, I just want to be with him. Okay?"

Jack grinned at her. "Okay. Oh, and this is Daniel." Daniel had suddenly appeared, holding a cup of coffee.

"You must be Susan," Daniel said nicely. "Randy can't wait to see you."

"Hi," Susan said, with that tone of voice that told Jack that she thought Daniel was dreamy.

Shaking his head, Jack stood up. "Let's go. I'll tell you about the school on the way."

She stood up quickly. "I have to get my bag," she said pointing at the carousel where luggage was circulating. "That's it," she exclaimed, pointing at any one of six black bags.

Daniel walked over and gave them a quick perusal, pulling one off after checking the name tag.

"Does he have a girlfriend?" Susan asked a little breathlessly.

"Yeah," Jack found himself growling, appalled that he was jealous of a little fifteen-year-old. He was pitiful. "Me." She might as well hear it from him. It's not like he and Daniel were the only same-sex pair at the school. If she stayed, she'd be dealing with Blair and Jim daily. Might as well find out if homophobia was going to be an issue.

"Damn," she said. "The cute ones are always gay." She smiled up at Daniel as he brought her bag over, sighing deeply.

"What?" Daniel asked, as if he knew he'd missed something.

"Nothing," Jack said quickly. He would never hear the end of it if Daniel knew he'd felt the need to stake his claim over this snippet of a girl.

"Jack told me that you and he, are, well, you know. Together," Susan confided.

"And why would Jack tell you that?" Daniel asked with a suspicious look at Jack.

Deciding he wasn't going to get out of this with his dignity intact and willing to take Susan down with him, Jack confessed, "She thought you were dreamy."

Susan let out a noise of outrage, blushing. "You weren't supposed to tell him that!"

"You weren't supposed to tell him what I told you," he argued right back.
"Jack," Daniel said chidingly, biting back a grin, "do try to remember that you're not fifteen, and are actually a frighteningly, or so I've been told, competent Colonel in the Air Force."

Jack sneered at the love of his life.

Susan was just outright grinning at them. "You two are so cute!"

"Oh, my God," Jack said, slapping a hand over his face. He would never, ever live this down.

Daniel put his arm around Susan. "Susan, I like you. Anyone who can give me blackmail material on Jack within five minutes of meeting him is okay in my book."

She grinned at him. "Are you sure you're taken?"

"Really sure," Daniel said. "But I'm flattered. Thank you. I'm also old enough to be your dad. And Jack could be your grandfather."

"Shut up!" Jack yelled, though it was somewhat muffled through his hand.

That got a giggle.

"Come on, Grandpa," Daniel said. "Let's fill Susan in on the Sentinel School."

"If you say that one more time," Jack warned, then stopped, because it's not like he could say he'd withhold sexual favors when there was a fifteen-year-old staring expectantly at him.

"Yes?" Daniel said, with a butter-won't-melt-in-my-mouth expression. "What will you do?"

Growling, Jack just grabbed Susan's bag and stalked off.

That got another giggle, much to his mortification, and a "He's so funny."

The Goa'uld would be on the floor laughing their asses off to watch Colonel-scourge-of-the-Milky-Way-galaxy-O'Neill be outgunned by a kid.

Fifteen minutes later Susan was staring at Daniel, who was sitting in the backseat so Susan could ride shotgun. "So he really can hear really good, and all that other stuff?"

Daniel nodded. "He really can. And so can a bunch of other people at the school. There are also Guides, who bond with their Sentinels to help them manage their senses."

"And then there are some Guides, like midwife-boy in the back seat," Jack said helpfully, "who bond with people who aren't Sentinels. Like me."

"Mid-wife boy?" Susan queried.

Daniel waved her off. "Long story. I'll explain later. The point is that all that stuff your mom was scared about is true, except it's an amazing gift, not anything bad."

Susan blew out a noise like a raspberry. "I know that. Like Randy could ever be anything bad. Please."

Jack decided he might like this girl after all. "So, we're still heading back to the school?"

"Does Randy already have a Guide?" she asked anxiously.
"Not yet," Jack informed her. He drove up to an intersection.

"Take a left here," Daniel said.

"Why?" Jack said.

"I want to go to Starbucks," Daniel said.

"You just had some coffee," Jack complained.

"No, you're supposed to go right," Susan said.

Both Jack and Daniel said to Susan at the same time, "How did you know that?"

She giggled again, and then, after a pause, said, "One of you's supposed to say, "Ya'll owe me a Coke."

"Why?" Daniel said.

She shrugged. "It's just what you do when two people say the same thing at the same time."

"I don't want a Coke," Daniel argued

"You owe me a Coke," Jack countered.

Jack stopped at Starbucks, bought Daniel more coffee and Susan a hot chocolate. Then, back in the car, he turned to her. "Tell me how to get there."

"How am I supposed to know?" she said with a frown.

"You knew a minute ago," Jack pointed out.

"I know," she said. "That was weird."

"Just close your eyes for a second," Daniel coached. She did, and he said, "Now is there anything inside you that's pointing in a certain direction?"

Her face twisted up but then she nodded and pointed, almost smacking Jack in the nose. "That way." She opened her eyes. "Am I right?"

Jack grinned. "Yup. Keep talking as we go."

After she'd correctly predicted her way to the school and they were driving up the driveway, Jack caught Daniel's eyes in the rearview mirror. "Looks like Randy's found his Guide," he said.

"Me?" she squeaked delightedly. "I'm Randy's Guide?"

"Pretty sure," Jack said.

"Cool!" she enthused as the car came to a stop. Susan spotted Randy who was standing in the doorway looking ready to bolt. She was out of the car in a flash and running to him, and then they were hugging, and crying, and talking a blue streak, and Jack caught Daniel's eyes again and Daniel was grinning as broadly as Jack was.

"Damn good day," Jack said. Everyone was home safe and sound, and Randy had found his sister and his Guide in one fell swoop.
The next day, Randy and Susan happily bonded and still talking like they had to make up for the last two years that afternoon, Jack, Daniel, Jim, Blair, Simon, and Chad all sat in one of the sound-proofed conference rooms. The door was open as they didn't actually need the sound-proofing, but they were soothing rooms, and Jim's senses were still a bit excitable even after making love and sleeping the clock around.

Blair prodded Chad's shin with his shoe. "Now you've got three kids to look after."

It was true. Hilary didn't live with him, still happily living in what Blair silently thought of as the orphan suite, but she went to Chad for everything else. Randy had started to do the same when Jack wasn't around. Susan would, no doubt, follow Randy's example and be looking to both Chad and Jack.

Chad sighed. "I know it. For someone who didn't even want kids, I don't know what the hell happened." If a satisfied smirk wasn't on his face, Blair might have thought he was unhappy about it, but the bond had been just as good for Chad as it had been for Hilary. Somehow, while he had become a place of safety for her with her newly remembered memories of a troubled and painful early childhood, she'd helped him tap into the wonder and fun of being a child who is now safe and loved.

Jack's phone rang and he answered it, stepping outside to take the call. Chad cocked his head to the side, almost like a Sentinel did when he was hearing something.

"Hilary?" Blair asked.

"She's having fun," Chad said with a smile. "She wants me to join them." He sounded half tempted and half distressed that he was tempted.

"Go," Blair said. "She won't be a child forever. We're not talking about anything we can't finish up later."

Chad hesitated for a second, but then he was up and out the door.

"I'll bet," Blair said slowly, "that he didn't have the best childhood either. Hilary's good for him."

"I don't think I'll take that bet, Chief," Jim said, looking fondly at him.

"Me, either," Simon said. "I've learned not to bet against you, Sandburg."

Jack came back in looking perturbed, and he closed the door behind him.

"What happened?" Daniel asked, concerned.

"You remember that planet we were on, Kelowna?" he asked Daniel.

"Of course," Daniel said. To the other three, he clarified, "That's the planet we were on when Blair got taken. Simon knows this, but my crow started to act up and then a bunch of the spirit animals showed up, including your wolf and jaguar."

"That's how we knew you were still alive," Simon said to Blair. "And exactly how did they get to another planet?" Simon demanded, even if he really didn't want to know.

"I imagine they just sent themselves to wherever your crow was," Blair explained. "I don't think distance means anything to them. But it is amazing to think that our spirit animals were on another planet. That's awesome!"
Simon sighed.

"Anyway," Jack said. "Carter just called. Her dad went to check on the planet, to find out why their gate won't open."

"And?" Daniel prompted.

"There was a massive explosion," Jack said. "An area the size of New York City is now just a huge hole in the ground. And that was where the gate was. Where we were," he added grimly.

They all stared at him. "I wonder," Daniel finally said, "if my crow knew something was going to happen, and his determination to get us to leave was about that and not about Jim and Blair at all. It might have just been a coincidence that everything happened at the same time."

"Wow," Blair said in amazement. "It sort of sounds like all of it happening at the same time was a good thing. Not that you wouldn't have listened to your crow, but all of the spirit animals showing up must have been hard to ignore."

"I wouldn't go so far as to say what happened was a good thing," Jim said wryly.

Blair wrapped his fingers around Jim's hand. "I know, but when you think about it, a lot of good came out of it. It maybe saved Jack and Daniel's lives. We discovered how to protect ourselves if something like this ever happens again, and we figured out something new about Daniel." He stopped and considered his friend. "It might be interesting to try some experiments."

Jim started laughing. Pointing at Daniel, he said, "You are going to regret that act of altruism."

Blair shoved him with his shoulder. "Hey, all those experiments I did on you helped."

"Yeah, you keep telling yourself that, Chief," Jim said with a twinkle in his eye.

Daniel, pointedly ignoring Jim, said, "I'd be glad to do some experiments with you, Blair."

"Thank you," Blair said gratefully, shooting Jim a disapproving look through narrowed eyes.

"Don't say I didn't warn you," Jim said cheerfully to Daniel. "I'm just glad it's not me."

"It won't be you for anything, if you keep it up," Blair said darkly.

Jim bit his lips, although his cheeks grew round with silent laughter.

Blair gave up and started laughing. "All I'm saying is all's well that ends well. Can I say that?"

"Yeah, you can say that," Jim said affectionately.

"Hear, hear," Simon said. "Although I'd rather never have it happen again, if it's all the same to you."

"I'm voting with Simon on this one," Jack said.

"A little trouble in paradise is never a bad thing," Blair said philosophically. "It keeps us on our toes."

"Strung up by the neck is more like it," Jack countered.

"Fine," Blair said, sighing theatrically. "I can see I'm doomed to hang out with a bunch of glass-is-
half-empty kind of guys." Not that he meant it. This school would be nothing more than a pipe dream without all the hopes and dreams and hard work of the men in this room. And all the other men and women who worked round the clock to make it a reality. Not to mention all the Sentinels and Guides.

"Not that this hasn't been a barrel of laughs," Jack said, "but Daniel and I have been here way too long. Hammond's going to be sending out the National Guard looking for us."

Blair was disappointed, but they had been here a lot lately. "I can't thank you guys enough. All of you," he added, taking in Simon with his smile.

Simon shrugged, leaning back, "Hey, you guys are my meal ticket. Couldn't just let you die. I'd be out on the streets eating out of dumpsters."

It had just been too stressful a week, Blair supposed, for any of them to feel comfortable getting up close and personal to their feelings. He let Simon's comment slide.

"And get rid of Wednesday," Jack advised as he got to his feet. "I know you think maybe she's got some intuitive thing going on, but she's nothing but trouble."

"I need to talk to her, first," Blair said, "but I won't rule it out. I'm just not sure what kind of life she'll live if she keeps feeling the call to come here and isn't allowed."

"She'll land on her feet," Jim said. Blair knew Jim agreed with Jack. They all did, except maybe Daniel, but when it came to the safety of the school, Daniel tended not to argue with Jack. "I'll talk to her," he promised.

"And I'll be there when he does," Jim assured the rest of them, which, much to Blair's annoyance, made them all relax.

Blair chose to let that slide, too. Wednesday could wait for another day. Today all he wanted to do was visit with the students, touch Jim as often as possible, and be grateful he was alive.

"Oh, hey," Jack said. "I got permission for you two to go through the gate to see what it's like, see if Sentinels would do all right with the wormhole thing. You game?"

Blair's mouth dropped open. "Go to another planet? Shit, yeah!" He grinned hugely at Jim. "You?"

Jim didn't look anywhere near as thrilled, but he nodded. "I suppose we should find out if all that input incapacitates a Sentinel. We wouldn't be much good to you if we come out the other side in a zone."

"We'll give you some time to get settled back in and then we'll set it up," Daniel said. "Simon, you're welcome to come, too."

"I'll pass," Simon said quickly. "I like my feet on my own Earth, if you don't mind."

"You don't know what you're missing," Daniel said.

"I've got plenty of excitement right here," Simon said firmly. "I don't need to go looking for it."

Goodbyes were exchanged, and then Daniel and Jack went off to pack, planning to say goodbye to the kids before they left.

Simon gave Blair and Jim a satisfied smile, saying, "Could you try to stay out of trouble for the rest
of the day?” Before they could answer, he strode out of the conference room.

Jim and Blair looked at each other. Blair had a thousand and one things to do. He really needed to meet with all the bonded pairs, to talk about what happened with him and Jim, and try to explain how to escape should something like that happen. He and Jim needed to look through more files to identify more Sentinels, and they still had a trip to finish. He sighed, suddenly aware of how tired he still was, and how much he mostly just wanted to be with Jim. "Bed?" he asked his bond mate.

"Bed," Jim agreed, taking his hand and pulling him up.

The End!!!!

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