Life For Rent

by elaine

Summary

Following his near death experience in Sentinel Too, Blair struggles to come to terms with how it has affected his life.

Notes

This story has been percolating for a very long time. It was inspired partly by the UK show Touching Evil, about a detective who'd had a Near Death Experience. Initially I'd intended to write it as a Due South story. Then I got sucked into The Sentinel and there was a canon Near Death Experience, so how could I resist?

This story was finally written for the Sentinel Big Bang, and I want to thank Morgan for organising it, and Pyschgirl for helping me with the psychological aspects of the story. Also Pattrose for the lovely illustrations. You can find the illustrated version of the story here.

Drowning, he'd always thought, was supposed to be an easy death. Peaceful. Now was a pretty damn sucky time to find out that it wasn't peaceful at all. His lungs burnt, and his chest felt like it was going to explode with the pressure of protecting what little breath remained in him. Outside his skin the water caressed him, cool and impersonal as the hands that held him down. He'd already given up struggling against them, concentrating all his energy on just holding on. Waiting. Jim will come. Jim will save me, just hold on. The words circled comfortably in his mind, well worn and smooth from frequent use. Jim always saved him, would always save him. Jim would come
Jim… wasn't going to come. The strong, handsome planes of his partner's face rippled eerily before his open eyes. Oh, right… the water, the fountain… yeah… ripples. Neat effect.

Jim's face, studiously impassive, allowing no purchase for any emotion to break through its defences. Jim's voice: “…breach of trust… don't know if I can get past this…”

You know where to find me. But Jim hadn't come.

Jim wasn't going to save him this time.

The water bit deep into his lungs, forcing its way into every crevice of his being, and it burned, even worse than the pain of holding it at bay. But the pain faded swiftly, becoming little more than a memory. He was dying, and it wasn't so bad now. Now that he'd given up, submitted to the implacable force of the water. They – the anonymous 'they' of authority, of urban legend and folk tale – were right. Drowning was an easy way to die. It was clinging to life that hurt.

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The jungle was… well, unexpected. It was Jim's jungle, not his. Even in death, it seemed, he was inextricably bound up with his sentinel. No escaping. Boy, was Jim going to be pissed. Wasn't like Jim actually wanted him any more.

He looked down at his paws, wondering at how it was so easy for him to trot on four legs when he'd only ever been used to two. Just one of those things, he supposed. Pretty cool to be a wolf, though. He picked up the pace a little, heading towards the light that glowed through the undergrowth, enjoying the way his unfamiliar musculature bunched and released as he ran in a smooth, powerful lope.

Maybe once he reached the light he'd be free of this place. Didn't want to risk meeting Jim in here. Jim wouldn't like that, and it would just about break his heart if he had to face Jim's rejection again. The guttural snarl of a big cat came from behind, and he stumbled momentarily, before plunging forward. Was that Jim? He wasn't sure, and didn't want to find out.

There was peace in the rhythmic tattoo of his paws against the ground; warmth and hope where the light danced playfully across his fur. The light called to him, sang to him; the sound reminded him of that Pentecostal church he'd gone to once for an undergrad assignment – a sweet, melodic white noise that poured over him like warm honey, like the melting sensation he got after the most mind blowing orgasms. It welcomed him, enveloped him with the calm sure knowledge that this was where he belonged, a sanctuary that would never be taken away from him. He ached with the desire to fling himself into the radiance and become a part of it.

Again the cat cried out, a wailing, desolate cry of need and loss slicing through the quiet harmonics. For a moment his pace faltered. The cat didn't really need him, didn't want him, and the light was so very beautiful… he wanted the light with an intensity that made every emotion he'd ever experienced seem like a child's fleeting whim.

His forward momentum slowed, stopped, and he knew he had to turn back. He'd never failed Jim in his life – whatever Jim's opinion might be on that score – and he wouldn't now. With a soft whine, he turned and ran back along the trail. Ahead, the black jaguar was leaping towards him in huge bounds. Unconsciously, his legs pumped harder, matching the determined strides of the cat. As they drew together he leapt, saw the jaguar do the same, and then they were inside each other, merging in a flash of light brighter even than the light he'd abandoned.
For a brief instant of time he was Jim; he knew him, everything he'd ever been, ever would be, understood everything about Jim with a crystal clarity that pierced him to the soul. It lasted for no more than the space of a heartbeat. And then the jungle was gone, and he was coughing and spitting up water; and he was cold and wet, and aching all over his body.

Welcome back.

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Hands thrust deep into his jacket pockets to hide the fact that they were still shaking, Jim prowled the waiting room restlessly, while Simon sat, a grim and looming presence in one of the bright orange plastic chairs. Everybody else in the room had moved to the far end, and even the hospital staff tended to take a wide detour around the two men. The euphoria had worn off a while back, and Jim suspected that Simon was also realising just how close they'd come to losing Blair forever.

His gut tightened and Jim turned away, pacing halfway down the corridor before returning to the main part of the room. He could still feel the chilled skin against his hands, still taste the chlorinated water of the fountain on Blair's lips. Still sense the emptiness inside him that said Blair was gone. Only the slow, steady percussion of Blair's heartbeat, easily discernable over the sounds of the nurses and doctors working on him, kept Jim from losing it completely.

The movement kept him from zoning on that sound, but more importantly, it kept him from having to think too much. Or talk to Simon, which was completely beyond him right now. Sandburg had died, for god's sake, and only Jim knew what that really meant – the complete absence of sound, of movement, down to the faint shushing sound of blood moving through veins and arteries, that Jim hadn't even been aware of noticing until it was gone.

Telling himself that everything was okay now didn't help. He'd brought Sandburg back from the fucking dead; which went against everything he believed in. Once you were dead, that was it. Game over. Nobody came back from that. Except Sandburg, apparently. And that was something that Simon would never, ever, want to know about.

And what about Blair? Fuck! How do you tell someone they were dead and you'd brought them back to life? He could just about see the roll of Sandburg's eyes, the sarcastic “Yeah, right.”

Even worse… what if he did believe it? More tests. Sandburg rummaging around in his memories, wanting to talk it over. Pick it to pieces; examine every tiny detail for hidden meaning. And what the fuck would he make of that final, stunning joining of their spirit animals? Something complicated and messily Freudian, probably. He didn't need that kind of crap. Didn't want to think about what it all meant.

He managed not to slam his fist through the wall. The pain would at least have given him some distraction, but he didn't want the attention right now. He glanced back at Simon. Simon didn't know, for sure, what had happened at the fountain; and he certainly wouldn't ask questions when he suspected he wouldn't like the answers. Simon wouldn't say anything to Blair about it. Nobody else would have any idea that Sandburg had really died.

That settled it. Sandburg was better off not knowing, and, as a bonus, it meant Jim didn't have to spill his guts.

A mental image of Blair stretched out on a mortuary table, his body split open from throat to groin flashed behind Jim's eyes, and if he'd had time to have breakfast this morning, he would have lost it then. Clenching his jaw, he forced the nausea back down and almost missed the doctor who was talking earnestly to Simon. He forced his hearing up too far and winced at the clatter of a cart
knocking against a wall somewhere on the floor above.

“…one at a time, please. Mr Sandburg is very tired. No more than five minutes each.”

“Of course.” Simon's voice rumbled reassuringly. He smiled as Jim walked over to join him. “Jim? We can go see Blair now.”

“You go first, Simon.” He needed more time to pull himself together. If he went to see Sandburg like this, he'd lose it for sure.

“Why don't you come with me? You can wait outside.” Listen in, the worried brown eyes told him. Hear for yourself that Sandburg's all right.

“Sure.” He fell into step with his boss. “They're keeping him a couple of days?” He thought he'd heard that.

“Yeah. Jim, are you okay?” Simon flashed another rapid assessing glance in his direction. “You don't look too good.”

Jim avoided meeting Simon's eyes. “I guess it's just sinking in how close we came…” he couldn't actually say the words, but Simon's hand, heavy on his shoulder, told him it was unnecessary.

“Too damn close.”

“Yeah.” He stopped, just short of the doorway. He could hear Sandburg's heartbeat on the other side of the closed doors. For now, that was enough. “Don't be too long in there.”

He tuned out the voices until they were just a wordless murmur; enough to be reassuring, but leaving the two men their privacy. While he waited, leaning against the wall, a nurse went into the room and a moment later, Simon came out.

“Your turn.” Simon nodded back towards the room. “And, Jim? When you're done here, there's work we've got to do back at the station.”

“I hear that.” Jim smiled grimly. He'd get that bitch if it was the last thing he did. “She's left Cascade for real now. I can feel that she's gone.”

Simon just glanced at him sideways. Not happy, but willing to use whatever advantage Jim's sentinel abilities could give him. “We'll be on it. We'll find her, Jim. I swear.”

He glanced at the open doorway, and mentally nerved himself. “Thanks, Simon.” He went in, and stopped just inside the doorway, waiting while the nurse stopped fussing with Sandburg's IV. Drinking in the sight and sound of his guide.

Sandburg looked almost normal. A little pale, obviously drained of strength. His lungs didn't sound too good, but they would heal. Someone had brushed the mass of curls back from his face, and there was a little cannula beneath his nose, feeding him a trickle of oxygen. It seemed impossible he'd been dead only an hour ago.

“You know, Chief, if you want to meet nurses, there are easier ways.” He passed the nurse and went to stand near the foot of the bed. Somehow, maintaining that small extra distance helped.

Blair smiled perfunctorily. “That's great, man, that's great. Now you tell me.” His smile faded, and there was a brief hesitation, and Jim barely had time to control the panicked realisation that somehow, impossibly, Blair knew. “Thank you.”
The only thing he could think to do was to deflect it with humour. “I couldn't let you die. You owe your last month's rent.”

Fuck. Could he really be that crass? But, obedient to his lead, Blair smiled faintly. “Oh, that's right. Sorry about that.”

He flashed again, for a moment, on the image of Blair's dead body on that mortuary table, and knew he had to do better than this. So Blair knew that he had died. Maybe someone told him. It didn't mean that he knew anything about that vision. That had all been inside his own head, hadn't it?

“You doing all right?”

Blair stirred tiredly and his voice gained a little more liveliness. “Yeah, you know. I'm all right. I saw it. The whole out-of-body experience. It wasn't like that classic light-at-the-end-of-the-tunnel thing. There was just a jungle. I was this wolf, and I was running towards a black jaguar. Then we collided, and there was this big burst of light. Next thing I knew, I was spitting up water. The doctors are trying to tell me it's some type of an endorphin rush when the body starts to shut down, but it was...”

“The same image. I saw the same image.” If he closed his eyes, he'd be able to see it. That incredible moment when Blair had been a part of him. He'd been Blair. Had known more about Blair than he'd ever known about himself. Had understood everything about Blair. Almost immediately, the knowledge had faded, but he still remembered that feeling. Had Blair felt the same thing? The idea terrified and enthralled him in equal measure.

Blair's eyes brightened a little. “You had the same vision?”

“Yeah. It was Incacha who guided me how to bring you back.” That much, he could admit without any difficulty. Better to talk about that than the other thing.

But, of course, Blair wasn't going to be so easily diverted. He laughed softly. “I can't believe this. Einstein said the greatest experiences we can have are the ones with the mysterious. We are definitely there, my brother. Come on in, man. The water's nice.”

Every muscle in his body froze at the thought of what Blair was implying. This was exactly the kind of shit that he most hated about being a sentinel. The senses; he could appreciate them. They were useful. The visions were just irritating and vaguely threatening on a level he'd rather not think about.

With an effort, he managed to hide his dismay. “Chief, I don't know if I'm ready to take that trip with you.”

The kid looked disappointed, and too tired to argue, although Jim suspected he'd hear about it later. He managed to lean forward and pat the hand that lay on the covers. “Why don't you get some sleep?”

Blair's eyelids were already drooping. He nodded vaguely and yawned. “See you later, Jim.”

“Yeah.” He turned away, then stopped. “Uh, Blair? I'll get your stuff, move it back into the loft. You don't have to do anything, okay?”

“…kay…” Blair's head slid limply to one side. He snuffled a little and sighed quietly.

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Megan was sitting patiently by his bedside when Blair woke the following morning. Instantly, his heart rate skyrocketed. “Jim? Megan, is Jim okay?”
“Relax, Sandy. He's fine.” She patted his arm in what he assumed was meant to be a reassuring manner.

But her voice was tense, and that didn't help him to catch his breath enough to ask further. When he finally managed to stop coughing and flopped back against the pillows, exhausted and watery-eyed, he shot her a questioning look.

“He's gone after her.” Megan's lips thinned angrily. “Simon got confirmation that she'd arrived in Sierra Verde and both he and Jim left late last night.”

“He what?” Blair pressed his lips together, fighting off another coughing attack as he forced himself to breathe slowly through his nose. “Jim shouldn't be anywhere near her. Not without me. She's been messing with his head from the start.”

“Well, they'll be there by now. There's not much you can do about it, Sandy.” Her smile wasn't very reassuring. “He asked me to keep an eye on you until he gets back.”

“I'm not waiting…” he coughed, forced it back and sat up, pulling the cannula from his nose and tossing it aside. “Get my clothes will you, Megan?”

She stood, towering over him on the hospital bed. “What do you think you're doing?”

“Leaving.” He swung his legs over the side and slid off the edge, nearly falling as his knees buckled. “My clothes, Megan.”

“You're a bloody drongo. You know that, don't you?” She helped him to the chair she'd been sitting on, then went to the locker and pulled out a pile of folded clothing.

Blair smiled weakly. “I might if I had any idea what a 'drongo' was.” He had a pretty good idea though.

Megan smiled perfunctorily. “So how do you plan to get past the doctors?”

“That's the easy part.” He and Jim had both had plenty of practice at that. “You think you can rustle up a ticket to Sierra Verde while I get dressed?”

“Two tickets.” At his surprised look she sighed. “Jim would skin me alive if I let you go alone. So don't even think about arguing.” She stopped at the door, hands on hips and frowned at him. “Besides, you won't even make it out the door without my help, and you know it.”

There was nothing more annoying than Megan when she was right.

Sleeping the whole way to Sierra Verde, apart from the necessary change of flights in Los Angeles, did wonders for his exhaustion, and the humid air, when they arrived, helped to ease the dry cough that had irritated him so much on the plane. By the time they reached the hotel, Blair was feeling almost normal again.

“I'm sorry señor, señorita, but the hotel is full.” The desk clerk shrugged perfunctorily. He didn't look even the slightest bit sorry. “A wedding party of Americanos.”

Megan opened her mouth to protest, but Blair shot her a glance that said clearly 'let me handle this' and she subsided. “That's all right. I'm Señor Ellison's partner. I'll share with him, and the señorita…” he hesitated, knowing that neither Megan nor Simon was going to like this. At all. “…the señorita will share with Capitan Banks.”
The desk clerk's eyebrows lifted, but he shrugged again and handed over a couple keys. “Welcome to Sierra Verde.”

The reason for the clerk's reaction became clear when Blair opened the door to Jim's room. Megan giggled. “How romantic, Sandy.”

He was still wheezing from climbing two sets of stairs, so maybe that was the reason his heart felt like a leaden weight. Share a double bed with Jim? Oh yeah, Jim was gonna love that. He stared at the four-poster monstrosity in dismay, but followed Megan into the room. “Wonder how Simon's going to like sharing with you.”

Megan's eyes widened, but she smiled determinedly. “I'm sure he won't mind sleeping on the floor.”

Somehow Blair doubted that, but he didn't say anything. He dropped his duffel on the floor and climbed – actually climbed – onto the bed and flopped onto his back. Maybe if he could just lie here for a few hours – or days… he tried not to notice how Megan kept shooting little concerned glances in his direction as she moved around the room, unnecessarily inspecting the furniture, the cheap framed print on the wall, the tiny bathroom.

Finally, he roused himself to speak. “You should go get settled in Si… in your room. I'll just stay here for a while. There's no telling where Jim and Simon are.”

She came over to the bed, leaning against the post and looked down at him, her flirty smile not even coming close to hiding the concern in her eyes. “You trying to get rid of me, Sandy?”

He chuckled dutifully, trying to think of a suitably light-hearted response. He used to be better at this.

The door flew open, sending him into panicked movement. He'd just managed to get himself sitting, his heart pounding, when he realised it was Jim. With a gun. Pointing at him. Somehow, that wasn't as reassuring as it ought to be. “Wait. Jim, don't shoot, man. It's only us.” He was only half joking, he realised.

To his relief, Jim lowered the gun and put it away, his eyes still narrowed. “What are you two doing here?”

Nice welcome, Jim. Yeah, I'm feeling much better, thanks.

The depth of his bitterness took Blair's breath away for a moment and before he could gather his wits, Megan stepped in. “Oh, I heard you and Simon came to Sierra Verde without me so I thought I'd come and help you. Did you find her?”

Jim's jaw tightened, but he only said, “We know she's here.”

“Have you seen her?”

“Yeah, sort of.” Jim's eyes slid away from his. “I got to meet Simon at the cafe.”

It was obvious that Jim didn't want either of them here. And the bed was surprisingly comfortable. And Simon was bound to be even pissier about this than Jim was. Blair heard himself saying “Well... We'll just stay here.”

Jim's hand clamped around his wrist and tugged him off the bed. “Come on. You're not getting off that easy.”

Great. Just great. Not for the first time, Blair wished he'd just stayed at home. He'd thought, when
he'd seen Jim in the hospital, that finally things might change between them, that the uneasy truce they'd maintained since Jim had read the opening chapter of the diss might somehow develop into a true partnership again. Guess not...looks like it's business as usual.

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The plan had been to fly into Sierra Verde, help Jim find Alex and the nerve gas, then get the hell out. There were things he ought to be doing in Cascade – like his job – and Blair really hadn't expected to be hunted by a tank full of hit men. He should have known that anything involving Jim, to say nothing of another sentinel, wouldn't be quite so simple.

Not to mention that, being barely out of hospital, sleeping on a church bench wasn't exactly his idea of restful recuperation. Blair woke in the grey light of pre-dawn with a sense of foreboding, which only deepened when he realised that Jim had gone.

How Blair found the beach, he wasn't afterwards sure. He remembered leaving the church and wandering through narrow alleys, not really knowing what direction he was heading in, but feeling a pulling sensation that – he hoped – wasn't anything to do with the water he'd coughed out of his lungs back in Cascade. Well, he had antibiotics to take care of that; if only there was a pill he could take to get his head in the right place.

Jim was on the beach with Alex, but instead of fighting they were... he stared, his mind numb with disbelief. It was only three days since she'd killed him and there was his friend, his partner kissing her like... Blair's throat tightened; he couldn't process this, couldn't accept the reality of it. As if he were in a dream, he heard himself calling Jim's name.

Alex reacted immediately, snatching Jim's gun and pointing it at Blair while Jim simply watched her. After a moment that seemed to stretch to infinity, Blair raised his hands. His whole body felt off balance, for one brief moment so light and insubstantial that it might float away if he wasn't careful, and then, almost immediately, weighed down by the bone and muscle and sinew that kept him anchored to the world.

With every panicked beat of his heart, he expected Jim to do something – knock Alex out, wrestle her to the ground; hell, just take the damn gun off her. But he did nothing. Said nothing. He was going to let her do it. Blair swallowed and closed his eyes, waiting for the burn of the bullet, knowing that this time Jim really wouldn't save him. Not even Jim's spirit animal would be able to deal with a gaping hole in his chest.

Soon. It'll all be over soon. And I can go back – back to the light and the music... back to where I belong. Home. He felt strangely peaceful – if it was possible to be simultaneously at peace and shit scared.

But there was no gunshot, and eventually Blair opened his eyes to see Jim gently, so gently, push Alex's hand down and take the gun from her. The whole interlude had probably taken no more than a couple of seconds, but it had seemed like an eternity. Blair watched numbly as Alex pulled free of Jim and ran off down the beach while Jim simply stared after her.

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The church was empty when Blair returned and he dropped into one of the pews with a sigh of relief. Well, more of a wheeze actually, but who was listening? Jim had left him, gone off to investigate something that he hadn't wanted Blair's help with, and Blair was glad to be alone. He should be trying to figure something out, to help Jim; but all he could see was Jim's gun pointing at him and the way that Jim and Alex had been together.
Yeah, together in a way that he and Jim had never been. Never would be.

He didn't dare think about that other thing, about the way he'd wanted Alex to shoot him, wanted to go back to the place that now felt more real than the physical world he still inhabited. He couldn't think like that. Jim needed him, had called him back from death to keep him here. That had to mean something… even if Jim didn't seem to know what to do with him, now that he'd got him back.

“Oh man…” He leaned forward, arms resting on his thighs, and allowed his head to droop forward. He felt hollowed out, more devastated by this latest turn of events than he had been by his own murder. And Jim… what the hell was up with Jim? Telling himself that it was some kind of primitive sentinel instinct didn't really help lessen the sense of betrayal he felt.

Pain stabbed through his chest, and Blair realised he wasn't breathing; hadn't been for too long. He managed a shallow rasping breath and started to cough, until it felt like his lungs were tearing under the strain. Finally, he wrestled it under control and started to take small, regular inhalations, holding the air in his lungs for a moment before slowly releasing it.

“Are you all right, Sandy?” Megan's voice, coming apparently from out of nowhere, startled him into motion. “Hey, easy there. It's only me.”

He blinked and brushed the hair back out of his eyes. “Sorry. I didn't hear you come in. Is Simon around?”

“He's gone to find Captain Ortega.” She held out a tray of heavy paper cups, smelling faintly of coffee. “I’m in charge of the breakfast detail. Want one?”

“Oh, god yes…” He took a cup and flipped off the lid. The first sip of coffee sent a shiver of pleasure through him and he smiled up into her worried face. “Marry me and have my babies.”

Megan smiled coquettishly and produced a large paper bag from the pew behind him, holding it open so he could see the selection of pastries. “What would you say to one of these?”

“I'd say marry me and I'll have your babies.” He grinned as her laughter smoothed the last of her worry lines away. “Should we be eating in here?”

“Probably not.” Megan bit into a pastry with relish. “Although Captain Banks did say to stay out of sight. Where's Jim? When I woke and found you both gone, I figured you two were together.”

Blair took another sip of coffee to cover his confusion. He wasn't ready to talk about what had happened, especially not with Megan who would certainly question him thoroughly. “Uh… we were, but he wanted to get some information about… something…” and, hell, did that sound lame… “I don't know where he is now.”

Megan was frowning again, but to Blair's relief she didn't ask anything more. He leaned back against the pew and took a listless bite of the pastry, his appetite gone.

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Arguillo was already at the rendezvous point when they arrived, forcing them to take up a position further from the riverbank than Jim would have liked. He still had a clear line of sight and he'd be able to hear anything that Aguillo and Alex said, but they were too far away to take action if something went down.

Beside him, Blair reeked of nervousness, setting Jim's nerves on edge. Of course, Blair had every reason to be afraid – Alex had tried… had succeeded in killing him and, at their last meeting, Jim
hadn't exactly fulfilled his Blessed Protector role with any distinction. He didn't like thinking about that; it roused in him a vague irritation directed mostly – and unfairly – at Blair.

He thought he heard something – a faint sound. “What is that?”

Before Blair could even respond, he recognised it; a helicopter. It flew up the river, circled round and landed on the shingle. Alex stepped out, a backpack over her shoulder.

The sense of foreboding Jim felt got even worse. There was something about the combination of Alex's presence and Blair's that screwed with his head. He knew that, but nothing he could do seemed to help. His senses prickled, extending instinctively and he heard heartbeats. More than there ought to be. At the same moment, he saw Alex pause and knew she was listening too. More and more, it seemed as though their abilities were linked in some way, as though they were becoming a single being.

“There's something else down there.”

“Down there?” Blair craned his neck to see. “Down where? Down by the river?”

But Jim wasn't just listening any more. His sight zoomed, following the sounds to a pile of debris. Through gaps between the dried out grasses and sticks he saw the muzzle of a rifle.

“Alex! Get back. It's a trap.” He didn't remember getting to his feet and running forward. He didn't remember consciously deciding to call out. He heard Megan asking furiously what he was doing as the quietness of the riverbank exploded with the sound of gunfire. Self preservation took over as his own gunfire, as well as Simon's and Connor's drew the attention of what remained of Arguillo's men – Alex's response had been chillingly deadly – and he dived back behind the log. Blair was on the ground, his breath coming in harsh, panicked gasps.

It was over quickly. Alex climbed back into the helicopter and Arguillo and his remaining men took off on their quad bikes. Jim heard the scream of a jaguar, saw a flash of blue and shook his head, not sure if it was real or if he was going crazy.

He glanced down at Blair. “Chief, you all right?”

“Yeah, I'm fine.” He didn't look fine; he looked sickly, scared, and mad as hell. “But what is wrong with you?”

He had no answer for that, or for Simon's louder, angrier reaction, or Connor's furious though mercifully silent glare. That tenuous connection he felt with Alex was all that seemed to matter right now.

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Blair's heartbeat had almost returned to normal as he trudged with the others along the riverbank. He was still trying to make sense of what had just happened. Not even the confrontation down at the beach had been as bad as this – Jim had blown their cover, put all their lives in danger because of this one woman. It was becoming uncomfortably clear that he simply couldn't trust Jim any more. None of them could.

And Jim… for all his admission to Simon, Jim was acting like it didn't even matter. An apology would be nice, but no, Jim never apologised, never explained. Just as he'd never said anything about abandoning Blair to Alex's murderous impulses, or after that confrontation at the beach. It was always Alex…
Wow. Blair dragged in a shaken breath; shocked by the bitterness and anger he was feeling. Maybe Jim deserved that anger, but it wasn't going to help right now. He needed to get his head clear and keep focused, because Jim sure as hell wasn't.

Almost on cue, Jim shook his head sharply. “Jim, you all right?”

Jim didn't answer. Too busy staring in the direction that damn helicopter had taken. It seemed like that was the last straw for Megan. “Have we decided whose side you're on?”

Again, nothing. Blair answered for him. “He's with us. Get the gas and the girl. We're back on track.”

Megan rolled her eyes incredulously. “She was in a helicopter. By now, she could be halfway to Panama.”

Finally, Jim took notice. “And that helicopter's leaking fuel. Let's just keep heading upriver.” He walked off leaving Blair and Megan staring after him in speechless dismay. It was as though nothing else mattered except finding Alex. And when they did… what would happen then?

“Jim, even if the chopper goes down, there's no way for us to track her in this bush.” Even Simon's objections made no impression with Jim. He simply waved his arm, beckoning them on and continued trotting along the riverbank. Assuming, Blair supposed, that they'd follow.

So of course, they did, while Simon headed back to Sierra Verde for help. What else could they do?

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They'd been walking for a couple of hours now, not so much following Alex's trail as following Alex. Jim didn't need to look for signs – whatever that connection he felt to Alex was, he couldn't deny its usefulness now. He knew exactly where to go, and he was following as fast as he could manage in the thick undergrowth.

He was only peripherally aware of Blair trailing determinedly behind, his breathing getting harsher, messier all the time. He ought to stop for a while, or at least slow down, to allow Blair some respite; but Jim continued at the same pace, ignoring the angry glare he knew Connor was aiming at his back. He could just about feel the sensation of heat between his shoulder blades.

What neither of them seemed to get was that he needed to get to Alex, though whether to kill her or to fuck her even he wasn't sure. He'd argued against them coming – god, he'd been furious that Simon had insisted on the two of them going with him – but he might as well have saved his breath. After the way he'd reacted at the river's edge, well… he could understand why Simon was worried. And pissed off – all of them were pissed at him, especially Blair.

A twinge of guilt made Jim's steps falter. Blair had been bitterly angry with him, and deservedly so, Jim supposed. He'd quickly pushed that anger down inside himself and tried to be calm and reasonable, but Jim could see the resentment, the hurt that Blair refused to voice. The memory of it finally cut through the compulsion that was driving him and Jim signalled to the others that they should stop and rest for a while.

Blair sank down into a crouch and hung his head, taking deep, rasping breaths while Connor bent over him, asking softly if he was okay.

Jim took a quick sip from his water flask and then held it out to Blair. “Just a couple of mouthfuls, then rest for a minute.”
“Thanks, Jim.” Blair's voice was strained, his cheeks pale under the flush of exertion. He glanced sideways at Connor, who'd moved away and was drinking from her flask. “Are we catching up? How far ahead is she?”

Jim didn't miss the note of apprehension in Blair's voice, and knowing that he was as much the cause of Blair's fear as Alex was… well, that was a sobering thought. He turned his head away for a moment, struggling to control the instincts that nagged at him to find Alex. “Far enough that we won't catch her today.” He inspected Blair from head to toe, taking in the exhausted tremors, the unhealthy pallor and the soggy breathing. “Look… you don't have to keep going, okay? Why don't you and Connor turn back and let me take it from here.”

“You're kidding, right?” Blair lowered his voice to a harsh whisper. “Jim, the way you react around her… there's no way I'm letting you face her alone.”

“But that's part of the problem, Chief.” Jim glanced over at Connor and kept his voice to the same low murmur. “It'd be easier for me to face her if I don't have to worry about you. And having Connor with us means I've got to be doubly careful. I don't want her finding out about my sentinel abilities.”

“We'll have to be careful,” Blair agreed reluctantly, but he took in another shaky breath and rose to his feet. “I'm ready to go on now.”

Pushing down his anger, Jim turned away, allowing the tug of instinct to guide him further into the jungle.

***

Blair would (no doubt about it) find it suspiciously convenient that Incacha had appeared to Jim in a dream to tell him to do exactly what he'd wanted to do all along – which was to ditch Blair and Connor and continue on alone. Jim left them without compunction, trusting that Blair's experience in the jungle wasn't entirely fabricated to impress prospective girlfriends and that, if it was, Connor was smart enough to get them both back to Sierra Verde safely. He knew damned well that what he'd dreamed was a true vision and not some subconscious wish fulfilment. He'd never had any trouble telling the difference.

He also knew that waking Blair to tell him would be an exercise in futility. Blair was going to stick like glue to his side, regardless. So Jim simply slipped away, leaving the others sleeping.

He found the helicopter a couple of hours later, the pilot dead inside and no sign of Alex in the vicinity. But then, he already knew where she was. It wasn't far now, and he picked up the pace a little.

The sun had barely risen above its zenith when he began to recognise the area he was walking through; he'd seen it in his vision of Alex. Which meant that he was getting close to the temple. He didn't really need the visual confirmation, because the sense of her presence was overwhelming, distracting him with the fight/flight/fuck reaction that he was – almost – getting accustomed to.

Not accustomed enough, as it turned out. Jim hesitated in the open doorway of the temple, warned by the faint sting of the dart on his neck; but the moment that he felt it, it was already too late.

He woke immersed in water and unable to move, with Alex leaning over him. Whatever the herbal concoction was – it tasted foul, with a bitter tingle in the aftertaste reminiscent of cocaine – it seemed to reach into his soul, surfacing memories he'd rather forget. Then the images changed; he'd never seen this – Simon, Connor being shot, the world exploding around him. He screamed for Incacha,
finding no help there, no help anywhere. He shot the wolf and Blair lay dying at his feet. Danny died, more death, more destruction, his nightmares playing like a faded, badly cut movie against the inside of his eyelids. It took every ounce of strength he had to reject the visions. This was not who he was. And, suddenly, he was free. Jim dragged himself out of the pool, his legs wobbly from the paralytic. He was aware of his senses in a way he hadn't been since they'd first come back online. Over the years, he'd become accustomed to them, thought of them as normal, but now he remembered how overwhelming it was to sense everything with such heightened clarity.

Alex was in another pool exactly like the one he'd been in. He leaned over her, but she was still in thrall to whatever drug she'd given him. He could smell the metallic tang of it on her breath. And then he heard the intruders.

It only took a moment longer to realise that Blair and Connor were with them – six heartbeats, the scent of gun oil and fear. He let them see him for a moment, knowing they couldn't react fast enough to harm him and, as he'd hoped, two of Arguillo's men came after him. Jim dispatched them without the slightest effort, feeling only contempt. He was still a little high on the drug, he realised; it gave him a sense of superiority that would have been dangerous if he hadn't been able to control it.

Next, the one called Calderon came after him. It was almost too easy. Arguillo was seriously spooked now, the fear roiling off him like an invisible fog. Even with Blair and Connor kneeling on the floor, hostage to Arguillo's gun, Jim had no trouble sweeping his feet out from under him. Jim bent over Blair, ready to cut the ropes binding his wrists when he felt Blair tense in fear.

Once again he found himself helplessly drawn to her. Knowing that she was a murderer – twice, at least, if he counted Blair – made no difference. She was a killer, ruthless enough to sell deadly nerve gas to a drug lord, uncaring how many innocents would die as a result of her actions. None of it mattered; he was bound to her in ways he didn't understand, drawn to protect her above all else, even his own friends. The panicked syncopation of Blair's heartbeat thundered in his ears until he blocked it out.

Alex needed him. He didn't have to listen to her babbling, he could smell the madness on her breath, see it in her eyes. It didn't change the way he felt about her, until she picked up the nerve gas canister and started to open it. Probably nothing short of that would have gotten through to him.

He distracted her easily enough – she was barely aware of what was going on outside her own head – and buried the sound of Blair's ragged gasp under the sensations of Alex's lips against his. He couldn't think about that now. Couldn't think about anything except Alex. Wasn't sure if he was simply controlling the situation with whatever means lay at hand or whether he was going under again. Didn't really care.

The spell only ended when Alex convulsed against him, crying out in pain. Self-preservation prompted him to slide the canister out of her hand and place it carefully into the pool, and then he was easing her down, soothing her as she screamed and struggled. Then, with appalling suddenness, the connection between them snapped.

***

one week later

The weekend came around all too soon for Blair's comfort; he wasn't ready to spend that much time with Jim. Not yet.

This time last week, they'd barely arrived back from Sierra Verde and both he and Jim had been trying to sort out the various messes caused by their suddenly dropping everything to chase after
Alex. The week between had been scarcely less hectic as Blair resumed teaching and caught up on the grading of assignments and preparing for classes. He hadn't had time to go into Major Crime and Jim hadn't asked him to. Every night either he or Jim had come home late and crashed into bed with little more than a grunted acknowledgement of the other's presence.

He slept late, the first chance to do so in what seemed like far too long, and when he finally dragged himself out of bed Jim had already left to do whatever he'd planned. That was all to the good, and if he suspected that Jim was just as keen on avoiding him, well, he didn't mind that at all. He still had a lot of processing to do. And he would process. Eventually. Just… he really wasn't in the right headspace to do it yet.

His appetite still hadn't returned, either, so Blair made himself an algae shake to wash down his last Amoxicillin and thought about maybe toasting a bagel, then decided against it. Time to get dressed and get out, before Jim returned.

Too late, he heard the key scritching in the lock. His mind and body chose that moment to freeze up completely, and so he was still standing at the counter, a smear of green at the corner of his mouth when Jim came in with a brown paper bag nestled in the crook of his left arm.

Jim frowned and nodded. “So, you're awake.” Implicit in the words: so you've finally got your lazy ass out of bed.

Blair shrugged. “That's debatable. I'm gonna have a shower.” Maybe by the time he'd done that, Jim would have gone out again…

He didn't take overly long, mindful of Jim's opinion on his using all the hot water, but still, it took a while to shampoo, rinse and condition all that hair. When he came out of the bathroom wrapped in his old fleece robe with a towel slung around his shoulders to catch the drips Jim was standing at the sink washing out the blender.

“Hey, you didn't have to do that. I was going to wash up once I was dressed.”

Jim's nose wrinkled slightly. “Believe me, I did have to do it. I thought we had a deal on this.”

Blair's first reaction was a roll of the eyes. He'd rinsed the damn thing and even Jim's nose wasn't that sensitive. Unless his dials were all the way up... he still hadn't been able to get much out of Jim on the subject of those herbs Alex gave him. “Are your senses playing up?”

Predictably, Jim's reaction was a gruff, “Not everything's about the senses, Sandburg. That stuff stinks.”

“And what's that supposed to mean?” Jim's voice was suddenly glacial.

Oh yeah, way to go… just push the biggest, reddest button that Jim has… Blair sighed and turned to face Jim. “I just meant your dials must be up if it's bothering you. I sure couldn't smell anything.” He hesitated a moment, then added, “If you want to do some exercises-”

“No, I don't want to do some exercises.” Jim headed round the other end of the counter, giving Blair a wide berth on his way to the stairs.

It was too tempting to let things go, but he knew he'd regret it later. Especially if Jim was going to
carry on like this. Like Blair had somehow done something wrong… “No, listen, Jim, we haven't really checked things out since… you know. We don't know what those herbs Alex gave you have done to your senses.”

“My senses are fine.” Jim growled, impatience clearly showing in every line of his body. “I just need you to stop leaving messes in my kitchen. You hear me?”

Was that a slight emphasis on the 'my'? Blair's temper snapped. “Fine. Would you like me to move out? I've hardly started unpacking; I can be gone in a couple hours.”

Blair went into his room, closing the door behind him with a decided crack. For a moment he stood, looking around the room, thinking about what a hassle it was going to be to get all his boxes and the two backpacks full of clothes into the Volvo and very determinedly not thinking about Jim, and what his reaction was going to be. Then his shoulders slumped and he sighed. He couldn't even begin to fool himself with the idea that Jim no longer mattered to him. His life had revolved around Jim and Jim's senses for three years. Regardless of how easily Jim seemed to be able to write their friendship off, Blair knew the same couldn't be said of him.

Jim was standing over by the French doors, staring out across Cascade. His shoulders tightened as Blair walked over, but he didn't turn. Blair stood beside him and they both stared at the view for the space of a couple of heartbeats. “Packed already?”

“No.” Blair hesitated, but the sarcasm in Jim's voice hadn't disguised the underlying weariness. “I'm sorry for the theatricals. I don't want to leave, but if you want me to go, just say so, okay?”

Jim glanced at him briefly. “I don't want you to go.”

“Good.” Blair managed a weak smile. “Jim…” his voice trailed off. He didn't have a clue what was happening between them and for once his ability to spin a good line of bullshit had totally deserted him. “We need to talk about what happened. The way you were-”

“Can't we just leave it?” Jim stirred restlessly. “I'm tired of having my life under the damn microscope. I'm tired of being your lab rat, okay?”

“No, Jim. We can't leave it.” Blair heard the edge in his voice and stopped, taking a deep, hopefully calming, breath. He didn't feel any calmer. “I died, Jim. You brought me back from the dead. And next thing I know you're sucking face with the woman who killed me. You'll excuse me if I don't want the same thing to happen again. And it could happen again if we don't figure out why it happened the first time.”

“Alex is-”

“Out of the equation. I know. But there must be other sentinels out there.” Blair pushed his hair back from his face, irritated with the way the damp curls clung to his skin. Even more irritated with Jim's deliberate obtuseness. “There should be thousands of sentinels, Jim, even allowing for the stresses of city living causing some, maybe most of them, to switch off their senses. Sooner or later, it's going to happen again and we have to be prepared.” He glanced up at Jim's face, noting the tension in his jaw – always a reliable indicator of his frame of mind – and sighed. “Why don't you start from the beginning? We've never really discussed this in any depth.”

For a moment he thought Jim was going to refuse and then he shrugged and rubbed the bridge of his nose, where the frown lines bit deep. “Remember when I saw the jaguar in the convenience store? Well, after that… I started hearing things. The jaguar, it sounded like, and it was happening… I think I must have been sensing her on you, because that night I pulled the gun on you? I heard the jaguar
“Okay.” That actually made a lot of sense. “Maybe you reacted to her as a rival. I'm your guide, you smell another sentinel on me… what happened next?”

Jim's whole body went rigid. “I dreamed… Jesus…” he wiped a hand over his face. It was shaking a little. “I dreamed about killing you. You were a wolf-“

“Like in the…” Blair swallowed. Not that. Can't face that again, not yet.

“Yeah. I was in the jungle, and I saw the wolf. I shot it and it turned into you.” He turned away, shaking his head. “Jesus, Sandburg I killed you.”

“But it was just a warning, Jim. You didn't want to kill me. That's not how those dreams work. You should have told me about it.”

“I couldn't.” Jim turned back to him, taking his shoulders in a fierce grip. “Everything was so weird and you… you weren't there, most of the time, and when you were…” he took a deep breath and let his hands drop. “I went to your office and she was there. I saw her through the door… and I had another vision of her, turning into a jaguar. When she opened the office door, I could tell it was her I'd smelled on you, but it was more than that. I knew… some part of me sensed that she was a sentinel. I just didn't really understand it, you know?”

Wait a minute… he already knew most of this, but hearing it again, without all the other events to confuse the issue, pieces of the puzzle were finally starting to fall into place. “Was that the day you kicked me out?”

Jim nodded reluctantly.

“Wow. Okay, this is…” Actually, he didn't know what this was. Significant, hell yes, but how, exactly? He needed a good working hypothesis. He took hold of Jim's arm pulling him over to the couch and made sitting motions. He perched on the edge of the coffee table, facing him. “Jim, what were you feeling? You know, when you kicked me out?”

“I don't know, dammit! I was confused… angry… scared…” Jim flung himself against the back of the couch, tipping his head back to stare up at the ceiling. “Threatened, maybe, like you said. I needed to think and I couldn't do that with you there. Every time you came home you brought her with you.”

“And then I told you what she was.” Blair forced himself to meet Jim's eyes full on. “It seemed to help for a while. You stopped treating me like the enemy.”

“Not entirely.” Now it was Jim's turn to look away. His gaze slid over Blair's shoulder, just as it had when he'd rejected Blair's peacemaking attempts. “I'm sorry, Chief. If I'd just listened to you that night…”

No. Just… no… I can't do this, Jim. Don't make me.

“It's… it's over and done with, Jim.” Blair forced himself to smile, to shrug casually, “and, hey, you brought me back, right?”

Which was probably the wrong thing to say. Suddenly neither of them could look each other in the eye. Jim was no doubt remembering – as Blair was, all too keenly – what had happened afterwards, in the hospital. They'd never talked about it, not once. It was pretty obvious they weren't going to talk about it now, either and whether that was a good thing or bad, Blair didn't care right now. The
memory of Jim's casual dismissal still hurt more than he could ever have expected.

After what seemed like a very long time, Blair swallowed and prompted, “What changed, Jim? In Cascade you were like a couple of dogs facing off over the same bone. Which was me, I guess. Or maybe your territory. Then, all of a sudden, in Sierra Verde you were after her like…” like she was a bitch in heat. Probably not the kind of analogy that would go over very well…

“Gee, thanks, Sandburg,” Jim muttered with a sour twist to his mouth. Well it didn't take a genius to finish off that line of thought. He shook his head, his forehead creased in bafflement. “I don't know. She tried to get me to join her, before she left Cascade, but I didn't want anything to do with her – not like that. When I got to Sierra Verde, I could still sense her, but it felt different.”

“You were in neutral territory. That's got to have made a difference.” He felt like they were on the verge of something, some new discovery about how the sentinel deal worked – territorial imperative, primitive mating ritual – who knew where it could take them? He felt strangely unenthusiastic about the prospect.

“Maybe.” Jim was getting restless now. “Look… this isn't getting us anywhere…” he stood up, working his shoulder, the one he'd been shot in at the convenience store. “I'm sorry, Chief. I know the way I was behaving… it can't have been easy for you.”

Wow… massive understatement there, Jim…

“It's okay.” Blair wondered how he could sound so calm. “We both made mistakes.”

“So, we're okay?” Jim smiled in obvious relief.

Okay? Hell, no, not even close. Blair ignored the hollow feeling in his gut; he didn't want to go there any more than Jim did. “Yeah. I guess we are.” He forced himself up off the coffee table and plastered a cheerful smile onto his face. “Well, it looks like I've got some unpacking to do.”

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Two weeks later:

“Sandburg!”

Simon's aggravated voice roused him from a half doze, and Blair almost fell out of the chair. He hastily straightened himself, and repressed a shudder as his clothes moved clammy against his skin. What the fuck had he been thinking, jumping into the sea after Ventriss like that? The shiver that ran through him was half reaction, half memory of the chill of that water, and he hitched the blanket around his shoulders a little more securely.

“Hey, Simon.” He smiled weakly. Banks had been with the Commissioner, talking through the handling of such a high profile case. “Everything okay?”

“No. Everything is not okay. There's going to be a lot of fallout over this case.” Simon scowled and poured himself a coffee, pointedly not offering any to Blair. “Not least of which is due to your involvement. Norman Ventriss is already claiming that the department's involved in a witch hunt against his son, spurred on by your resentment at losing your job at the university.”

“He what?” He could feel the heat rushing to his face as anger flooded him. “Oh man, that…” he stopped, took a deep breath. Too much anger lately. Gotta get a handle on that. He studied Simon's tense face warily. “It's not going to work, right? Brad isn't going to get away with this?”
“No, he isn't, mainly because Susan has admitted to being an accessory and provided a full statement implicating Brad in Chung's murder.” He leaned over the desk, still standing, and Blair braced himself for what was obviously to come. “But that's no thanks to you. I'm warning you Sandburg – if you ever behave like that again, I'll have no hesitation in pulling your credentials with this department.”

“Simon, that's not fair. I was right about Brad Ventriss.”

“And you think that makes everything okay? Think again.” Simon pointed in the general direction of the interview room where Jim had been interrogating Brad Ventriss for the last hour or so. “If it wasn't for Susan's statement, we'd be hard put to assemble a case that the DA would accept. Mainly because of your involvement.”

“But…” Blair struggled to martial any kind of coherent argument. “Simon, Jim needs me to be there. You can't.”

“From what I've seen lately, he might be better off without you.” Unexpectedly, Banks hesitated, his eyes studying Blair's shocked expression, and his face softened slightly. “Listen, Blair, I don't know what's been going on between you two lately,” he held up a hand, “and I don't want to know. Just sort it out, okay? It's not doing either of you any good to be at each other's throats all the time.”

He scrubbed a hand over his face. “Simon… I…”

“Take some time. Think about it.” Simon's voice had returned to its normal volume. He even looked a little concerned. “I don't want you thinking that I don't value your contribution to this department, because I do.”

“Thanks, Simon.” He slumped back in his chair before it occurred to him that Banks might want possession of his office again. It took an effort to push himself out of the chair. “I'll just…” he waved his hand vaguely towards the bullpen.

“Sit down, Sandburg.” Simon turned away to top up his coffee. “I've got a meeting with the DA next, and Jim should be finished soon. Or I could get a squad car to take you home if you prefer.”

Blair shook his head. “I'll wait for Jim.”

“Help yourself to coffee if you want some.” Simon took a sip as he headed for the door.

Coffee was the last thing Blair wanted right now. He was still more than a little hyped from the adrenaline rush of bringing in Brad Ventriss. And from his unexpected plunge into the sea. He shuddered at the memory. It was less than a month since Alex had drowned him in the fountain at Hargrove and he could still taste the chlorinated water in his memory. What the fuck had he been thinking?

Simon was right. He hadn't been thinking lately. He couldn't even convince himself that he'd been processing his feelings about what had happened to him. They'd been too raw, too intense for him to deal with, so he'd pushed them under. The trouble was, as he was constantly telling Jim, repressed emotions have a way of surfacing regardless.

If he closed his eyes he could still see that blue jungle, and the light. He could hear the music as clearly as if he was still in that place, and a terrible sense of emptiness swept through him. He shuddered again, almost sick with grief and loneliness – and that was crazy wasn't it? Because he had Jim – except that they could hardly manage to speak without arguing – and he had his place in Major Crime – unless Simon took it away from him – and he had his studies.
Yeah, at least he had that. Not even Chancellor Edwards could take that away from him. There was
even a pretty good chance that now Brad had been arrested for murder that she would rescind his
suspension as a teaching fellow, so he'd have money too. It was time to count his blessings and start
moving forward again. He could get on top of this, make it work, get his dissertation written and
then… what? Blair shrugged. He had no idea, really. He'd think about that later.

With a small sigh, he pulled the blanket a little closer around his shoulders. Okay, get the dissertation
finished. That was a goal he could achieve, and maybe once it was done Jim would see that it wasn't
a threat to him, that it never had been. Maybe then they could repair the damage to their relationship.

He must have dozed off, because he didn't hear the door open, but he came awake with a start when
a large hand clasped his shoulder. “Hey, Chief. You ready to go home?”

“Home?” Blair looked up, relieved to see a smile on Jim's face at last. “Yeah, home sounds good.”

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Jim watched Blair trail exhaustedly into the bathroom, leaving behind a strong smell of damp flannel
and salt. Smiling, he shook his head, part exasperation, part admiration; he felt like his ears were still
ringing after the reaming Simon had given him over the handling of the Ventriss case.

Cut the kid some slack, Jim, he's been through a lot in the past few weeks.

The smile vanished. Blair had been through a lot more than even Simon knew and he should have
made allowances for that. God knew, he was no stranger to PTSD himself… maybe he should
suggest counselling to Blair. Yeah, that'll go down well… me telling the neo-hippy witchdoctor how
to deal with his “issues”. He could just see the sarcastic rolling of Blair's eyes. No, Blair could deal
with that part of things perfectly fine without any help from him.

Didn't mean that Jim couldn't be a bit more supportive, though, starting right now. He headed into
the kitchen and pulled open a cupboard. Something healthy… Blair had said he wasn't hungry, and
planned to go straight to bed, but something to warm him from the inside was in order. Aha, that's
it…perfect. He grinned at the can of organic chicken noodle soup. Add some of the eight-grain
bread, toasted, and a mug of that herbal tea mix Blair liked so much, and dinner would be ready by
the time Blair was out of the shower.

Well, not quite. Blair emerged unexpectedly early and disappeared into his bedroom without so
much as a glance in Jim's direction. Okay, slight change of plan… he poured the soup into a deep,
wide mug and put it on a tray with the toast. Having dinner in bed was probably a better idea
anyway.

Blair glanced up in surprise as Jim shouldered the door open. He was sitting in bed, reading with his
glasses perched on his nose. His eyes widened as he took in the tray and the steaming mug.

“Thought maybe some soup would be a good idea,” Jim offered with entirely fake casualness. “You
need something.”

Blair smiled, reminding Jim suddenly of how rare that was any more. “Thanks. It smells great.” He
put the book aside as Jim lowered the tray to his lap. “Are you having some?”

Jim shook his head. His brand of hunger required something more along the lines of a hefty steak.

“ Nope. I'll leave the healthy stuff to you for tonight.”

Blair's gaze turned slightly suspicious but he merely picked up the mug. “You don't know what
you're missing, man.”
Jim laughed, and left him to enjoy the meal. Broiling the steak took a while, and eating it with due appreciation took even longer. When Jim went back into Blair's room to collect the tray, Blair was asleep, the glasses sliding down his nose, the book open across his lap.

The tray was on the floor. Jim left it there while he carefully removed Blair's glasses and slipped a couple of the pillows out from behind his back. He eased his sleeping roommate down onto the remaining pillows and pulled the covers up to his chest. He could still hear a faint, residual rustle in Blair's breathing that worried him, even though he knew it would take a long time for Blair's lungs to recover completely.

Today's dip probably hadn't helped any, either. He brushed his fingertips over Blair's forehead and down his cheek, resisting the urge to give it a friendly pat. There was no sign of fever, so he pushed away his concern for the moment, picked up the tray and left.

***

“Sandburg okay?” Simon motioned for Jim to stay behind as the rest of the team filed out of his office. “I haven't seen him in a while.”

Jim sat again, trying not to show his reluctance for what was obviously going to be a heart-to-heart. “Yeah, he's fine, just busy working on his dissertation.” Which I do not want to talk about.

Simon grunted and nodded. “Seems like things have been going a bit smoother lately. You know… between the two of you.”

“Everything's fine.” Jim lied smoothly. It wasn't entirely untrue – they weren't on edge the same way they had been. They didn't fight, or even snipe at each other all that much, but they weren't back to normal either. Sometimes Jim found himself comparing living with Sandburg to those last few months before Carolyn moved out and wondering how long it would be before Sandburg did the same. And he had about as much of a clue how to fix it as he'd had with Carolyn.

When he didn't elaborate further, Simon shot him a speculative look and shifted in his seat. “So, is he going to be riding along tomorrow?”

So that's what it was about. Simon wanted Blair in on the drugs bust tomorrow. “I can handle it Simon. Sandburg's busy and I don't need him to be there.”

Simon huffed a bit, displeased and frowned. “Still, I'd prefer him to be with you. Promise me you'll ask him. If he can't make it, then I'll be your backup.” He shot Jim a strange look; part irritation, part amusement was what Jim read, “Okay?”

Jim rolled his eyes. “I got it. I'll ask him. Anything else?”

Simon pasted a deliberately fake smile on his face. “You can go now.”

“Thank you, Sir.” Jim left, closing the door behind him with a sharp little snap and headed for his desk. Maybe he should e-mail Sandburg… who knew what time he might get home tonight? If it wasn't the dissertation it was one girl after another, none of them sticking around long enough for Jim to register their faces or names, just the lingering wisps of their perfume sometimes when he arrived home late at night.

He stared at the computer screen, curiously reluctant to do it, but Simon would have his hide if he came in with some lame excuse about why he hadn't asked Blair as he'd promised. With a put-upon sigh, he brought up the e-mail program and started a new message.
The reply came sooner than he'd expected, and the eager tone brought a smile to Jim's face. So he still likes the roller coaster, huh? Guess there's hope for us yet. The smile faded as he thought about the implications of that – first, that there was even an 'us' to think about, and then that he was still holding onto the hope that their partnership would continue past the publication of Blair's dissertation.

He'd been deliberately trying not to think about the dissertation and Blair never mentioned it any more. He didn't want to think about it, still smarting from the things Blair had written about him in that opening chapter. Although, if he was honest with himself, it hadn't been so much what Blair had said as the cold, clinical way he'd said it that had felt like a betrayal.

Sure, he had a college education, he knew how these things were done; but to see his life laid out like that, like a lab specimen – sliced open, dissected – by someone he'd only seen as a friend until then… yeah, that had certainly made him see Sandburg in a whole new light. Underneath that fuzzy, neo-hippy front Blair Sandburg had a streak of ruthless pragmatism a mile wide. It might make Jim respect him more, but he didn't have to like it. He didn't have to trust this new chameleon colour in Sandburg's personal rainbow.

Trust… that was the problem in a nutshell. It had taken Jim a long time to trust the hippy kid who'd inveigled himself into his life with a casual lie. That first, carelessly eager acceptance when he'd asked Blair to guide him had spoken volumes. He'd been more interested in getting Jim to help him troll for that co-ed than in the sentinel thing. Jim had nearly ditched the little punk right then. He would have, if he'd had any idea how to find someone else who knew about sentinels. But then Blair had really helped him, not just once, but over and over, and through some really scary stuff.

He'd almost got to the point where he trusted Blair when he'd had pulled that Borneo expedition stunt and Jim had been left facing the prospect of managing his still sometimes unreliable senses on his own. Even though Blair had eventually decided to stay, Jim hadn't been entirely reassured; not until Blair had admitted to stalling on his dissertation to keep his place as Jim's partner.

Like most good things in Jim's life, it hadn't lasted long… first reading Blair's opinion of him in that damning introductory chapter, then finding out he'd been helping that bitch Alex… and suddenly, they were right back at square one, with an added side dish of bitterness and betrayal.

And, god help him, Jim didn't know how they were going to get past that. He'd been waiting for Blair to lead the way – to guide him (ironic, that) but Blair wasn't going anywhere. And neither, it seemed, was Jim.

***

How in hell did things get so fucked up without me even noticing? I should have seen it sooner… two fucking months…

Blair stared numbly through the glass at the two men in the interview room, Aldo pacing, Jim sitting, leaning back in his chair, arms folded over his chest. He knew Jim was innocent. He knew there was no evidence that would tie Jim into the missing drugs – unless Veronica had manufactured it – but there was something in the way Aldo looked at Jim, a calm certainty that the prey was his that raised warning hackles all along Blair's spine.

He blocked out the words – didn't need to hear Jim tell his story again, didn't want to hear it more than once – and focused on the body language. And that told a story, clear as day – Aldo knew he had Jim, even though it was impossible. He'd come in from the get go with Jim firmly in his sights, even before Alan and Veronica had turned up. Alan's death had only made him more determined to pin everything on Jim.
Hell, if he could, he'd blame global warming on Jim too. I should have suspected something… every time – every fucking time – Jim meets up with an old girlfriend this happens. When will he ever learn? I should have forced the issue more, made Jim listen to me…

The thought raised a sour taste in Blair's mouth. After that one attempt to warn Jim that Veronica might not be as innocent as she'd appeared, he'd deliberately kept his distance. He hadn't wanted to think about how skanky it was for Jim to be screwing his dead friend's widow with the dead friend barely cold in his grave. He hadn't wanted to think about how Jim could be so fucking casual about that incredible merging of their spirit animals and so unforgiving of Blair's mistakes, and yet be so willing to trust (and sleep with) yet another woman who'd already betrayed him once.

So he'd ignored the frequent overnight absences and done his best to concentrate on his dissertation, in between trying not to worry about the missing drugs and the way Ray Aldo was focusing all his attention on Jim. Looked like he'd succeeded all too well.

It's like Alex all over again, except that at least this time Veronica hasn't tried to kill either of us, only her husband… with Jim as the murder weapon.

The door opened, distracting him from his thoughts, and he turned his head to see Simon's dark figure looming in the doorway.

“What's happening?” He sounded just as worried as Blair felt.

“They just keep going round and round. Aldo's not cutting him any slack. What about Veronica?”

Simon shook his head. “She's sticking to her story. Doesn't look good.”

Now there's an understatement…

Strange how it was even more painful to hear Jim telling his story that it had been to actually live through those two months. Blair found he was digging his nails into his palms, the small pain distracting him from the greater one.

When the dreary recital finally ended, he stifled a sigh of relief. It was clear Aldo had nothing but suspicions and Veronica's lies. No actual proof. “Well, it's still her word against Jim's.”

“Doesn't matter. Because of what went down with the drugs, he's already under suspicion. People would always wonder if he was a bad cop.”

He was right, of course. Blair brushed out past him to join Jim. Unless Veronica changed her story, Jim was screwed.

***

The night Veronica died, Jim didn't go home at all. He'd listened to Blair and Simon talk as they walked away, and then he'd gotten into his truck and driven, not thinking about where he was going, not caring. He'd just needed to keep moving.

Dawn found him on the freeway, headed south, with no idea of why or where he was going. There was nothing for him anywhere but Cascade, and precious little there.

He had his job, and that was about it. Simon was pissed at him, and rightly so. Blair was… well, Jim didn't really know what Blair felt about any of this. He'd tried to talk to Jim and Jim had shut him down. Since then they'd only talked about practical things – grocery shopping, bills, when Blair was going to be coming into Major Crime (not very often lately).
With a curse, he swung the truck onto the shoulder and stopped, leaving the engine running. The tank was nearly empty; he'd have to get off the freeway soon to buy gas anyway. Jim rubbed his hands over his face and sighed. Might as well do it now. He slammed the truck into gear and pulled out onto the almost empty freeway, then took the next exit. He found a gas station two blocks west and filled up, then crossed the road to a diner that was just opening.

Jim drank the coffee (bitter) and ate a donut (stale) and thought about keeping on driving south. Right now, his reputation in tatters, it felt like a good idea. No matter what happened, some of the mud Aldo had thrown was bound to stick, at least in some people's minds. Maybe he deserved that. He'd been stupid, wilfully blind to Veronica's manipulations. He hadn't seen the warning signs that should have alerted him.

He hadn't listened to Blair, which was possibly the worst thing he could have done, considering how fragile their relationship was right now. If Blair left because of this, who would blame him? Certainly not Jim. He should go home and sort this out, but he knew he wouldn't. There was only one way to fix the problems between him and Blair and he knew he wasn't ready to go there. He probably never would be, so there was no point in talking about it.

The early morning traffic was just starting to build as he drove back towards Prospect. When he went into the loft, Blair was already awake, maybe hadn't slept either, by the look of him. His face brightened a little when Jim came in, dropping his keys in the basket.

“You okay, Jim?” His voice was quiet, sombre. “I was just going to make some coffee-“

He stopped when Jim held up a hand, palm out. “I don't want to… aw, hell, Sandburg, can we just leave it? I'm tired.” Even to his own ears, he sounded defeated. “I'm going to get some sleep. Can you call Simon in a while and tell him I'll be into work later?” There was still a hell of a mess to sort out. Simon wasn't going to be happy about him coming in late. He'd be even less happy if Jim called him at this hour of the morning.

“Sure, Jim.” As he passed, Blair laid a hand briefly on Jim's arm. “If you need anything…”

Jim stopped a couple of steps past Blair, thought about turning, and then just nodded before heading for the stairs.

***

“I'm letting this go…” Slow, deep breath in, long exhale. One, two, three, four.

One of the things that really sucked about his senses, Jim thought, was the way they'd suddenly spiral out of control, leaving him, in this instance, with no option but to eavesdrop on Sandburg’s meditation session. Sandburg had been meditating a lot, lately.

“I'm letting this go…” Slow, deep breath in …

Jim ground his teeth and thought about turning up the volume on the TV. Would it be worth the inevitable headache to avoid the likelihood of a murder charge? He was still debating silently when Blair's voice intruded again.

“I'm letting this… fuck!”

He heard the scrape of Blair's jeans against the floor as he rose and the hasty, muted steps of sock clad feet, but didn't turn his head until a second or two after Blair burst through his doors into the living area.
“Meditation not doing it for you?” Pouring fuel on the banked embers of Sandburg's aggravation probably wasn't the smartest idea he'd ever had. Especially when Blair was close enough to take a swing.

Blair's eyes narrowed and his jaw lifted pugnaciously. It was better, in a way, than the quiet sympathy that he'd been smothering Jim with for the last few days. Just about anything would be better than that.

“How am I supposed to meditate when I'm so fucking pissed at you?” He looked surprised for a moment, as if he hadn't intended to say that. Then his eyebrows drew together and his lips tightened. He glared at Jim accusingly.

“You're pissed at me?” Jim flicked the mute button on the remote and stood, deliberately looming over him.

Blair, damn him, didn't look at all intimidated. “You bet I'm pissed at you. When are you ever going to fucking learn?” He flung his arms out when Jim failed to answer immediately. “When, Jim? How many more times are you going to do this to yourself?” His forefinger poked Jim in the chest. Forcefully. “When are you going to stop doing this to me?”

“To you?” Startled, Jim took a step backwards. Blair followed, not quite crowding him, but coming closer than he normally would. “What the hell are you taking about, Sandburg? I'm not doing anything to you.”

“Not doing anything?” Blair's upper lip drew back in an angry, contemptuous snarl. “Do you think it was nothing for me to see you suck face with Alex on that beach? Or to have you brush me off when I tried to warn you about Veronica? Do you think it was nothing to know that you'd rather chase after women like that when you won't even acknowledge what happened between us?”

Jim realised that he was sitting on the couch with no memory of how he got there. Vague images of blue-tinged jungle and a wolf, running away, flickered at the back of his mind before he banished them. He glanced up at Blair and saw a stricken look that probably matched his own expression. Blair hadn't intended to say that, and god knew Jim wished that he hadn't, but it was too late now. The words were out and they'd have to deal with the fallout as best they could.

After a long moment, Blair dropped down onto the couch beside him – not too close, always that slight distance between them now – and tipped his head back to stare up at the ceiling. “Jim…”

“I thought…” his voice sounded strange, strained. Jim swallowed and tried again. “I thought we'd… dealt with this. I told you…”

“You weren't ready.” Blair finished for him, wearily. “Doesn't mean you're never going to be. Jesus, Jim… why? Don't tell me it's because we're both guys, because I know it's not that.”

It wasn't that, though he hadn't expected Blair to know it. And it didn't mean he had no reservations in that area; they just weren't the reason. Blair wasn't going to like the real reason, and Jim tried to find some way of answering him that wouldn't make everything worse.

Finally, he sighed and turned his head to look at Blair's profile. He looked tired; and desperately, miserably unhappy. There were lines around his mouth and between his brows that were new, and shadows under his eyes. The last few months had been bad, and Jim didn't know how he was going to make things better between them. Maybe he couldn't, maybe this was it, the moment when Blair simply gave up on him. But whatever happened, Blair deserved the truth.
“Remember when you told me Carolyn was the only person who knew me better than you?” And that was another bitter memory Jim would rather not have recalled to Blair's mind. Angry voices, the sour tang of betrayal and hurt feelings… Blair's offer to bin his dissertation – an offer Jim still wished he'd accepted, even though he knew he couldn't. “You were wrong about that. You know me better than Carolyn; have done for a long time. We've lived together longer, spent more time working together, on vacation… just hanging out. You know more about my past, about me. Caro didn't care about a lot of those things, not the way you do. She only cared about the present, and I liked it that way. I didn't want to tell her that stuff, I wanted it to stay buried. You wouldn't let me get away with it, but she did.”

Blair's eyes didn't move from the ceiling. “And you resent me for it.”

“No.” He'd learned to deal with that a long time ago. “I didn't like it when it was happening, but I know I'm better off for having told you those things.” He saw a tiny quirk of a smile at the corner of Blair's mouth. “And if you ever bring this up again, I'll deny I ever said it, okay?”

At last Blair looked at him, still smiling a little though it didn't mask the unhappiness in his eyes. “Okay.”

He hesitated then, wishing he didn't have to say this. Sugar coat it as much as he could, there was no way Blair was going to get out of this conversation without being hurt. “When Caro and I split… it was bad. Really bad. I'd thought… you know, we were hardly speaking to each other by the end, but it still hit really hard.”

All of Blair's attention was focused on him now, judging by the small furrow between his brows. Yeah, Blair was listening hard, hearing all the nuances, all the things he was saying without words. Jim swallowed, painfully. He hated feeling so exposed. “But, even at the worst moments, I knew I could survive without her. If we… if we were to do this… I don't think I could survive if…”

“You think I'd leave you?” Blair's voice was flat, devoid of emotion. “Jesus, Jim, you think I could leave you?” he laughed, a tight, unhappy sound. “I don't think I could leave you now.”

He had to look away. It hurt too much to see Blair's face like this. “I think everything ends.”

“You don't trust me.” Anger replaced hurt bafflement. “You don't trust me to stay.”

“No, I don't.” He turned a little in his seat to face Blair. “But it's not you. I don't trust anybody to stay. I haven't been wrong so far.”

“Yeah, well look at the women you choose.” Blair smiled bitterly. “Is your taste in men just as bad?”

And that hurt, dammit, even though he supposed he deserved it. “It doesn't matter. Good, bad, they all leave me.” Don't you go… god! The memory sent a wave of nausea through him. “I can't, won't, go through that with you.”

“So I don't get a say in this?” It wasn't really a question. Blair stood, looking down at him. “Okay. I get it. Thanks for the vote of confidence, Jim.”

Had he actually expected Blair to fight him on this? Jim felt a sour sense of satisfaction as he watched Blair walk steadily to his room, close the door with a careful snick. Pointedly not slamming it. Even more pointedly not making any sotto voce comment for Jim to “accidentally” overhear.

That went well…

***
He'd only meant to get Jim to talk about it, but instead he'd pushed him into a corner. And that just wasn't a smart thing to do with a guy like Jim Ellison. So now Jim had taken a position and, if Blair knew anything about Jim he knew that neither hell nor high water would move him from it.

So much for Mr 'I Did A Minor In Psychology' Sandburg's hopes of resolving this mess. He'd screwed up royally and there was nothing he could do to fix it. Not now, maybe not ever.

Over the next few days, Blair tried to quash the feeling that time was running out on him. He was well over halfway through the dissertation. In six weeks, maybe eight, he'd have finished the first draft. Another month to go over the finer points, check the attributions and bibliography and tweak the wording a little, then it would be ready to hand in.

Once he'd successfully defended the thesis he'd be Doctor Sandburg, but what next? Chancellor Edwards might not be able to block him from receiving his doctorate but she'd made it plenty clear that there would be no place on the teaching staff for him. Sidney and Eli would give him glowing recommendations, but they would be worthless in Cascade.

He was fast running out of options, and he'd need a job. Leaving Cascade would be his best hope of getting a teaching position. He should be glad to go. He'd spent half his life in this town, and long outstayed his welcome with just about everyone. He could go somewhere warmer, dryer. Every time it rained, he'd start wheezing a bit, legacy of Alex's murderous impulses. Maybe in Arizona, or Nevada, or New Mexico his lungs would finally recover completely.

And Jim would know he'd been right to refuse that deeper connection. Everything ends…

Fuck.

***

'Humanity has long dug into its past in the hope that it will shed light on its future. Perhaps what this reveals is that it is the best of ourselves that will survive and lead us through the next millennium. Watching our every step will be our tribal protectors – the sentinels – and their insight will further illuminate the spiritual connection of all things.'

Blair read through the final paragraph, hesitated a moment and then clicked 'Save'. It was rubbish, of course. Not everything, though. No, the data was sound, but his conclusions and comments lacked all objectivity. Somewhere along the line, he'd fallen in love with his subject, both literally and figuratively, and trying to hide it had only led to that damnably clinical introductory chapter and a huge fight with Jim. So he'd really let himself go on the final chapter, pouring out his heart for anyone to see.

There was no way he could hand this in, but maybe he'd lanced the wound. Maybe now he could write the dissertation his doctorate – and the subject – deserved. It was a start. Tomorrow he'd begin his revisions. He lifted his hands and typed two words – 'The End'.

One day, he'd look back and find that ironic.

***
How had he gotten into this mess? The last couple of days had been insanely chaotic, even allowing for the kind of chaos that was normal in his and Jim's life. And now, finally, he had the loft to himself and time to think. Naomi was visiting an old friend and Jim… who knew where Jim was? Certainly not Blair, not since that last meeting they'd had at the hospital. Zeller on the loose and Simon and Megan shot…

… and Jim, blaming himself, for things that Blair knew were his fault. “I don't think it's a good idea to be around me right now.” It had been easier to deal with Jim's angry accusations – “Go for the brass ring.” – than that empty, defeated tone.

Brass ring… god, doesn't he know that he's my brass ring; always has been? Blair shook his head. No use thinking about that. No use regretting what he couldn't change, either; but he just couldn't drag his mind out of the rut that it was running in.

Should have stood up to Naomi; told her not to interfere. But no, I just did what I always do with her – talk around the truth, make excuses for not doing what she wants me to do. When am I just going to grow up?

He stopped his pacing and sat on the bed, head hanging, hands clasped between his knees. He had the whole loft to himself and yet he'd shut himself into his room, and it wasn't even his room at the moment, since Naomi was sleeping in his bed and he was sleeping on the couch. He didn't want to be out there. Out there was the space he and Jim shared – their CDs mingled on the same shelf, the little bits and pieces of their lives strewn on the coffee table, the walls; the wok he'd bought sitting side by side with Jim's pots and pans. He wasn't sure he belonged out there any more.

And, besides, if Jim did come home…

He was right. I should have told him about Sid Graham. What was I thinking? One minute on the phone with Sid fucking Graham and Jim would have had him backing off so fast… and then he would have reamed me a new one, but I've dealt with that before. But no, I had to try and handle it myself… not because I'm scared of Jim, not exactly. What I was scared of was that Jim would call the whole thing off; withdraw his permission for me to publish the dissertation even with his name changed.

“God.” The sound of his own voice startled him. “Jim was right. There was no way, ever, that I could have done it. Anybody who bothered to check would find out about us.” He stood, slowly, stared around the room as if seeing it for the first time. It was over. The academic dream, his friendship with Jim, his career. Over. The only remaining question was how, exactly, the final chapter would be written.

And, once he accepted that, he knew the answer – simple, brutal, but the only way to set things right again; as long as he could find the courage to go through with it.

***

Jim nodded a greeting to the duty nurse as he passed the desk but didn't stop to ask the way. He didn't need to, any more than he needed to identify himself to her. He knew this place too damn well, and the staff knew him too well.

The last time he'd been here was after Blair was drowned.

His stride faltered and he slowed, rubbing a hand across his mouth. Christ, what a time to think of that… except that, of course, it was entirely appropriate. Blair had just thrown his life away in front of… god only knew how many people, but certainly everyone who mattered. And he'd done it to
There was so much to think about – what Blair was going to do now, where he was. Whether he'd ever want to have anything at all to do with Jim after all that had happened. If he kept thinking about it, he'd never get anything done, and there was plenty to do. Bartley was still being a pain in the ass and Jim wasn't at all confident that Zeller was out of the picture. That explosion had been a damn sight too convenient for him to buy it entirely.

The last thing Jim expected was to hear Blair's voice, here in the hospital, but as he neared the end of the hallway, that's exactly what he heard – Blair talking to a doctor. As he came into viewing range, Jim saw a doctor in surgical scrubs turning away from Blair and walking off. Blair walked towards Jim, his face sombre. Jim swallowed, stealing himself to speak to his partner. If Blair still was his partner…

Blair looked at him, then looked away again. “Hey. The doc said the surgery went well and the bullet missed major organs on both of them, but, uh, he said they can leave in about a week or two.”

“Thank God.” Neither of them could meet each other's gaze. His eyes shifted to scan the open area to his right while Blair turned away, looking down at the floor.

“So, I heard you guys probably got Zeller.” He saw Blair glance up at him briefly out of the corner of his eye but when Jim turned to look, Blair's gaze had drifted away again.

“I don't know. Somebody probably got him. We still got Bartley to contend with.” His eyes met Blair's for a split second and then they both looked away. Blair didn't seem willing to talk about what had happened and Jim didn't know how to. “I don't know which one's worse.” He swallowed, forced himself to go there… “I saw your press conference.”

Their eyes almost met then. “Oh, yeah, you saw it?” Blair shrugged, a small, unhappy smile curved his lips. “It's just a book.”

“It was your life.” Jesus, what's going on here? Blair was acting like he'd done something shameful. Like he really was a fraud, not just pretending to be one.

Blair nodded. “Yeah, it was. You know, you were right. I mean, uh, I don't know what I was expecting to do with it…” His eyes lifted to meet Jim's gaze and the unhappiness in them made Jim's gut twist in sympathy. “…and, uh… I mean, where I get off following you around for three years pretending I was a cop, right?”

He'd done this to Blair. Sure Blair had made mistakes, and there was still anger there, somewhere in the background, but mostly what Jim felt now was guilt. If he'd trusted Blair, even a little, maybe all of this could have been avoided. And now he had no idea how to put it right again. But he could try.

He forced himself to look down at Blair, and to keep looking even when Blair wouldn't return his gaze. “This self-deprecation don't suit you, you know. You might have been just an observer, but you were the best cop I've ever met and the best partner I could have ever asked for. You've been a great friend and you've pulled me through some pretty weird stuff.”

“Thanks.” There was no lightening of Blair's expression at all. It was as if Jim hadn't said a word.

At a loss now, Jim offered the only thing he could think of. Distraction. “Are you ready to get busy?”

Finally, there was an almost imperceptible lightening of Blair's expression. He nodded, and started to turn his face away again, but Jim landed a playful cuff on his shoulder. “Come on, we've got a rally
to plan security for."

Blair followed Jim back along the hallway. “If Zeller really is alive? Maybe we should just let him shoot Bartley.”

At last, a sign of the old Blair. Jim grinned down at him. “Don't tempt me.”

***

Naomi was sitting by his bed when Jim came round from the anaesthetic. Frankly, he would have preferred Zeller. But Zeller was dead and his last souvenir was somewhere in the OR trash.

“The doctor says it's a fairly minor wound.” She managed an unconvincing smile. Naomi had never liked Blair being involved in police work, and Jim getting shot wasn't going to change her mind on the matter. “They'll keep you in for a day or two and then you can come home.”

It didn't feel minor right now, in fact it hurt like a bitch, but Jim accepted that with a nod. “Where's Blair?” His voice was raspy and Naomi reached for a cup and spooned a few ice chips into his mouth. He let his head fall back with a sigh and enjoyed the tiny trickle of cold water down his throat.

“Blair's at home. He said he had some things to do and he'd come in later.” The lightness of her voice belied the concern in her eyes. Somehow Jim didn't think the concern was for his leg.

“Packing?”

“No. Why would he…” She sighed, giving up the pretence that everything was okay, and slumped back against the plastic chair. “He won't talk to me, not really talk. But then, why should he? He doesn't trust me any more, and I can hardly blame him for that.” She shook her head. “I don't know what he's going to do, but I know one thing, Jim Ellison. You can not let him leave you.”

This wasn't the first time she'd talked as though he and Blair were in a relationship. The last time he'd let it ride. “Naomi, Blair and I… we're not… not together. If he wants to leave-

“Well, of course you're not.” Naomi's exasperated interruption silenced him. He really ought to give up thinking he understood her. Or Blair, for that matter. “Do you think I wouldn't know if you were? Although why you're not is more than I can understand.”

“It's complicated.” Jim clenched his jaw. He'd be damned if he was going to get into any kind of discussion with Naomi about why he wasn't her son's lover.

“Of course it is.” The tone of her voice conveyed more irritation than empathy. “But that's not what I'm talking about. There's a bond between you both and I'll tell you frankly, if it was only you who'd be worse off, I wouldn't say a thing, but I think it would hurt Blair even more if the two of you were to separate.”

“I can't make him stay if he doesn't want to.” And that was his problem in a nutshell. Because if he could find a way, he'd do it in a heartbeat. “There isn't any reason for him to stay now.”

Naomi's eyes sparkled with anger. “Then find a reason! Unless you want him to leave, in which case you're not the man I took you to be.”

Jim shook his head tiredly. “Naomi, I… I'll try to think of something, but maybe you should consider whether Blair might not be better off without me.”
"No, I won't consider that." She lifted her chin determinedly and, oh god, how that reminded him of Blair in one of his more pigheaded moods. "And neither should you."

***

Simon had been moved to a normal room a day after his operation. The day Jim was due to be discharged, he wheeled himself over there and waited for him to wake up, tuning out the snores as best he could. His senses, predictably, were not reacting well to the smells and sounds of the hospital.

He had a cup of water and a straw at the ready when Simon snorted and grumbled his way to consciousness. He'd improved a lot in the last couple of days, much to Jim's relief and was now strong enough to maintain a near-lethal level of grouchiness. Jim waited while he raised the end of the bed up so he was more or less sitting and then handed him the cup.

"Thanks." Simon sucked cautiously on the straw, then looked at Jim suspiciously. His face looked disturbingly naked without his glasses and Jim took them off the nightstand and held them out. Simon fumbled them into place. "To what do I owe the pleasure of this visit?"

No point in beating about the bush. "Sandburg."

Simon cast his eyes heavenwards. "I knew it," he muttered. "What's happened now?"

"Nothing." Jim said. "Well, I mean…"

"Spit it out." Simon grimaced his hand lifting to his chest, but dropping away before he actually touched the wound. "What's he done?"

"I think he's planning on leaving." Saying it only made Jim feel more certain. Blair had been to see him – once. It had been awkward and uncomfortable, with neither of them knowing what to say. The impression that, with Zeller's death, he and Blair had closed their last case together had been overwhelming.

"Leaving what?" Simon frowned.


"Hm." Simon rubbed a hand over his mouth then lifted the cup to suck at the straw again. When he handed the cup back to Jim, his eyes were thoughtful. "You know, Jim, maybe that would be for the best. For him as well as us."

"No!" He managed to control his instinctive reaction. "Simon, come on… you know how much he's helped me."

"I thought you had a pretty good handle on your senses, Jim. And you said yourself you wanted to go back to working alone. Or Connor can back you up." Simon considered that for a moment. "Okay, maybe not Connor, you'd kill each other in a month or less. Joel, maybe? You can count on him to keep quiet about all this sentinel stuff."

"It's not just the sentinel stuff, Simon. He'd make a good cop. You know he would." He waited out the long silence with barely concealed impatience.

"I don't know, Jim… after all that's happened?" Simon gestured dismissively, "And now the press conference? Jim, he's publicly admitted to fraud."

"We can spin that. Blair never released the thesis; it was all Sid Graham's doing. He's never tried to
pass it off as fact, or submitted it to the university.”

“It's still a big ask, Jim. And it's a big step up from being an observer to being a cop.” Simon looked him over, clearly not liking what he saw. “Do you really want to go down that road? More importantly, does Blair?”

“I don't know, Simon.” Jim shook his head. “All I know is, I don't want to do this any more without Blair. Not the sentinel thing, and not being a cop either.”

That earned him a hard stare. Jim endured it until Simon's face softened a little and he nodded. “All right. What do you want me to do?”

“Call in some favours. I don't want to offer this to Blair unless I can be sure we can follow through.”

“Jesus.” Simon's head dropped back against his pillows and he scowled up at the ceiling. “All right. I'll do it.” He turned his head towards Jim. “You realise I own your ass until hell freezes over for this?”

“So what's different?” Jin grinned, feeling like a huge burden had been lifted and Simon snorted, rolling his eyes.

“Get out of here” Simon waved a hand in dismissal. “I need my beauty sleep.”

He was snoring again by the time Jim had struggled up out of the chair.

***

The plan had been to get drunk and then get laid, and it had started out promisingly enough. After Simon and Jim had sprung that badge on him, they'd all – Naomi included – headed out to Cascade PD's favourite bar, O'Leary's, and even though Simon, Megan, Jim and Naomi had left after the first round of drinks, Henri and Rafe and Joel had stayed a while longer, buying round after round for their “newest recruit”. It was almost enough to make him forget the shit they'd given him over the dissertation being leaked. Other cops had joined in and Blair stayed on after the Major Crime people had all gone.

Eventually, Blair had left too, riding the buzz, and wanting to move onto part two of the agenda. He went to one of the bars near the university without even thinking about how he might be received there. Nobody actually said anything, but his friends were clearly uncomfortable and when Blair caught sight of a couple of his less than favourite students staring and then trying to pretend they hadn't seen him notice, his enjoyment of the evening plummeted. He waited out another twenty minutes or so, just for the sake of his pride, and then moved on to a completely different kind of bar.

There, the music was loud, and he couldn't see a single person he knew. Blair nodded in satisfaction. If he was going to be a cop, then he wouldn't be coming to places like this any more, so he might as well make the most of it. He threw back a couple of shots to bolster his nerve, and because the buzz from the beer was fading fast, and moved onto the dance floor. Most of the men were dancing in couples but there was still a fair number dancing alone. If he couldn't get laid here, he couldn't get laid anywhere.

It should have been easy, but the guys who approached him somehow didn't seem all that appealing. He danced with them for a while then moved on with a friendly smile. Eventually, he realised that the men who caught his eye, the ones he wanted, were all a very familiar type. It sucked all the enjoyment out of the evening, killing the mood and making him feel sick to his stomach. He left, hailed a cab, and went home.
The lights were off, but then it was – he'd checked – just shy of one o'clock in the morning. He stumbled a little going up the stairs and had to stop in the hallway while he fumbled his keys out of his jacket. This wasn't good; the last thing he wanted to do was to wake Jim. He bit down on his bottom lip and focused on keeping his hand steady as he inserted his key into the lock.

The faint click made him suck in a relieved breath as he turned the handle and opened the door. All he had to do now was toe off his sneakers and get from the door to his room without knocking into or tripping over anything. He got one step inside the door and froze.

There was just enough light coming into the loft that he could clearly see the outline of Jim's body, lying on the couch. Blair cursed silently; had Jim decided to wait up for him and fallen asleep? Or had he needed help getting up the stairs and decided to sack out on the couch instead? He hadn't needed help the last couple of nights, but then he hadn't gone into Major Crimes and then followed it up with a walk to O'Leary's on those other days.

Should he wake Jim and help him upstairs, or sneak past and go to bed? Whichever decision he made, he was pretty certain it would turn out to be the wrong one when Jim finally woke up.

The choice was taken out of his hands a moment later. Jim pushed himself up onto his elbow, rubbing at his face, and then sat up, swinging his legs off the couch with a soft groan. “Have a good night, Sandburg?”

So he was back to being Sandburg again… Blair sighed and dropped his keys into the bowl with a clatter. “It was okay. Do you need help getting upstairs?”

Jim shook his head and stayed on the couch, his face unreadable in the dim light. After a brief, silent argument with himself, Blair went over and sat next to him, dropping his head back and staring at the ceiling. Jim was obviously working up to something and he might as well just get it over with. It had been a shitty night anyway.

“Does this mean you don't want to be a cop?” Jim's voice was quiet and calm, as though the answer didn't really matter to him. Not that Blair believed that for a moment.

“No! Jesus!” He turned his head and stared at Jim's profile. There was no leaping jaw muscle, so maybe he really was as unconcerned as he appeared. “I was just… I dunno… burying the old life. Like a rite of passage, you know?”

Something in Jim seemed to relax, and Blair saw the hint of a smile. “I just… if you don't want to do it, I'd understand. It's okay. Whatever you decide.”

“Thanks, Jim.” It seemed like he really meant it. There was a lot riding on this for Jim, and Blair could hardly blame him if he was invested in the idea of Blair being his permanent partner. “I do want to do it, okay? I mean, it's not something I ever expected, and… and… if things had gone differently… well, I probably would never have chosen to be a cop. A consultant, maybe… but, you know, it's good. I think it'll work.”

“We make a good team, Chief.” Jim turned slightly, careful of his leg, to face Blair. It was hard to read his expression with the light behind him. “The best.”

The outline of Jim's head blurred suddenly, and Blair blinked rapidly. It was the drink making him maudlin that was all. Jim's fingers brushed lightly against his cheek and, oh, that hurt; and took his breath away and set his heart to pounding. Then Jim leaned forward; his lips touched Blair's with a gentle, tentative pressure.
For a moment, all Blair wanted to do was to respond, to deepen the kiss and not think about the consequences. Then, without consciously thinking about it, he found himself pushing Jim away and scooting back until he hit the arm of the couch. “What the fuck?” And that wasn't nearly far enough. He scrambled off the couch and retreated even further. “Jim, what the hell do you think you're doing?”

“I thought this was what you wanted.” There was only confusion in Jim's voice. “Isn't it?”

His heart was pounding like he'd run a marathon, and the sick feeling was back, even worse than before. What was Jim actually offering? A pity fuck? Some whacked out idea of penance? He forced his knees to lock before he ended up on the floor in a shaking heap. “So, you're offering yourself as some kind of consolation prize here, Jim? You don't have to. I'll still be your partner, I already told you that.”

“That isn't—”

“Isn't it? Why are you doing this now?” Anger was fuelling a slow burn behind his breastbone and he fought to contain it. If he let it out he'd say things that would destroy their friendship forever. Even now, he wasn't ready to do that. “I'm going to bed and you should too. In the morning we can talk about it, if you still want to.”

Jim shook his head slowly, but didn't speak, and Blair turned away, walking as steadily as he could to the sanctuary of his room.

When he woke, dry-mouthed and nauseous, Jim had already gone out. He stumbled through his morning routine – toilet, shower, coffee – debating whether to try to talk about last night with Jim when he came back and was inclined to let it lie. Some things, like sore ribs, were best not poked and prodded. He hadn't come to any conclusion when the door opened and Jim came in, awkwardly juggling his cane, a bag of groceries and the key.

He smiled tentatively when he saw Blair. “Oh… hi, Chief.”

“Hey, Jim.” Blair hurried over. “Gimme the bag.”

“Thanks.” Jim handed it over and turned away to close the door. By the time he'd done it, Blair was back in the kitchen investigating the contents. “Bagels. Great!”

“Yeah, I noticed we were out of them.” There was strange note in Jim's voice, and he hovered uncertainly by the end of the kitchen island. “Is there any coffee left?”

He obviously wanted to say something, but Blair wasn't inclined to indulge him right now. He needed food and a lot more coffee first.

“I started a fresh pot.” Blair waved vaguely in the direction of the coffee maker. “Why don't you sit down? I'll bring you a mug when it's ready.”

“All right.” Jim moved away, glancing back at him with a slight frown.


“I've already had breakfast, Sandburg,” Jim growled sourly. “Just coffee's fine, thanks.”

Great. Just great. Blair retrieved eggs, milk and cheese from the fridge and set them on the counter, then found a bowl. It looked like Jim was going to be about as friendly as a bear with a sore head. How in hell were they supposed to talk about what happened last night if Jim was going to take that
Jim cleared his throat. “Look… Blair… about last night…”

“It's okay, man.” Blair broke in hurriedly when Jim hesitated. “It was a crazy day yesterday. We were both…”

“Yeah.” Jim looked relieved. “I just… I'm sorry if I… if you…”

“No, really, Jim. I'm good.” Blair forced a grin, “Well, except for the hangover.”

“Self-inflicted, Chief.” Jim's smile might just be a tad forced too. “You'll get no sympathy from me on that score.”

Blair turned away, reaching for the frypan. He closed his eyes and took a deep breath. I can do this. I have to do this. By the time he turned back, he'd managed to bury the sickening sensation of loss deep in his gut. He could deal with that later.

***

Blair hesitated in the doorway, blinking in surprise at the empty bullpen as his already cramped guts twisted even tighter. Rhonda was the only person there, sitting behind her desk next to Simon's door. The bullpen was never empty.

“Blair.” Rhonda's smile was warm and open. “It's good to see you again. Captain Banks was called out for a few minutes, but he'll be back soon. He said you should wait in his office.”

“Okay.” He managed a weak smile as he passed the desk. Normally, he'd linger, chatting about her kids, her elderly mother, and maybe indulge in a little harmless flirtation. Or try to find out if she knew what this was all about, but he'd done that, without any success, when she called to pass on Simon's message.

It was weird to be in Simon's office again, after nearly a month of staying away from the PD altogether. Everything was familiar and yet strange. He sat in the chair placed squarely in front of Simon's desk, but after a moment got up and wandered over to the window and looked out. Obviously Simon had something important to say; something that couldn't, apparently, be said over the phone. And he didn't want word of it to get back to Jim, at least not yet. It must have taken some doing to clear the bullpen completely – Megan and Jim were still officially on desk duty, and somebody should be there at all times to answer the phones.

The thought didn't do much to help his nerves. There were only two reasons Simon would want to speak to him right now – Jim's senses and the Academy. And there was nothing wrong with Jim's senses. At least nothing that Jim was telling him.

Blair almost leapt out of his skin when the door opened abruptly and Simon strode in. There was little evidence to show he'd been shot only six weeks ago; maybe he was a little thinner, but otherwise he looked hale and hearty. His expression was less encouraging and Blair's heart sank further as Simon frowned before greeting him with: “Sandburg. Thanks for coming in at short notice.”

“Well, it's not like I've got a full schedule.” He winced at the fake cheerfulness in his voice, but Simon didn't seem to notice, so maybe it wasn't as obvious as he'd thought. “What's it about, Simon?”

“Sit down.” Simon dropped into his own chair, fixing his eyes on Blair's face. The silence drew out
uncomfortably long before he scowled and leaned forward. “It’s about the Academy. I’ve just come back from a meeting with the Commissioner… I was hoping…”

Blair’s heart seemed to be doing flip-flops behind his ribs. He swallowed, trying to moisten a completely dry mouth without success. “Oh. I guess it was too good to be true, then. Have you told Jim?”

“I wanted to talk to you about it first.” Simon shrugged. “To give you a chance to decide what you wanted without any pressure from him.”

“What do I need to decide?” His fingers were aching from gripping the arms of the chair. He consciously forced himself to let go and flexed them. “If I can’t go to the Academy then I can’t be a cop, can I?”

“Can’t go… damn it!” Simon’s face creased into lines of annoyance. “I’m sorry, Blair, I should have been clearer…” He rubbed his fingers across his mouth. “You can still go to the Academy, but the director is insisting that you take all the courses before he’ll graduate you. You’ll be able to test out of some, but the firearms course, plus fitness and unarmed combat are mandatory at a minimum. I’m not sure what other courses you’ll have to actually complete.”

It felt like he'd forgotten how to breathe. Blair took in a noisy, messy gulp of air, almost ready to burst into hysterical laughter. If he’d had any doubts about wanting to go to the Academy, they’d certainly been put to rest. “Okay. I can do that, Simon. As long as it gets me a badge at the end, I'll do whatever I have to.”

There was no mistaking the relief on Simon's face. He'd obviously had doubts too. “Good. That's good news, Sandburg. There's just one other thing…” his face clouded over again. “You're not going to like it.”

Blair stared at him warily. “What?”

“You're going to have to cut your hair.”

Was that nervousness on Simon's face? Blair shook his head disbelievingly. Cutting his hair was a small price to pay, no matter what he'd said on the subject before. “I can do that, Simon.”

Relief, satisfaction; that was what Blair read in Simon's expression and it sent a welcome thread of warmth through his body. Simon wanted him in Major Crime. It wasn't just guilt or friendship. Simon thought he'd be useful, and not just as Jim's little sidekick. It was a boost his ego badly needed. He laughed aloud. “I can't believe you really thought I'd throw it all in rather than cut my hair”

“Heh, heh…” Simon relaxed back into his chair. “It's a good thing you don't mind. I think Jim's got kind of attached to the Hair.”

Blair felt his cheeks heat up, and of course Simon noticed it immediately. His smile disappeared to be replaced by a glare. “Is there something you want to tell me, Sandburg?”

“No!” He straightened in his chair, the blood rushing to his face. “No, nothing.”

“Huh.” Simon stared at him unnervingly. “Because, if there was something that would be a problem. There are rules about fraternisation in this department.”

He got himself under control. “Simon, I promise you there's no fraternising going on. None.”
“Okay.” Simon glanced down at his desk. He opened the drawer and took out a cigar, fussing over it and consequently avoiding Blair's eyes. “And if there ever was to be any fraternising, and I found out about it…”

“You won't.” Blair repressed a sigh of relief, not really caring that Simon apparently didn't entirely believe him. As long as he didn't say anything to Jim, or stop Blair from becoming a cop, he could think whatever the hell he liked. “I can guarantee it.”

***

Three weeks. Three weeks before I start at the Academy. Blair stared at the calendar as though somehow he could make the time shorter. Or longer. He wasn't sure which. He just knew that where he was right now – neither a student nor an observer, nor a cop – really sucked. Jim was back on active duty with Megan as his temporary partner and Blair wanted to be right alongside him. On the other hand, he really wasn't looking forward to actually being at the Academy.

He tossed the little desk calendar aside and headed for the bathroom to shave. No time for this now, he thought. But, when his eyes met his reflection in the mirror, he froze, then let his gaze skid away while he raised a hand to rub the back of his head. The short curls felt prickly against his palm. Like Jim's would? No. Don't even go there… He forced his eyes back to the mirror.

It was a long time since he'd cut his hair that short, if he ever had. He'd been trying to delay the inevitable for as long as possible, but yesterday his hand had been forced, in the form of an invitation – or thinly veiled order – from the director of the Rainier Police Academy to meet with him the following afternoon. He'd met Director Walter Grimes once, when he'd gone to the Academy to test out on some of his courses and Grimes had been quite obviously unimpressed with his long hair, even though Blair had otherwise been impeccably dressed in a suit and tie.

So, the haircut couldn't be put off any longer. Blair had gone to Jim's barber, a retired cop, and the look on Jim's face when he'd got home last night had been… well, I guess it was either laugh or cry… He'd gone with laughter, but it had been close. It was a close run again, as Blair stared at his reflection for a moment longer before shaking his head and getting his razor out of the cabinet. He didn't have time for this.

Forty-five minutes later, he was sitting across the desk from Director Grimes, trying not to feel intimidated and, considering he'd dealt with Simon Banks for four years, that said a lot about the kind of man Grimes was. Blair had checked; he had the reputation of being a hard-ass, but a fair hard-ass. Blair could only hope it was true.

After what seemed like an eternity, Grimes cleared his throat and glanced down at the papers in front of him. “Well, Sandburg, you've done better than I expected.”

“Thank you, Sir.” Blair did his best not to show any emotion. He suspected that a man like Grimes might construe it as weakness. Keep it short and simple, don't ask any questions that aren't essential, Jim had told him.

Grimes grunted under his breath. “You've passed the academic papers, human relations, and most of the civil law units. I still want you to take the Washington Penal Code classes; there's some aspects that you need to be more familiar with.”

Blair nodded, unperturbed. He'd had a feeling some of the answers he'd given weren't up to scratch.

“Your instructors were reasonably happy with your performance in Tactics, but there's a refresher course we have for serving officers I'd like you to take.” Grimes turned a page, looked down and
frowned. “Physical fitness is marginally acceptable. I want to see you do better. Firearms… abysmal is the word that springs to mind.”

“I know I have a lot to learn-”

“A lot to learn?” Grimes leaned forward. “You're a menace to society, Sandburg. You won't graduate from this Academy until I'm completely satisfied that it's safe to allow you to carry a gun. Do you understand?”

Blair felt his eyes widen …that's a little over the top. I didn't think I was that bad… but he managed to say calmly enough. “Yes, Sir. I understand completely. I wouldn't have it any other way.”

“Huh.” Grimes's aggressive posture relaxed slightly. He looked down again. “You'll also need to pass the Defensive Driving course. You can sit that on your first day at the Academy. And as many times after that as necessary.”

It was horribly tempting to tell Grimes that the day Jim Ellison let him drive would be the day hell froze over, but Blair managed to stop himself.

“Unarmed combat…” Grimes frowned again. “Your instructor describes your performance as 'creative'. What in hell is that supposed to mean?”

“Uh… I think-”

“Never mind. Creative is not what we're looking for here, Sandburg.” The hard grey stare fixed on Blair's face. “You'll forget about creativity while you're here and just learn the moves. What you do out on the street is up to you.”

“Yes, Sir.”

Grimes glared at him again as though he suspected Blair of not being completely honest. “All things considered, I'll allow your request to expedite the courses you're required to take. The classroom subjects can easily be fitted into a shorter time frame. For firearms, PT, and unarmed combat, I'll allow you to take twice the usual number of classes each week. If you pass, you should be able to graduate in three months.”

Blair's heart sank. Three more months of Jim out on the street with only Megan for backup? “Three months? Sir, I'd hoped-”

“Take it or leave it, Sandburg.” There wasn't the slightest hint of yielding in Grimes' face or posture. “The things you'll learn in these classes need to become instinctive. You could cover all the classes in half that time, but you wouldn't have the instincts, and that could put you, your partner, or the public at risk. I won't allow that to happen.”

Put like that, it only seemed reasonable, but Blair didn't feel any happier. He didn't want to wait that long. He didn't want Jim to be on his own that long. But he didn't have a choice. He lifted his chin and met Grimes' stare with calm determination. “I'll take it, Sir.”

He thought he saw something that might, conceivably, be described as grudging approval on Grimes' face.

***

The first day, when Blair arrived home from the Academy he had a bruise on his cheekbone. The second day he had a split lip. Jim didn’t say anything, but Blair must have caught something in his
expression because he shrugged and grinned and made an off-hand comment about the unarmed combat course being rougher than he'd expected.

Jim shrugged and offered casually, “I can show you some moves if you like.”

“Sure.” Blair was equally casual. “When you've got some time.”

It wasn't any kind of surprise to Jim; he'd expected Blair to have to put up with some hazing, to start with at least. He'd also expected that Blair wouldn't want to come running to him, or anyone else, about it. Still, no harm in giving him a few pointers he wasn't likely to be taught in unarmed combat or anywhere else.

He stretched his arms out to the side and then pushed himself up off the couch. “No time like the present. Let's clear some space.”

They'd done this back in the early days when Jim's conscience hadn't rested easy with the idea of bringing Blair into danger. Blair had resisted at first; after Lash kidnapped him he'd changed his attitude and learned some easy, dirty tricks that he could use for the times when he couldn't talk his way out of trouble. There hadn't been too many of those times, thankfully. Jim still remembered some of them with an internal shudder.

Together they pushed back the coffee table and couch and rolled up the carpet. “So how're the other courses going so far?”

“Defensive driving's fun.” Blair grinned at him. “But I don't suppose I'll ever get to put it into practice.”

“You'd better believe it, Chief.” Jim started his warm up routine while Blair removed the heavy belt with its nightstick and empty holster – he wouldn't be allowed to carry until he'd passed the firearms course. “Had any practice on the range yet?”

“Yeah. Not doing all that well, actually.” Blair's nose wrinkled a little. “I know they didn't want me to take any classes before I started at the Academy, but somehow I don't think you'd teach me bad habits.” He made a little show of considering his words. “Well, except for dropping my gun all the time.”

“Fighting words.” Jim smiled, inordinately pleased by Blair's teasing. He dropped into a crouch and beckoned him forward. “Let's see what you've got. Show me what they're teaching you.”

They made a few passes, Jim holding back enough to assess Blair's moves. He held himself pretty well, and made a couple of good feints. When Jim tried to close in, Blair darted back or to the side, wisely declining to get too close to someone with a longer reach and greater strength. It was fine for practice, but sometimes on the street, you didn't have that luxury. The next time he tried it, Jim moved swiftly to intercept and pull him into a close grapple. Blair froze, then brought his hands up to push Jim away.

“No. You'll never get free that way.” Jim tightened his grip to prove the point and Blair' breathing hitched. He turned his face away, his cheeks reddening. Jim released him, and stepped back, ignoring the sudden tension between them. This was about Blair protecting himself. He needed to learn these things. “Look, when you're in close, you've got to take whatever advantage you can. You can bring your knee up, stomp on your opponent's foot, or use your hands – even a sharp pinch might make him flinch enough for you to pull free. Come on, I've already taught you this stuff.”

“I don't think that would go down too well in class, Jim.” Blair's voice was too breathless for the
small amount of exercise they'd had.

“To hell with class.” Jim's patience snapped and he abandoned the pretence. “You didn't get that bruise or the lip in class. How many were there?”

Blair sighed, rolled his shoulders a little. “Just two. It's not a big deal, so I don't want you making a federal case out of it.”

“I know it's not a big deal.” Jim dropped back onto the couch. “I expected it would happen. Your name and face are too well known, at least in Police circles. And you know what a bunch of gossipy bitches cops can be.”

“Oh.” Blair seemed to deflate suddenly. He sat down beside Jim, leaving a little more space than he would normally.

“I'm just saying, outside of class you don't have to worry about the rules. If someone's hassling you, you deal with it however you can make it work.” Jim turned his head to look at Blair, who had his head tipped back staring at the ceiling. “They want to take you on? Make them do it on your terms, not theirs.”

“Okay. That makes sense.” Blair swallowed, his Adam's apple bobbing under taut skin, and then sighed, bringing his hands up to press against his eyes for a moment. When he dropped them his left hand brushed Jim's bare arm and he flinched away again.

This was getting annoying. “What's going on, Chief? Has somebody said something? About… about us?” He'd expected that too – it had happened in the early days at the PD until the other cops had gotten used to the two of them. There was bound to be all sorts of rumours flying around, especially now.

“Yeah.” Blair sounded tired. He stood up. “I'm gonna wash up and then call out for pizza. I'll cook tomorrow night, okay?”

“Wait.” Jim grabbed his wrist. Something about Blair's behaviour didn't feel right. He'd known about the rumours at the PD before and they hadn't bothered him. “Tell me, okay? Who's talking?”

“Nobody's talking, Jim.” Blair said impatiently. “Just… well, I guess you ought to know. It's Simon.”

“Simon?” That was… unexpected. Jesus, Simon knew them both too well to believe crazy rumours.

“Yeah.” Blair heaved a sigh. “It's my own fault really. He just made some off hand remark and I… I guess I kind of overreacted. Now he seems to think there's something happening between us. I'm sorry, Jim. I guess I was a bit off my game.”

“Huh.” He wondered if maybe he should say something to Simon, but that would probably only make things worse. Better just to leave it alone. He squeezed Blair's wrist gently before releasing it. “Well, it's not important, Chief. Go have your shower. I'll order the pizza, my treat. We haven't celebrated your starting at the Academy yet.”

“Maybe we should wait to see if I survive the first week.” Blair smiled, his shoulders noticeably relaxing as he headed for his room.

***

When Blair started coming home with a smile on his face and something approaching his usual
energy in his step, Jim figured that things were working out at the Academy. He quietly shelved half-formed plans to call in a few favours. Blair wouldn't have thanked him for interfering but he'd have done it if he'd thought it necessary, and taken the consequences if Blair ever found out. But now it was beginning to look like everything might work out okay after all.

At the end of the fourth week, when Blair came home looking completely wrung out, Jim was lying on the couch, a grin on his face. Friday of the fourth week was the day new cadets went through their first run on Main Street, or – as the cadets liked to call it – Pain Street. As far as he knew, Jim was still the only cadet who had managed a perfect score on his first run, but even with his Ranger training it had been a close call on several occasions. Most cadets came out of it completely shattered and wondering if they'd made the right decision to join the Police.

“So, Sandburg, how many civilians did you kill today?” He sat up, swinging his legs off the couch and patting the seat beside him.

Blair smiled weakly, unbuckling his belt as he walked over. He put it down carefully on the coffee table and turned, flopping backside first onto the couch. “None. But the bad guys got off pretty lightly too.” He stretched his arms up over his head and yawned. “God, I'm trashed.”

“I'll get dinner started soon. At least you've got the weekend off.” He glanced over at Blair's oblivious profile. “Did you take any hits?”

“Nope.” A small smile curved his lips. “if nothing else, four years on the street with you have taught me how and when to duck.”

“Yeah, I guess it did.” Jim managed a smile he wasn't really feeling. A tiny niggling doubt had settled in his gut. “How did the others go?”

Blair chuckled. “Half of them got shot, and a whole lot of civilians bit the dust. It was carnage, man.”

“It usually is.” Jim hesitated, not wanting to put a dent in Blair's good mood. Of course it was early days, only the first of many run throughs Blair would make during training, but… “What did the instructor say?”

“Bossch? Oh he was his usual charming self. Said it was just as bad to be too cautious as it was to be too gung ho.” Blair rolled his shoulders, taking in a deep breath before letting it out slowly. “I mean, I get what he was saying, but it was just an obstacle course, and my first time. I'm gonna get better at it.”

“Of course you are.” He patted Blair's knee companionably and got up. “Want a beer?”

Bair's face brightened. “Jim, I'd sacrifice my first-born for a beer.”

He got two bottles out of the fridge, passed one to Blair and twisted off the cap of the other. A good third of Blair's bottle went down in a couple of long swallows. “Just a tip. They'll keep the course the same for the first three, four times, then they'll change things around, just to keep you from getting complacent.”

“I'll remember that.” Blair saluted him with the bottle. “Thanks. Now, want to tell me what's got your panties in a bunch?”

He should have known Blair would pick up on his uneasiness. “Nothing, really.” Even to his own ears his denial sounded unconvincing. “I mean, your background isn't exactly typical for a cadet. Like you said, you've already had experience on the street, and you're not used to having a weapon to get out of tight situations.”
Blair frowned slightly. “I'm hearing a 'but' here, Jim.”

“But,” Jim shrugged, “if your instructors get the idea you're gun shy, it could be a problem.”

“Do you think that?” When Jim hesitated, Blair let his head drop against the back of the couch. “Just great. When are you going to trust me, Jim? Is it even worth me going through all this?”

Alarmed by the bitterness in Blair's voice, Jim leaned forward and put his hand on Blair's arm. “It's not about me trusting you, okay? You have to convince the instructors that you're ready, willing and able to use your weapon if the situation calls for it.” He smiled, remembering some of Blair's more outrageous improvisations. “Me, I'd rather have you at my back, unarmed, than most other cops carrying weapons.” The muscles under his hand relaxed and Blair turned his head to smile at him.

“Thanks, Jim. That means a lot.” He sighed. “Maybe I am being too cautious. My scores on the firing range aren't all that good, and I'm not consistent. Some days I don't do too bad and some days I'm just all over the place.”

It was a good opening and Jim took advantage. “You want me to give you some pointers? We could use the firing range at Central.”

“Okay.” Blair nodded thoughtfully. “Yeah, I guess I could use some help.”

“Then how about you come in early with me tomorrow? Around six, six-thirty?” It was less likely there'd be any unwelcome onlookers at that time. Blair wasn't supposed to be hanging around the PD until he'd graduated and taken his oath.


Jim patted his knee. “I guess I'd better get dinner started. Looks like we'll both be having an early night.”

***

They drove in to Central separately the following morning; Jim would be staying on to do his shift and Blair would be doing whatever he'd planned for the weekend. As he'd hoped, the firing range was deserted and he started setting up one of the lanes while Blair checked the guns and extra clips.

“Okay, let's start with something easy.” Jim clipped a paper target and sent it ten yards down the range. It was a simple bullseye target and at this range Blair shouldn't have any problems getting most of his shots inside the innermost ring. “Just empty the clip, okay, Chief? And don't think too much about it, I just want to get an idea of how you operate.”

He leaned against the sidewall watching as Blair fired round after round. His stance was good, and he absorbed the kickback with his wrists exactly as he should. He wasn't making the rookie mistake of blinking as he fired. And his aim, at this range at least, proved to be reasonable enough.

He moved the next target to the twelve-yard mark and stood behind Blair this time. From the new angle Jim could see there were a few minor problems with the way Blair was standing. His hips were canted slightly, showing he was placing more weight on his right leg than his left. His shoulders angled the opposite way to compensate. It was a small thing and probably not something Blair's instructor would have noticed but Jim knew Blair, and his body, a lot better than any instructor ever would. When Blair had emptied the clip, Jim brought the target back. The results were still within an acceptable range, but Jim could see that at a greater distance, Blair would start to have problems.
He changed the target again while Blair reloaded both clips. “This time I'm going to adjust your stance a bit. Your balance is off slightly.” He didn't add that the leg Blair was favouring was the one Quinn had shot. It might be coincidence, though Jim doubted it; either way, it probably wouldn't do much good to mention it. “Raise the weapon but don't fire until I say so.”

He stepped forward placing his hands on Blair's hips and pressing lightly to move him into a more balanced position. When he was satisfied, he slid his hands up to Blair's shoulders, checking by feel that they were also level. Then, keeping one hand on Blair's shoulder, he moved his right hand back to his hip. “Okay, fire off the clip when you're ready.”

He was standing too close; he knew he was being a giant asshole, but he didn't back away even when he felt the heat of Blair's body spike suddenly and caught a waft of pheromones rising between them. Sometimes the urge to be close, physically close, to Blair was almost overwhelming.

There was a barely perceptible hesitation before Blair fired. Jim watched approvingly as Blair bettered the score he'd managed at ten yards. “That's good. Try not to breathe out when you're firing.”


This time the target Jim selected was a head and shoulders outline. He loaded it up and sent it down to the twelve-yard mark again. When Blair was getting ready, he stepped up behind him again, left hand on his shoulder, the other on his hip, adjusting his stance. He knew the moment Blair saw the target; the muscles under his left hand bunched and tightened and Blair drew in a sharp breath. He probably hadn't used these targets yet at the Academy.

“It's just a piece of paper, Chief.”

“I know, Jim.” The tension remained. “It's... it's what that paper represents.”

Jim sighed, and felt the warm puff of air against his lips deflected back to him from Blair's cheek. He could feel the percussion of Blair's heartbeat reverberating in the space between their bodies. He'd move away, he told himself, if Blair said anything; but Blair didn't. “You can't think about that right now. Remember what I said last night about needing to convince the instructors? For the time being, you have to forget about what it represents and just think of it as a piece of paper.”

The short curls tickled his cheek as Blair nodded reluctantly and raised his weapon again. Jim could smell the nervousness on him, a sour undertone beneath the stink of cordite, and wondered if it was the target, or him, that was making Blair tense. Once, it had been so easy to be inside each other's physical space; Blair had been just as eager as he. That had changed after the first argument about the dissertation. They'd never really healed that wound, and then it had gotten worse; the mess with Alex Barnes had pushed them even further apart.

For now, though, he closed his eyes and concentrated on how Blair's body felt under his hands. The slight tightening of his shoulders as he squeezed off the first round, the tiny recoil, not perceptible even to Jim's eyes when the gun kicked back into his hands. There were three bullets left in the clip when the door into the firing range opened. Blair didn't hear it with the ear protectors on, but Jim did. Whoever had entered would easily see the two of them, but Jim didn't move away. To do that would only draw attention and make them look guilty. He waited until Blair fired the final bullet and started to lower the weapon before stepping back and reaching for the controls to bring the target towards them. The spread of the hits was wider, more haphazard than on the previous shoots, but Jim smiled encouragingly.

“Not bad for a first try. Now load up the clips again.” He clapped casually Blair on the shoulder, his
hand lingering unnecessarily. “This time, I want you to empty the first clip, eject it, slot in the second clip and empty it too. See how fast you can do it. I'll be in the next lane doing a few rounds of my own, okay?”

Blair nodded, his cheeks flushed, and started filling the clips from the ammunition box.

The two men who'd come in were a couple lanes down from Jim's; an older white man who looked vaguely familiar and a young African American. They were setting up and neither looked in Jim's direction as he moved into his own lane and set up the target. He sent it down to the twenty-five yard mark, the furthest it would go, and sighted along the barrel, emptying the clip as quickly as he could. Then he ejected the clip, slammed another home and emptied that one too.

He was finishing his third round when someone passed behind him and he heard a young sounding voice say: “Hey, Blair! What're you doing here, man?”

“Kieran! I could ask you that.” Blair sounded pleased, and Jim relaxed a little. Every so often he still overheard comments about Blair that raised his hackles. He turned away from the target to reload his clips and caught a glimpse of the young African-American grinning at Blair.

“I come in with Dad most weekends. The more practice, the better, right?” Kieran glanced quickly in Jim's direction and lowered his voice. “So, is that Ellison?”

“Yeah, that's Jim.” Blair's voice was too casual. “He's giving me some pointers.”

“Looked like you guys were getting pretty intimate there.” The kid's voice was only teasing, but Jim tensed up, wondering if Blair was getting hassled at the Academy. “Man, I can't blame you. If I batted for that team, I'd want a fine hunk like that, too.”

“Kieran, shut up. He might hear you.” Blair was laughing, but it sounded phoney to Jim's ears.

“Nah, not with his ear protectors on.” Kieran laughed. “Unless he really does have sentinel hearing.”

Jim could almost feel the sudden tension in the air. His hands froze for a second and he heard Blair say in a tone Jim had never heard from him before: “Not funny, Halloran.”

“Hey…” The kid sounded startled, “Sorry, Blair. I didn't mean anything. It was just a joke.”

“Look. Last time that story was going the rounds some good people nearly got killed. Jim nearly got killed. He couldn't do his job properly.” Blair's voice wobbled a bit. “You think I really wanted to trash my academic career in public?” He sighed audibly, and the fight went out of his voice. “It was my fault that paper got out into the media, all right? But it was never intended to be released. I'm not crazy. I knew it was fake.”

“So how did it happen? We've all kind of wondered about it, you know.” Keiran's voice was subdued now, dropping almost to a whisper.

“The publisher sent it to a reporter friend. I guess he thought he could push me into accepting his offer. I'd already told him I wasn't interested.” Blair's voice was so quiet, Jim had to make an effort to hear him.

“That sucks,” Kieran hissed angrily. “Can't you sue him?”

It wasn't the first time Jim had heard that question asked. He'd suggested it to Blair himself. And got the same answer Blair was giving Kieran now.
“I can't afford the kind of publicity that would bring, and neither can Jim. Besides, it's my word against his. My mother sent the file to him, from my laptop, and there wasn't any witness to our phone conversations.” Blair hesitated, and when he continued his voice was flat, resigned. “Maybe I'd win, and maybe I wouldn't. It isn't worth the risk, not after what happened last time. I just want to get on with my life.”

“Yeah, I get it.” The kid hesitated. “Listen, if I hear any more talk at the Academy, I'll tell-”

“No.” Blair interrupted, “Just keep out of it, okay? If you want to help, just change the subject. Don't try to explain; don't try to defend me. The more talk there is, the longer this thing is going to be causing trouble.”

“Kieran, you here to chat or practice?” The voice was slightly Irish-accented, and Jim put the name together with the voice. He was a uniformed officer in the Burglary division that Jim had met a couple of times.

“Coming, Dad! See ya later, Blair.”

Jim felt, rather than heard, the kid pass behind him. He glanced over to see what Blair was doing but he'd disappeared back into his own lane. A moment later he heard shots as Blair emptied his clip again.

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For once, Jim didn't mind that the criminal fraternity of Cascade seemed to have taken the weekend off. Normally, the last thing he wanted to do was to sit around going through old case files, prepping for trial, tying up loose ends, or rechecking cold cases in the hope that some new clue would leap out at him.

The two open cases he and Connor were investigating were at a standstill; and, little as he enjoyed working with her, Jim had to concede she was good – in some ways better than Blair, though he'd gouge out his own eyes before he'd admit it. But she didn't have a handle on his senses the way Blair did, and he couldn't be with her for more than ten minutes without wanting to strangle her. It was easy to forget how much Blair helped him until he wasn't there to do it any more.

He sighed and reached for another file folder. He knew he was wasting his time – his concentration was shot to hell, and it was entirely his own fault. He couldn't stop thinking about this morning, and his behaviour in the firing range. It had been inappropriate and inexcusable; and now that he had time to think about it, he found Blair's reaction – or lack of it – disturbing. Blair had never had any problem with letting him know he'd crossed a line. This morning he'd been so far beyond the line it wasn't even visible, but Blair hadn't said a thing.

Jesus. He leaned back in his chair, rubbing his hands over his face. Was Blair even interested any more? Sure, he'd smelled the arousal but any pretty girl or good-looking guy he passed in the street could get Blair aroused; it didn't mean anything. Whether he was willing to take a risk on Jim was another matter altogether. It suddenly occurred to Jim that he'd fallen into the habit of thinking that decision was his to make. Maybe Blair had already made his decision and moved on.

That… was unacceptable.

“Christ.” Jim stood up and headed for the break room to refill his coffee mug. The others in the bullpen glanced incuriously in his direction.

What kind of jerk was he becoming? He'd been pushing Blair away for months, but Blair wasn't
allowed to let go of him? Jim leaned against the counter, taking a sip from his mug. It tasted bitter and he tossed it into the sink and started making a new brew. At least it gave him time to think.

The days when he'd fooled himself into believing that by not sleeping with Blair he was somehow protecting himself were over now. Losing Blair would be just as devastating whether they went forward, or stayed as friends. Jim still wasn't sure whether he wanted to become Blair's lover, even if Blair was interested any more, but he'd have to make up his mind soon. One way or another, he needed to get this out of the way before they became partners again.

Jim heard the clack of women's heels in the hallway and caught the whiff of Connor's scent. Sighing, he braced himself for more irritation.

“You can forget the caffeine, Jimbo, we've got a case.” She frowned as he turned to face her. “Are you okay? You look like you got the rough end of a pineapple.”

He didn't even try to figure out what that meant. “What's the case?”

“A floater,” she said with ghoulish enthusiasm. “When the Harbour Police ran his driver's license it came up flagged.”

“Huh.” It could mean a federal agent or a cop under deep cover, or maybe even an important CI. “Well, don't get too excited, it'll probably end up in someone else's lap.”

“Seriously, what's the matter? Is it something to do with Sandy?” She sailed on, oblivious to his annoyance. He hated that nickname almost as much as he hated her calling him 'Jimbo'. “When you're in a mood, it's usually something to do with him.”

It must have been desperation, because Jim found himself asking “Has Sandburg said anything to you about the Police Academy?” He knew they'd been meeting up for coffee occasionally; Blair hadn't made a secret of the fact he was discreetly keeping in touch with his friends at the PD.

“No. Is there a problem?” She turned as he reached the door and they walked together down the otherwise deserted hallway.

“He's not doing so well on the firearms course, but other than that, I'm not aware of anything.” Jim hesitated, and then decided he might as well go for broke. “He doesn't tell me much these days. Unless I ask him.” And sometimes even then, but he wasn't going to admit that.

The elevator, when it came, was just as empty as the hallway. He leaned against the back wall and ignored Connor's sidelong looks. There was clearly something she wanted to say, and the fact that she wasn't saying it meant it was too blunt even for her to just come out with it.

Jim sighed. “You might as well say it, whatever it is.”

“Okay. You asked for it.” She took a deep breath. “You do realise you behaved like a jackass, don't you?”

It took a moment for him to realise what she was talking about. Then it hit him. “Oh. You think he's still-”

“You dropped him in it,” she said angrily. “Why wouldn't he still be pissed off? I'm still pissed off at you.”

“I didn't…” but he had, in a way. If he'd worked with Blair instead of cutting him loose, maybe they could have fixed the problem before Blair had to throw his entire career away.
“Have you even talked about it, you two?” When Jim hesitated, she snorted. “Of course you haven’t. Bloody men. Blair might spin a good line about being in touch with his emotions but when it’s down to brass tacks, you’re both about as useful as tits on a bull.”

Jim hated to admit it, even to himself, but she was right. He needed to set this right with Blair before they had any hope of sorting out the rest of their issues. If he was really lucky, this case would end up being handed over to the Feds and he could go home tonight and fix things up.

He glanced over at Connor, who was still glaring at him. “Do you Aussies really talk like that, or do you just make that shit up?”

The glare turned into a smug little smile. “As useful as an ashtray on a surfboard,” she said primly. “As useful as a fart in a thunderstorm. As useful as a parachute in a submarine.”

Jim sighed and closed his eyes.

***

At first, Blair had planned to confront Jim over his behaviour that morning. His initial reaction had been shock, then annoyance after Kieran’s joshing him about it; but later it turned to outright anger. God knew, he’d struggled to accept Jim's decision not to become involved romantically, but he'd done it. But now Jim was – to put it bluntly – turning into a cocktease, and he wasn't going to stand for that. Jim needed to make up his mind – either to piss or to get off the damned pot.

He spent half the afternoon pacing furiously and rehearsing what he wanted to say. Not something he’d normally do, but he was getting more and more pissed as the day wound on. Then the phone rang and it was Jim, saying he'd got caught up in a case and wouldn't be home until late. It couldn't be helped, but it didn't do anything to improve Blair's mood.

Over the next few days he barely saw Jim; there was no chance at all to talk about anything more serious than what groceries they needed and whether the utilities bill had been paid. It made him realise how little he and Jim talked any more. Usually, the television was on and they either watched together in silence or Blair would go into his room to study. Being there alone didn't really feel any different.

Jim finally arrived home on Wednesday evening just as Blair was thinking listlessly about what he should cook for dinner. Blair glanced up from his seat on the couch as the door opened. A moment later he was on his feet. “Jim, what happened?”

“Nothing.” Jim shrugged irritably. “I didn't duck fast enough, that's all.”

It wasn't all. The bruise on his jaw was minor, hardly worth worrying over. It was the tightness around his eyes, the tiny frown line between his eyebrows that he couldn't quite smooth out that set off alarm bells in Blair's mind.

“You zoned.” He went over to Jim, his hand lifting instinctively to touch Jim's jaw. He managed to stop himself before that happened and let his hand drop back to his side, but his eyes scanned Jim's face, seeing the exhaustion of too many days spent working outrageously long hours. “I thought Megan was helping you with your senses?”

“She is.” Jim shook his head tiredly and sighed. “She's just not you. Sometimes she misses the signs, or can't get me out of it fast enough.”

Sickening guilt swept through him. He should be with Jim, but Simon had ruled that out until after Blair had graduated from the Academy. He'd been telling himself that Jim had a good handle on his
senses, and he did, most of the time. It was the other times that left Blair feeling worried and helpless.

“Why don't you go have a shower and relax? I'll order takeout and… maybe we can talk about the case, or run through a few sensory exercises?” Jim wouldn't be keen on that, he never was, but it might give Blair more of an idea how he could help. He'd call Megan too, though that could wait till morning.

It was a sign of Jim's weariness that he didn't even argue the point. He climbed the stairs slowly, coming back down in his bathrobe a few minutes later while Blair was scanning through the menus. “What do you want, Jim? Thai, Vietnamese? Italian?”

Jim just waved a hand in Blair's general direction as he disappeared into the bathroom. “Whatever, Chief. I don't really care.”

The Thai restaurant around the corner would be the fastest delivery, so Blair decided to go with that. He phoned in the order, choosing Jim's favourite dishes in the hope of getting him to eat adequately. By the time Jim had finished his shower and dressed, the order would be nearly ready.

Sure enough, the food arrived just as Jim was coming down the stairs dressed in sweatpants and an old t-shirt and sweater. He looked a little more relaxed, with most of the tightness around his eyes dissipated. He actually cracked a smile when he scented the food and went to the cupboard to get plates and forks.

Blair set out the cartons on the table and got them a beer each from the fridge. He handed one to Jim as they sat, and Jim saluted him with it. “Thanks, Chief. This looks really good.”

He waited until Jim had eaten a fair proportion of the food before saying: “I know you're not supposed to tell me about the cases you're working on, but if there's anything I can help you with…”

Jim put his fork down with a sigh. “It feels like I'm missing something, you know? I've gone over the crime scene a dozen times, but there's something there that I just can't get a handle on.”

“He won't allow that.” Jim's eyes met his, a hint of apology in their depths. “It's a Federal case. The only reason they haven't taken it over is the guy was deep undercover and we don't know whether his cover was blown or whether it's just someone taking out what they believe is a member of a rival group. And there's another agent undercover whose life could be in danger if it gets out that the vic was a Fed.”

“Messy.” Blair leaned back, letting his head drop back until he was staring at the ceiling. “Can you tell me about the crime scene? If you feel like you've missed something, then you probably sensed something unconsciously. It'll still be there in your memory and maybe we can bring it to the surface.”

Predictably, Jim grumbled, but when they'd finished he sat on the couch while Blair cleared the dishes, closing his eyes and taking slow, deep breaths to relax himself. When Blair had rinsed the plates and stacked them for later, he went over and sat on the coffee table facing Jim. “Okay, just let your mind wander; there's something it wants to tell you, so just let it happen, okay?”

“Sandburg, if it was just going to happen, it already would have, don't you think?”

Blair shook his head resignedly. Jim always had to fight him at first. “Just relax and let your mind drift. We'll get more focused in a minute.”
Jim sighed, but already Blair could see the muscles in his neck and shoulders starting to loosen. “Okay.”

“I'll put some music on.” He went over to the stereo and picked out a quiet, Celtic inspired CD that featured soft flute music. He turned the volume down almost all the way. He could barely hear it at all, but for Jim it would be soothing background music. “Just listen to the flute, Jim. Focus on that and filter out the other instruments, but don't concentrate too hard. Don't try to make it louder, just follow the rise and fall of the flute's melody.”

Jim nodded, a tiny frown on his forehead that gradually evened out.

“All right. Now we'll try each of your senses in turn.” Blair watched Jim's face for clues as he took him one by one through hearing and sight. They were his strongest senses most of the time, and Blair doubted the missing information would be related to them. When he prompted Jim with scent, the change was immediate – his jaw muscles clenched and his eyes flickered rapidly beneath their lids.

“Oh, I think we've got something, Jim.” Blair lowered his voice, deepening the pitch to a persuasive murmur. “What are you sensing?”


“Filter those out. There's something else. Something subtle that the other scents are overpowering.” Blair couldn't help thinking how much he'd missed this in the last couple of months. He sometimes thought that helping Jim was what he was born to do, and it never failed to thrill him when Jim responded in this way. He could live without the sex, and he didn't need to write up papers about Jim's sentinel abilities. It was this, what was happening right here, that made everything he'd sacrificed worthwhile.

Suddenly, Jim got it. Blair could see it in the way his nostrils flared and his chin tilted up. “It's some kind of scent… probably men's aftershave.”

“Good. That's great. Do you recognise it?”

“I don't know what it is, but I've smelled it before.” Jim opened his eyes, smiling. “I've smelled it on someone in the last few days.”

Blair grinned. “Knew you could do it.”

The exhaustion of the last few days had gone from Jim's face. “I'll go back through the interviews. Maybe reading the notes will jog my memory. It's no good as evidence, but at least I'll know who to focus on.” He hesitated and then smiled almost shyly. “Thanks, partner.”

Partner. Blair smiled to himself. It was good to hear that word from Jim's mouth again.

***

Blair had just completed the Main Street course – his third attempt – when he got a message to report to the Director's office. He set off at a trot, wanting at the very least to put his head under the tap and wipe away the worst of the sweat first. He had a sinking feeling he knew what this was about. Despite being careful to remember Jim's lessons, his firing range scores were still below what he'd need to graduate.

He wasn't reassured to find not only the Director, but also Sergeant Bossch waiting for him. The firearms instructor's presence only confirmed what he'd already suspected this meeting was about.
“Take a seat, cadet.” Captain Grimes nodded towards the only empty chair.

“Thank you, Sir.” Blair deliberately didn’t glance across at Sergeant Bossch, sitting to the right of Director’s desk. He sat, keeping his back straight, his hands on his thighs. “Sir, I realise my scores haven’t been good on the firing range, but I know I can improve.”

The two men exchanged a brief look and Grimes shook his head. “Actually, I don’t believe you can, Sandburg. The psych evaluations are indicating you have some real issues with regard to firearms use.”

“‘The psych evals?’” Blair swallowed nervously. He knew he’d done badly in the more physical side of his training, but he knew enough about psychology to know he’d done well in that area. “Sir, I—”

Grimes ignored him. “I'm also concerned about your performance on the obstacle course and unarmed combat courses.”

Blair took a deep breath and let it out, forcing himself to speak calmly. “With all due respect, Sir, I've done better than I'm doing now, both in firearms and unarmed combat. I'm getting extra help, and I'll do whatever it takes to get my scores up to an acceptable level.”

Bossch spoke for the first time. “No, Sandburg, you won't.”

Something about the subtle emphasis on the last word hit home. Blair's eyes widened slightly. “You've done something to the gun I use. What is it? Misaligning the barrel? You don't want me to pass.” He stared at Grimes. “I suppose the same thing's happening with the other practicals.”

He should have realised. He'd been sure that his times over the obstacle course were better than they turned out to be, and they hadn't improved at all. He'd put it down to nervousness, same as with the firearms practice. And he knew he'd aced the psych eval, though the results were never released to the cadets.

Grimes hesitated for a moment, then nodded sharply. “I'm sorry, Sandburg. It's nothing personal.”

He rubbed his chin reflectively and sighed. “Look, you seem like a decent man, but you must know that allowing a self-confessed fraud to become a police officer will do a gross disservice to the Force. I don't know what Banks was thinking of to sponsor you to the Academy.”

“The fact is you'll never be able to testify in court. You'll never be primary on a case, because that would taint the evidence.” Bossch even looked sympathetic, which only made this whole situation worse. “We're doing you a favour, Sandburg. Get out now, before you're humiliated in court and forced to resign.”

If they'd shown even the slightest bit of animosity, Blair might have been able to fight back. As it was, he found himself nodding vaguely. “I'll think about what you've said. I'll let you know my decision in twenty-four hours.”

“I'm sure you'll do the right thing.” Grimes rose and extended a hand. Blair ignored it. “Dismissed, Cadet.”

He left the room, numb with shock. He needed to talk this over with Jim, but somehow that didn’t seem like a good idea. This whole interview was a set up. If he tried to do anything about it, it would be his word against two senior officers and, as they’d said, he was an admitted fraud. Jim would believe him, but it wasn't about that. They were right. He should have seen it from the start. Simon and Jim should have seen it, but they’d let their belief in him cloud their judgement. He didn't need twenty-four hours to make a decision. What he needed was time to come to terms with it.
He figured he had maybe four hours.

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“Are you angry?”

Jim glanced up at Blair, who looked like he was about ready to puke. “Angry?” he considered the question. Surprised, yeah. Disappointed for sure. More than a little relieved – he hadn't really been looking forward to the day he could no longer tell Sandburg to stay in the truck and call for backup. Not that he ever did… “No, I'm not angry.”

Blair simply nodded, not looking any happier, and Jim's eyes narrowed. “The other cadets weren't still giving you trouble, were they?”

“No.” This time Blair did meet his eyes. “Nothing I couldn't handle.”

He suspected there was more to the story than Blair was telling him, but in the face of such obvious distress, he wasn't willing to push. “If you don't want to be a cop, then you shouldn't be. It isn't the kind of job you can do to please someone else.”

“It's not…” Blair hesitated, pressing his lips together. He looked sicker than ever. “I want to work with you, Jim. I do. It's just…” he shook his head. “Being a cop isn't the right way to do it. Not for me.”

“So, what is?” And that came out too sharply. He saw Blair flinch slightly and deliberately softened his tone. “You won't be able to ride along with me after this. You do realise that.”

“Yeah, of course I do. And, no, I don't know what I'm going to do. Get a job, I guess. God knows you must be sick of carrying me financially.” Blair looked away, then back again. “I will pay you back, Jim.”

“Fuck! You think I care about that?” He pushed himself up off the couch and paced over to the window. His hands were shaking a little.

Blair threw up his hands placatingly. “No, man. I know you don't. But I do, okay? Plus, I've got a load of student debt to pay off. The sooner I can get some money coming in, the better.”

Mollified, Jim came back and perched on the arm of the couch next to him. “Any ideas about what you'll do?”

“Whatever I can.” Blair smiled ruefully. “I'm not exactly in a position to be picky.”

“I guess not.” He put his hand lightly on Blair's shoulder and squeezed it consolingly. “I'm sorry, Blair. I was hoping we'd got past all that mess.”

The shoulder moved briefly under his hand. “Yeah. So did I, man.”

He sighed. “Well, I guess I'd better tell Simon before he hears it through the grapevine.” That was, for sure, not going to be a lot of fun.

Immediately, Blair tensed, the sickly pale sheen returning to his face. “Oh, God… I hadn't thought… Jim…”

“It's all right.” He squeezed Blair's shoulder again then pulled him into a hug. There was a measurable hesitation before Blair's arms slid awkwardly around his waist and he relaxed against
Jim’s body. His heart was thudding wildly. “I'll take care of it, okay?”

“You're really not angry?” Blair shivered under his hands. “I thought... I was afraid this would be the last straw.”

“I'm really not angry.” Jim tightened his arms around Blair’s shoulders. “Blair, I’m sorry, okay? I'm really sorry about the way I behaved when your dissertation got leaked.”

“I deserved-”

“No, you didn't.” He lowered his head until his cheek was resting against Blair’s short curls. “I should have trusted you more. I should have worked with you to get that whole fiasco shut down. If I had…” It was a relief to finally come out and say it. Thoughts of how differently things might have gone had been haunting him ever since that talk with Connor.

Warm breath infiltrated through his shirt as Blair heaved a huge sigh. “And I should have told you sooner. I just thought I had it under control.” He pulled free of Jim's hold and looked up at him, a hint of brightness in his eyes. “We both made mistakes, Jim. Let's just leave it at that.”

“Okay.” Jim smiled down at him for a moment then stood up, arching his back to relieve the stiffness of an awkward position. “And don't worry about money. I paid the mortgage on this place on my own for two years before you moved in. I can certainly manage to do it again.”

Blair nodded soberly. “All right. For the moment. Maybe I can make it up in helping out around the house. I'll have plenty of time on my hands until I get a job. How about I take care of the cooking and cleaning?”

“And the laundry?” Jim cocked his head, grinning. “To my standards?”

“Man! You really know how to kick a guy when he's down.” Blair's face lit up in a genuine smile. “You think there's any room for compromise here?”

Jim only laughed, ruffling the short curls affectionately. It was only a small step they'd taken, but it felt good. Maybe... maybe he could even make that decision about him and Blair, now that he didn't have to second-guess how it would affect their working partnership. Maybe he could let himself have what he'd wanted almost since the day they'd met.

But not right now; he looked again at Blair's face, animated with laughter, but somehow still pinched and drawn. The last time he'd tried to take that step with Blair, it had ended badly. It hadn't helped that he'd been acting mostly on a confused mess of desire and pity, but Blair hadn't been ready for it, either. He wouldn't make that mistake again. Something told him this would be his last chance. Screw that up, and not even their friendship would survive the fallout.

***

“Sandburg did what?” Simon's face was thunderous. He rose part way out of his chair, looming at Jim from behind the desk. “Tell me you're joking.”

Jim didn't answer. It wasn't as if Simon really needed to be told the news again. He glanced away, at the view out the window, and waited.

After a few moments of particularly heavy breathing, Simon dropped back into his chair with a gusty sigh. “Did he say why, for Christ's sake?”

“He realised it wasn't going to work.” Jim stirred uneasily in his chair. He wasn't entirely convinced
that was the real reason, but he wasn't going to push things. On the surface, Blair seemed reasonably okay, but Jim got the feeling that it was at best a fragile stability.

By way of explanation – or excuse – he offered: “He'd been having trouble with the firearms training. I just don't think he could handle the idea of having to use his weapon on someone. It's better he drops out now than burns out later on.”

“Better for him, maybe.” Simon's lips set in a thin line. “You realise I put my ass on the line to get him into the Academy in the first place?”

Jim nodded soberly. “I do, and so does Blair. He's really cut up about the whole thing, Simon.”

“And what about you?” Simon's eyes seemed to bore right through him. “You said you didn't want to do this without the kid. What are you going to do now?”

“One of us needs to have a job.” Jim shrugged. He hadn't thought seriously about quitting, not yet. He certainly didn't want that on Blair's overactive conscience. “I guess I'll just keep on partnering with Connor.”

“Huh,” Simon grunted. A reluctant smile curled the corners of his mouth. “At least I won't be the only one suffering.

“Are you talking about me or Connor?” Jim relaxed a little. The yelling part of the interview was over now, and he could dial his hearing up to normal.

“Both of you.” Simon turned his head and stared out the window. “How's he taking it?”

“Not all that well.” His fingers were cramping where they clutched at the chair arms. Jim forced himself to loosen his grip. “He was looking pretty green when he told me. We've sorted a few things out, and he seemed better this morning. Still too quiet, though.”

“Sandburg, quiet?” Simon chuckled, the sound a little forced. “I didn't think it was possible.”

Jim managed to smile. “And I always thought it would be a good thing. What do I know?”

“All right.” Simon waved a hand vaguely towards the door. “You'd better go break the good news to Connor while I practice my grovelling techniques for the Commissioner.”

***

An invitation to lunch from his father was never an entirely unmixed blessing in Jim's experience, and this one seemed more doomed than most. All the same, he went to his father's house without telling Blair anything about it. He had enough problems right now without adding Jim's paternal issues into the mix.

If the invitation to lunch at home, rather than an expensive restaurant, wasn't warning sign enough, Jim arrived to find Sally about to leave. His father had given her the afternoon off. He smiled gamely and hugged her before closing the front door and going in search of his father.

“Ah, Jimmy, there you are.” William was in the den, with a tray of hors d'oeuvres and an open bottle of Chardonnay. “Good. Sally's left a salad, and there are crab cakes warming in the oven. I'll get them in a minute. Sit down.”

He accepted a glass of wine and sat, knowing that his father would get to what he wanted in his own time. He sipped the wine and ate a couple of smoked chicken puffs and a mini bacon and tomato
quiche while William talked about an investment he was considering – something electronic Jim gathered, though he wasn't really listening. Then talk turned to Steven and his current difficulties with his ex-wife. Or, rather, soon-to-be ex-wife – the divorce papers should be through any day now – and that, it seemed, was the problem. He made noises in all the right places and managed to make a couple of comments to prove he was listening, but really he was wondering how long it would take to eat the crab cakes, because nothing important was going to be discussed while they were eating.

They moved to the dining room for the crab cakes and salad, which were consumed with the respect that was due to Sally's culinary skills, though Jim refused more wine. Finally, Jim took the dishes through to the kitchen and put them in the top-of-the-market dishwasher. When they returned to the den, William poured them both more wine – ignoring Jim's protest – and leaned back in his chair.

That was the signal that the serious part of the meeting was about to get under way. Jim waited, his chin tilted at an angle that signalled he was in no mood for any bullshit.

His father, if he recognised the attitude, remained calmly unimpressed. “I heard that Sandburg has withdrawn from the Police Academy.”

“That's right.” He didn't ask how his father had found out in little more than a week. Of course William Ellison would know anything that affected one of his sons. “He decided that he wasn't suited to becoming a cop.”

The lined face didn't alter its expression. “That wasn't the information that I received. However, I'm sure it would suit everyone concerned that the real reason remains private.”

Jim's chin lifted slightly higher. He wasn't going to argue the point with his father, not right now; but he was for damned sure going to be asking some questions.

“Don't get into a snit, Jimmy. I'm sure Sandburg… Blair… was only doing what he thought was best.” His father hesitated, then continued, “in fact, I think better of him for his actions, however much they may have been at the prompting of others.”

Jim's eyes narrowed. “If someone's forced him out-”

“Don't be naïve.” William spoke sharply. “There was never any question of Sandburg becoming a police officer and you should have known better than to encourage him to believe that he could.”

So that was it. His anger deflated suddenly. “I had to do something. He gave up his academic career for me.”

William sighed. “He gave up his reputation. That was far more damaging.”

Jim couldn't argue with that. He stared gloomily at the floor for a few seconds before lifting his eyes to his father's face. “You didn't invite me here to tell me this.”

“No.” Surprisingly, William looked ill at ease. “I daresay Blair will have amassed substantial debts over the course of his studies. He's also completely without income and his employment prospects, in Cascade at least, seem very limited.”

“He'll do all right.” Jim shrugged uncomfortably. In spite of what he'd said to Blair, Jim knew he was really worried about his finances. Or complete lack of them. “He's resourceful and smart. He'll get a job soon.” A thought occurred to him – that his father had some contacts who might be able to help Blair. “You don't know anyone who-”

“I'm afraid not.” William shook his head decisively. “Jimmy, you don't seem to understand that this
puts you in a very precarious situation. This man, who to all appearances betrayed you in a most
public and embarrassing manner, is still living in your home, and being supported financially by you.
Don't you see how it would look if this became public knowledge?"

“I don't care! After what he's done for me – and you have no idea how much that is – there's no way
I'm going to turn my back on him now.” Jim pushed himself out of the chair, almost angry enough to
strike his father if he said another word. “This conversation is over.”

“Sit down.” His father spoke bluntly, not rising, but his knuckles had whitened where he gripped the
arms of his chair. “I know enough that I'll always be grateful to him for what he's done to help you.
I'm not asking you to turn him out on the street.”

Feeling slightly ashamed and a lot like a teenager again, Jim sat. “So, what are you saying?”

“I'll pay his debt. I can easily arrange for it to be done anonymously, in instalments, to make it look
like he's paying it off himself. The last thing we need is another indication of a cover up.” William
was watching his face closely. “I'll also provide him with enough funds to move away from Cascade
and start his life somewhere else. Somewhere where his past won't be an issue.”

“No.” Every instinct Jim possessed told him that this was not the answer. “I won't ask him to leave
all his friends, his home…” me… Jim shook his head. “I can't do it.”

“Jimmy…” William sighed impatiently. “Don't you owe it to Blair to let him decide?”

“If Blair thought that by leaving he could protect me, he'd go regardless of what he really wanted. I
can't let him do that, he's already lost too much.” Jim stood again. “Look, Dad, I appreciate it, but-”

“My offer's still open.” His father rose too. “I think you should tell him, Jimmy.”

Jim nodded, hugging him briefly. “I have to get back to work, but thanks.”

***

Lately, Jim had gotten into the habit of listening ahead whenever he arrived back on Prospect. The
first few days after dropping out of the Academy, Blair had been subdued and distant as the
consequences started to sink in and several times Jim had heard him stirring restlessly and muttering
in his sleep. The last time he'd had nightmares was just after the dissertation debacle, so it came as no
surprise he was having them again, and Jim had decided not to say anything unless they got a lot
worse.

For the last couple of days Blair had been veering between hostile and – equally disturbing – brittle
cheerfulness, so a little advance notice helped him to prepare for whatever mood Blair might be in.
Today, he heard not Blair's voice, but his father's. Cursing, he took the stairs two at a time and
savagely stabbed his key into the lock.

Blair's face, wreathed in smiles, turned towards him. “Jim! Man, you'll never guess-”

Jim ignored him, and glared at his father. “I told you to stay out of this. You've got no right-”

“Jimmy, if you'll just listen-” William Ellison rose stiffly to his feet.

“No! Just stop interfering in my life, goddamnit.” He gestured towards the still open door. “Get out,
Dad.”

His father stood his ground, jaw clenching stubbornly. “It's not up to you, Jimmy. My offer was
made to Blair.”

Instinctively, Jim's eyes turned to Blair, who was standing in the no man's land between him and his father. Blair's face was pale, his eyes clearly distraught, and when he realised he had Jim's attention, Blair swallowed nervously. “Jim, you don't want me to-

He went over to Blair, clutching at his shoulders and holding on tightly enough to make him wince. “No. I won't let him do this. I won't let you do it. Do you understand me?"

Blair's face went perfectly blank and he pulled away. “I… uh…”

“Jimmy!”

He didn't even glance in his father's direction. “Dad, shut up!”

“Okay, I'll just…” Blair gestured distractedly towards his room. “Thanks, Mr Ellison… for offering, I mean.”

Jim waited until Blair had closed the door behind himself and then turned a full strength glare on his father. “When are you going to learn? Just leave us alone, all right?”

“No, it's not all right.” His father looked furious. “I offered to pay Blair's student debt, no strings attached.”

Oh, fuck… His jaw dropped. “Dad, I… I'm sorry.”

***

Jim hated him. Jim really hated him. He must, because why else would he do this?

Or… or maybe he was afraid someone would find out. Maybe that was it. Blair wanted desperately to believe that… except it wouldn't explain the fury in Jim's eyes when he'd realised what William Ellison had offered.

Blair sat on the bed, knees drawn up to his chest, and shook uncontrollably. He could barely hear the bed rattling over the sound of his breath rasping in his lungs, his heart pounding in his ears. He hadn't had a panic attack like this in years…not since his early years at Rainier, when he'd been a teenager, and alone, and far away from everything he knew.

He had to calm down. Had to. Snatching at random, he repeated over and over one of Naomi's favourite mantras, but the words were meaningless. Literally. Just a series of jumbled syllables that his brain couldn't resolve into actual words.

It wasn't until the mattress dipped beside him that Blair realised Jim had come into his room. He couldn't open his eyes. Couldn't hear anything at all. But he felt it when Jim's arms came around him and pulled him against Jim's chest. Felt the large, gentle hands run soothingly up and down his back. And he felt the humid warmth of lips against his hair. Blair choked back a sob, and his fingers twisted in a death grip on Jim's shirt.

Eventually, he became aware of Jim's voice, soft, repeating his own mantra. “…okay. Just breathe, Blair. It's okay.”

He took a deep breath, let it out again, and pushed himself away from Jim's clasp. He noticed, mortified, that the front of Jim's shirt was wet. “Oh, god, I'm sorry, Jim. I didn't mean to—"
“No, I'm sorry.” Jim patted his shoulder awkwardly, moving away a little. “I thought Dad was interfering again. A week ago he told me he'd pay your debts if you left Cascade. I told him where to shove it.”

“Oh.” Blair bowed his head, staring at his hands, which somehow had curled into fists. And Jim hadn't even bothered to tell him? It was his choice, his life, damn it!

“But, now…” Jim took in a deep, audible breath, “it was never about the money, I promise. I just didn't want you feeling like… like you had to leave…” his voice trailed off.

Blair snuck a glance at him, noting the twitching jaw muscles, the downcast eyes. The way his fingers, laced together in his lap, were white at the knuckles. Of course Jim wouldn't want that. The guilt would be more than his over-active sense of responsibility could bear. The thought brought no comfort, though.

With a sudden, frightening clarity, Blair could see them a year, five years, down the track. Still together, his reputation still in tatters, unable to find anything better than a menial job. Still in debt. How long would it be, he wondered, before Jim's guilt soured into resentment? He'd never kick Blair out, but staying would be infinitely worse.

William's first solution had been the right one, although probably for the wrong reasons. He should accept the offer, and once his debts were cleared, he could leave. His uncle had retired from the trucking business and moved to Florida, but he still had friends. And Texas was about as far away from Cascade as he could get. Or maybe one of Naomi's many friends could find him a job somewhere. Next time she surfaced, he'd ask her.

In the meantime… he was still shaking, feeling sick to his stomach, but he was used to that, the usual aftermath of a panic attack. “Look, I'll think about your father's offer, if it's still on the table. It's incredibly generous.”

“You deserve it, and he can afford it.” Jim glanced at him, his face lightening a little. “Are you sure you're okay?”

He managed to smile. “Sure. You know me. Panic Attacks R Us.”

“And the nightmares?”

So he'd heard them. Blair cursed inwardly, but shrugged as casually as he could. “It's just the usual crap – generalised anxiety. They'll go away once things settle down.”

***

It was the first time Blair had been to the house Jim grew up in since the Foster case. He'd been invited a few times, but he'd always declined, partly to allow Jim and his father to reconnect without having an awkward third wheel, partly because the house itself made him feel uncomfortable. He didn't really like houses that were designed and decorated primarily to show off their owner's wealth.

Oh, well, here goes nothing… he pressed his finger to the doorbell, noticing that it trembled just a little. It's cold, he told himself, might even snow.

He wasn't expecting William Ellison himself to open the door and it must have showed in his face. William looked him up and down impassively for a moment and then stood aside. “Sally's out shopping at the moment. Come in.”

“Thanks.” Blair smiled, too brightly, and went inside, pausing while William shut the door behind
him.

“This way.” William headed in the direction of the den. “Can I get you something to drink?”

“No, I'm fine, thanks.” The last thing he wanted was to drag this out. “I came about-

“I think I can guess what you came about.” William's voice was dry, but with a faint note of humour. Blair wondered what Jim's father really thought about him and everything that had happened recently. He didn't seem the type to have much sympathy for someone who'd as thoroughly screwed up his life as Blair had done. “Take a seat.”

“Thanks.” Blair sat, and rubbed sweaty palms on his thighs. William looked at him expressionlessly. Well, it didn't really matter what he thought in the long run. Best just to get it over with. “I wanted to tell you this in person…”

William's eyelids flickered – in surprise, Blair thought. “You're turning down my offer?”

Yep, surprise.

“It's very generous of you, but I… I can't accept it.” It was an incredible relief to actually say it.

“I must say I didn't expect this.” William studied him curiously. “Do you mind telling me why? I've made it clear, I hope, that there are no strings attached to my offer.”

“Mr Ellison, there's always strings attached in a situation like this.” Blair shrugged minutely. He'd thought about this for a long time before deciding he couldn't take the money. “Giving away large amounts of money like that? People have… expectations. Not you, necessarily. I just… things are complicated right now. I don't want to make them more complicated.”

William tilted his head. It was an uncomfortably familiar gesture. “If this is about Jimmy…” He shrugged. “Jimmy doesn't have to know about it.”

If only it was that simple. “I'd know. And, frankly, I'd feel more comfortable owing money to the university than owing money to my roommate's father.”

“I'm not asking you to repay me.” William smiled faintly, “I thought I'd made that clear.”

“You did.” Blair shifted uncomfortably. There was a small part of him that was screaming 'take the damn money'; he resolutely ignored it. “That isn't an option.”

“I see.” He actually looked regretful. “Well, I understand your stance, and I respect you for it. However-

“I won't change my mind.” Abruptly, Blair pushed himself up out of his chair; he wanted this over with.

William stood too, and together they walked back towards the front door. “If you ever should change your mind, the offer remains open. And nobody else need know about it.”

“Thanks.” They shook hands; William's grasp was firm and dry. “I appreciate your offer, but my decision's made.”

***

The receptionist murmured into the telephone, her voice too quiet for Blair to hear. Occasionally, she would throw a glance in his direction, but never met his eyes. He sat on the edge of his seat, his
resume clutched in clammy hands, and tried not to fidget. He'd never been so nervous about a job interview before – certainly not for one that he wouldn't even have considered applying for a few months ago.

Finally, she looked directly at him. “You can go in now, Mr Sandburg.” Was that disdain he saw in her eyes? He was probably just being over sensitive.

“Thanks.” He stood, fumbling with the resume, and dropped it. He bent to retrieve the folder and saw one of his fingers lying on the floor. “Sorry. I'll just…” at least there was no blood – that would have been messy on the light coloured carpet. He tried to pick up both the finger and the resume, but another finger fell, then one from his left hand as well.

“Mr Feinstein is waiting.” The receptionist sounded impatient. “Do you want this job or not?”

“Yeah, yeah. I want the job. I'll just be a minute.” But the more he tried, the worse it got. Panic grabbed him in the guts as fingers tumbled one after the other.

Blair woke with a gasp, his throat so constricted he could barely breathe. His heart was racing, pounding so hard that he expected Jim to come charging in at any moment to see what the problem was. As the seconds ticked by, and that didn't happen, he tried to relax, tried to breathe slowly and deeply, but though the nightmare was over, the after effects were stubbornly refusing to fade.

It wasn't hard to see the significance of the dream. His life was falling apart around him, and it was totally out of his control for the first time in his adult life. The thought of having to go out and find a job was more daunting right now than facing down a machete wielding mobster or a deranged sentinel – he'd thought he'd known how totally he'd screwed himself with that press conference, but faced with the prospect of looking for work, he was discovering a whole new level of fucked-upness.

It wasn't so long ago, there'd been a host of friends, acquaintances, and colleagues he could have gone to if he'd needed a job, now there were none. Eli was out of the country and even if there were friends from his academic life who still believed in him, none of them had enough status that they could risk Chancellor Edwards' wrath by helping him.

He'd registered with a couple of employment agencies and judging by the response, he didn't expect to hear from them any time soon. It seemed the name Blair Sandburg hadn't faded into obscurity even after nearly six months. Well, he'd always wanted to be famous… clinging desperately to the gallows humour, Blair snorted quietly then rolled onto his side, punching his pillow into shape. Optimistically, he closed his eyes and started taking slow, shallow breaths.

Maybe it was time to start packing and go. He'd told himself it was the best plan, but then he'd done nothing about it. Getting out of Cascade only made sense, but as he lay there thinking about it, his chest started to tighten, his breathing shortened into harsh gasps. Fuck! Not another panic attack. The last thing he needed was for Jim to hear that. Slowly, he blanked his mind, repeating his favourite mantra: I am… calm… I am… calm…

Eventually, he drifted into an uneasy sleep.

***

The breakfast dishes were still sitting untouched, stacked on the kitchen counter where Jim had left them in the morning. He closed the door quietly behind him, resisting the temptation of a more impatient impulse. He and Blair had a deal, damn it, and Blair wasn't holding up his end of it. Sometime – sooner rather than later – he'd have to say something, but not today.
He glanced across at the coffee table, where the scattered newspaper pages stood as proof that Blair had at least left his room sometime during the day. The heavily scored out areas of print showed that Blair had also checked the job vacancies, but without any success. He sighed and went over to tidy the pages into a neat bundle. The ink was too thick and dark for even Jim's eyes to read through, so he didn't know what jobs Blair had called about, but he saw a couple that should have suited Blair. Not anything remotely as good as he deserved to have, but certainly well within his capabilities.

A quiet click told him that Blair had come out of his room. “Checking up on me, Jim? I'm trying to find a job, believe me.”

“No, I-“

Blair came over and snatched the papers out of his hands. “I'd take a job flipping burgers, if I could get one, but funnily enough, employers don't want a self-confessed fraud working anywhere there's money.”

“I'm not checking up on you.” Jim watched with an unaccustomed sense of helplessness as Blair fumbled the pages into something passing for order and folded them into a bundle. “But I saw something you might have overlooked, Chief. There's a job with an environmental advocacy group. It's only part time, but it'd be a foot in the door.”

“Jim, I tried to get voluntary work there a couple weeks ago.” Blair's voice drifted up from behind the counter as he tossed the newspaper into the recycle bin. “They didn't want me, okay?”

“Oh.” It was even worse than Jim had imagined. No wonder Blair's enthusiasm for job-hunting, as forced as it had seemed, had waned considerably over the last few weeks. He felt his jaw clench involuntarily; it seemed like he was inexorably being pushed to a decision he'd hoped never to make. “Look, Blair, maybe we should-“

“I told you I'm trying! What more do you want from me?” Blair straightened, his cheeks flushed and his eyes hard, angry chips of blue. “Maybe your father had the right idea. I should-“

“No!” It only took a few long strides to reach Blair. Jim caught him by the shoulders, holding him firmly. “You're not leaving, okay? Just listen to me.”

Blair's eyes softened a little before dropping. He nodded reluctantly.

“I've been thinking about this for a while.” Jim took a deep breath; once he said this there was no going back and he'd damn well better be prepared for the consequences. “Maybe we should have another press conference. Set the record straight.”

“Set… you mean…“ Blair looked up at Jim, his eyes widening. “Oh, no… Jim, no… we can't do that.”

“Why not? Once your name is cleared, you could get your teaching… okay, maybe not at Rainier. Edwards would block that if she could. But maybe at Cascade Community College-“

“Jim.” Blair brought his hands up and grabbed two fistfuls of Jim's shirt. “Jim, listen to me. You can't do it, okay? It would only get you into trouble and it wouldn't help me.”

“I don't get it. Once everyone knows you didn't lie…” There was no doubting the misery, or the sincerity in Blair's face. “Why wouldn't it help you?”

Blair took in a long, deep breath and let it out. “I need coffee for this. How about you go sit down and I'll bring some over in a minute?”
“Okay.” He suspected Blair needed time as much as he needed coffee and wasn't surprised when, even armed with two mugs of sharp scented brew, Blair sat on the couch beside him and didn't say anything until his mug was half empty. “So?” he prompted eventually.

“All right.” Blair leaned forward and placed his mug carefully on the coaster. Then he ran his fingers through his hair. It was growing out of the short crop and curling messily at the moment. That didn't stop Jim from wanting, on a fairly regular basis, to run his fingers through its lush wildness. “God, this is embarrassing… you remember when we first started working together?”

“Vividly.” Jim couldn't help smiling. Blair had been all nervous energy and unputdownable excitement. And, god, so damned pretty it had hurt being near him. “What about it?”

“Remember how we sat down and went through the consent form you signed?” Blair glanced sideways at him. “Did you actually take any notice of that?”

“Well…” He hadn't paid close attention. All he'd needed was reassurance that the punk kid he'd cornered in that storage room wasn't pulling a fast one on him.

“I should have known.” Blair laughed a little, shaking his head, but then he sobered fast. “It was a standard consent for human research subjects, outlining your rights and my responsibilities. The two most important clauses were the ones where I promised not to do anything that would harm you, and the one where I guaranteed to protect your identity. I failed to do either.”

“But-”

“Jim, no reputable university would accept me after this.” Blair turned his head to meet Jim's eyes, one hand raking the hair back from his face. “If I'd already had a job with tenure I would have faced a disciplinary hearing and academic censure at the very least. Maybe I'd even have been fired. Why would anyone give me a job?”

Surely, it couldn't be that bad? “Isn't there some way-”

Blair sighed explosively. “No, Jim. There isn't. Universities have had Federal funding pulled for ethics violations in the past. It's a big deal.”

“Even if it wasn't your fault?” He'd come a long way, Jim realised, beyond the anger and betrayal he'd felt at the time. “After all, Naomi sent that file without your permission and Sid Graham released excerpts against your express wishes.”

Blair just shrugged listlessly. “It was my fault. I shouldn't have left my laptop where someone could access your file. And, like you said, your name was all over it. I was going to change it, but the fact is, anybody who knew either of us would know exactly who my research subject was.”

“Jesus.” Jim leaned back against the couch, staring almost blindly at the tense line of Blair's shoulders. “I'm sorry, Chief.”

“I'm not.” Blair turned to look at him. “Not really. From the moment we started working together, my dissertation was hopelessly compromised; but I don't regret a thing. Except for how it ended.”

***

I don't regret a thing. Except for how it ended. Ended. Is that how he saw it? Blair thought about that for days. Of course it was ended, in one sense; he would never ride along with Jim again. But he could still help out with his senses. He had helped with that Fed's murder case. Jim had located the killer with the memory of his scent and it hadn't taken long after that to find the evidence he'd
needed.

Is that enough? It'll have to be, I guess. It's all I'll ever have.

And it was the only way he could really justify staying in Cascade. That was a thought too painful to dwell on, so he pushed it deep down inside him where all the other things that were too painful to think about resided, and set about rebuilding his life once again. He'd made a deal with Jim about doing the chores, so he forced himself out of bed on the days when he only wanted to stay safe and forgetful in his nest of blankets. But that only took up a tiny portion of his day.

He continued to apply for jobs, with rapidly diminishing expectations of success. Even the construction jobs he applied for eluded him, but at least that was due to the length of time since he'd last used a welding torch. It was a minor consolation, that one, and gave him hope that one day he might even be successful.

As Thanksgiving approached, Blair decided to make an extra effort this year. For the first time since he'd known Jim, his roommate had decided to ask for leave on Turkey Day and, surprisingly, given that Jim was single and childless, he'd been granted it. He'd also made it clear he didn't want to spend the day at his father's house, so Blair turned to the Food Network for inspiration. If he had to compete with Sally's cooking, he'd need all the help he could get.

“Duck?” Jim sounded doubtful. “We're not having turkey?”

“Not unless you want to be eating turkey leftovers until New Years,” Blair explained patiently. He liked turkey, but he didn't like it that much.

Jim shrugged. “If you put it like that…”

“I do. Now can you dice up these potatoes while I get the stuffing ready?” Maybe it had been a mistake to ask Jim to help him prepare the meal, but it had given them a chance to do something together besides watching old football games and ice hockey.

The phone rang, and Jim escaped with more than a hint of relief. “Oh. Hi, Naomi. How are you?” He smiled and nodded before bringing the phone across to Blair.

Blair dropped the spoon he was using to mix the stuffing and wiped his hands on a wet cloth. “Thanks, Jim. Hi, Mom. Happy Thanksgiving.”

“Happy Thanksgiving, Blair.” Naomi's voice sounded carefree as ever, and as welcome as the first signs of spring. “I'm so sorry I couldn't come up to be with you and Jim.”

“It's okay, Ma.” Blair smiled. “It's good to hear your voice.” He went over to the windows, looking out over Cascade. “How are you doing?”

“That's what I wanted to ask you, sweetie. Have you got a job yet?”

“Not yet.” Dammit, why did she have to ask that? “I'm still looking.”

He heard her exhale, as though she'd been holding her breath. “Well, then, how would you like to take a little trip with me?”

“A trip?” He couldn't help looking back towards Jim, who was trying to look as though he wasn't listening in on the conversation. He waved his hand dismissively and scowled. Jim shrugged and turned away. “Where're you going?”
“Tibet. Next week.” Her excitement was, as always, infectious. “I'm going to a Buddhist retreat for a month. I'm sure it would be wonderful for you. I've noticed there's a negative flow in your energy lately. This could be exactly what you need. I'll pay for the trip of course.”

“Mom, I can't.” He saw Jim's head come up, his eyes narrowed, and his lips silently forming "Tibet?". So much for not listening. “It's great of you to offer, but I can't just-”

“But why not?” She really didn't get it, obviously. But then, leaving when things got tough was a lifestyle choice for her. One lesson that he'd never been able to learn from her. “If you don't have a job… and I'm sure Jim will manage fine without you. It'll only be a month. Six weeks at the most.”

“Because I need to concentrate on getting a job.” His fingers were cramping from their grip on the phone. “And because… just, because. Okay, Naomi?”

“All right.” She sighed, caving more easily than he'd expected. “Well, I'll be in touch when I get back.”

“Okay, Mom.” He smiled in his relief. “When are you leaving?”

“Tomorrow.” That figured. Only Naomi would think he could possibly just drop everything in one day to fly to Tibet. “Say goodbye to Jim for me.”

“I will. Take care, Mom. And write me, okay?” He replaced the phone in its cradle and went back into the kitchen. “Can you believe that? Tibet!”

Jim looked him over, his face impassive. “She's right. You could go.”

“No, Jim. I couldn't.” He hadn't even been tempted. “Now, if you've finished the potatoes, you can peel the sweet potatoes next.”

***

For a while, it seemed as though things were getting better and Jim began to hope that maybe he and Blair could eventually have that conversation he'd been rehearsing for weeks – the one where he finally admitted he wanted more than just friendship. He even began to hope that Blair might actually want it too, although he was far less certain about that.

Blair started taking his chores seriously, and the meals he prepared were delicious. He also seemed to be making new friends; at least that was what Jim thought, until he realised that the Julia, Emeril, and Nigella that Blair mentioned occasionally were hosting cooking shows on the Food Network. It certainly explained the improvement in Blair's cooking abilities.

But, the more time and energy Blair spent on food, the less, it seemed, he spent on finding a job. Some days, Jim would come home to find he hadn't even looked at the newspaper, folded neatly on the coffee table. Some days, Jim found it still in the hallway.

He hesitated to say anything, especially when he remembered their last conversation on that subject. Blair seemed to be happier, although sometimes Jim wondered if that was really true, and Jim didn't want to do anything to bring him down. But, as Christmas gave way to the New Year he became increasingly concerned by Blair's behaviour.

Breaking point came at the end of a long and extraordinarily dull day. He opened the door of the loft to find Blair in the kitchen wearing baggy old sweats and an even baggier, frayed old sweater, his hair almost standing up in clumps; a ragged halo. Whatever it was he was cooking, it smelled fantastic.
“Oh, hey, Jim. You're home early.” Treating him to a wide, if slightly vacant smile, Blair looked like nothing less than a demented reject from the Stepford Wives Academy. Jim wondered why he hadn't realised this before. “I'm trying this new recipe…”

Jim snatched the wooden spoon from his hand. “Whoever you are, I want Sandburg back. Now.”

“Uh… Jim, are you okay?” The soothing guide-voice only irritated him further. “Your senses aren't acting up, are they? Or… maybe it's that bug that's going round the station…”

Dodging the hand that reached up to touch his forehead – like he couldn't tell if he had a temperature – Jim caught Blair by the shoulders and steered him out of the kitchen and across the room to the couch. When he tried to escape, gibbering about something being ruined, Jim forcibly pushed him down onto the couch and held him there. “Sandburg, forget about the damn recipe. We need to talk.”

“Okay.” The usually mobile face took on a suspiciously neutral expression – Sandburg in humouring mode. “What do you want to talk about, Jim?”

“Well, it's… I mean you…” Frustrated, Jim ran a hand over his hair. “You're cooking. And cleaning…”

Blair nodded, smiling. “Well, we did agree, remember. Since I don't have any income right now…”

“But it's… this isn't you, Chief. Last night you got the dustbuster out after we had popcorn. And we never just have lasagna or chilli any more, it's always Boef Bourguignon, or bison cutlets, or, or… some weird Moroccan/Japanese/South American fusion thing.” He watched in growing disbelief as Blair smiled and nodded his head agreeably.

“Would you feel better if we had chilli tomorrow night, Jim? I've got some ostrich meat that would be perfect…”

“It's not about the fucking food, okay?” Jim took advantage of the startled silence to get his point across. “It's about you. It's like nothing even exists for you outside of the loft. You cook, you clean, you do laundry. You watch those damn cooking shows on TV. That's it. You don't read, or use the internet.”

“But…”

“You never leave the loft. I'll bet you got the groceries for that recipe delivered, didn't you?” He could see by Blair's reaction that he'd guessed right. It didn't bring him any satisfaction. “When did you last go out? Tell me.”

“I went to lunch with Kathy, for her birthday.” Blair smiled triumphantly. “So you see, Jim…”

His jaw clenched. “That was nearly a month ago.”

“No way, man.” Blair shook his head emphatically. “It can't have been more than a couple of days. A week, tops.”

“What date was her birthday? January 15th?” At Blair's nod, he picked up the newspaper that had been on the coffee table, untouched, since this morning. “What's the date today, Blair?”

The blue eyes widened. “Oh my god… February 12th? Jim, I swear…”

Satisfied now that he'd got his point across, Jim pulled Blair against him. “It's okay, Chief. I know things have been rough, but you can't hide in here forever.”
“Jim, I never meant…”

“It’s okay.” Jim's arms tightened as Blair began to shake. “I'll call Simon, get tomorrow off. We'll go out, have lunch, maybe go to a movie. Ordinary stuff. Everything will be back to normal before you know it.”

***

His luck held, and the next day was fine, though still very cold. Snow had been forecast, but he suspected it was still a few days away. They drove to one of Blair's favourite restaurants for lunch and took their time over the meal before setting out to walk to the nearest movie complex.

It didn't seem, as Jim had feared, that Blair had developed a phobia about going outside. It was more like he'd simply turned so far inward that he'd forgotten it existed. Now, out in the fresh air, his colour was better, his eyes more lively than Jim had seen in weeks.

They were almost at the complex when the sound of blaring horns and screeching brakes nearly brought Jim to his knees. For a moment, he held onto Blair's supporting arm. Then the screams started. Exchanging a glance with Blair – why could they never go anywhere without some disaster occurring? – Jim took off at a run. He could hear Blair pounding along behind him, out of breath far too easily.

The accident scene was at the next intersection, only half a block away, and it was immediately obvious that there was little to be done. A bus had jammed the intersection when it had swerved, too late, to avoid a pedestrian. She was lying on the ground, blood bubbling from her mouth and nose, miraculously still alive.

Not for long, Jim assessed, as he knelt beside her. A few snapped questions ascertained that an ambulance had been called, although he doubted she'd still be alive when it arrived. He pulled off his jacket and laid it over her. Someone else's jacket was folded into a pillow and eased under her head. The glazed blue eyes blinked wearily and lifted to his.

“I didn't see her. I didn't even see her…” The frantic, distraught voice of the bus driver cut through the babble of other voices, and Jim heard Blair's voice murmuring reassurance. “She just stepped out…”

“I'm sorry.” The thread of a whisper was difficult even for a sentinel to hear. “Tell him I'm sorry.”

So, it hadn't been an accident after all. Jim brushed a strand of hair away from her bloodied lips. He could hear the ribs moving every time she drew a shallow breath, and the sound of her blood-filled lungs reminded him of Sandburg, as he'd struggled to breathe in those first few minutes of his new life.

He felt anger, that she'd involved innocent bystanders in her death, sorrow for the waste of it all, but looking down at her calm face, mostly he just felt confused pity. “Why did you do it?”

“I just…” she paused to collect some strength from somewhere inside her, “just want to go back… the light… it was so beautiful…” a ragged gasp from behind him told Jim that Blair had joined them. There were people all around them and yet it felt like nothing existed outside the tiny space that surrounded them.

He spoke softly, not wanting to startle the woman. “Blair, you don't need to see this.” But a moment later Blair's hand came to rest on his shoulder and Blair crouched beside him.

The woman smiled at Blair. “…so beautiful… such peace… I just want to go back…”
“It's okay. I understand.” Blair reached down and wrapped his strong, square hand around her fragile one. His eyes met Jim's for a moment, and the anguish in them was almost enough to make Jim abandon the woman in the need to get Blair away from this.

Her eyes scanned Blair's face for a moment and she smiled beatifically. “You do understand… you know… so beautiful…”

“Yes, I know.” His voice betrayed tears Jim couldn't see. “It's all right. You can let go now.”

She closed her eyes, a few tears slipping from beneath the lids as the last breath left her body. Jim heard a tiny moan from Blair and he reached for his friend to draw him away. As they stood, becoming suddenly aware of the bystanders, a paramedic moved past them. He hadn't even heard the siren of the approaching ambulance.

***

The uniforms that arrived on the scene showed little interest in Blair. He hadn't seen the accident. The witnesses and Jim, as the first officer to arrive at the scene, were a much higher priority. Blair gave them his name, address and phone number without mentioning he was Jim's roommate, and neither cop seemed to recognise him. Jim, he knew, would have to file a report back at the station, so he caught Jim's eye and muttered that he'd catch a cab home, then quietly slipped away.

He didn't intend to walk all the way home, but it had been a long time since he'd been outside, and the weather wasn't so cold he couldn't bear it. Besides, he needed to do something, and sitting at home waiting for Jim didn't appeal in the slightest. He could walk part of the way and then get a cab.

How had the woman known about him? He'd seen it in her sympathetic smile and had felt the understanding flow between them. She'd felt sorry for him. And what did he feel? He really didn't know – sorrow, obviously. Regret. His pace quickened a little, as though he could outdistance the memory of a small, fragile woman drowning in her own blood.

Shame. Guilt.

Envy. Longing.

Oh god… he couldn't do this again. Once had been one time too many. He was almost running now, pushing between unsuspecting pedestrians, crossing street after street with scant regard for the oncoming traffic, until a blaring horn brought him tumbling back into the present on a street corner he didn't recognise. There was a bar just across the road, and his sides were aching from the unaccustomed exercise. He crossed the road, carefully, and went inside.

Two beers weren't enough to dull the pain, but a third would be a really bad idea, Blair decided. He doubted he'd have enough money left in his wallet for a cab and the thought of getting on a bus made him queasy. He'd be damned if he'd call Jim, who was probably still busy at the station anyway. With a self-pitying sigh, he started walking again.

It wasn't until he'd turned onto Prospect and saw Jim's truck parked outside Colette's that Blair realised just how late it was. The streetlights were on, and it was almost full dark. Admittedly, that happened pretty early this time of year, but it must be well over three hours since he and Jim had parted company. Jim was no doubt going to pitch a fit.

The numbness that had allowed him to make it home burnt away under the white fury on Jim's face as Blair opened the door. “Where the hell have you been, Sandburg? Do you have any idea what time… are you okay?”
Blair sagged against the doorframe, suddenly exhausted beyond words. He nodded listlessly and didn't resist when Jim carefully eased him far enough into the loft that he could shut the door. “I was just waiting for you to arrive before I ordered takeout. I thought maybe that new Malaysian place on Vincent.”

“Sounds good.” Blair managed a smile. “I'll just go lie down for a while. Not used to all that fresh air.”

Jim's face softened into a gentle smile. “Why don't you do that? I'll call you when the food arrives. Okay?”

“Yeah. Fine.” He made it to the bed and crumpled onto it, barely aware that Jim was pulling off his boots and covering him with something warm.

***

Even though he'd waited nearly an hour before ordering, Sandburg was still asleep when the delivery guy arrived with the takeout. Jim tipped him generously and started warming plates while he considered what to do, but by the time everything was ready there was still no sign that Blair was about to surface any time soon.

Maybe he should let Blair sleep; but lately, although he'd cooked elaborate meals for Jim, he'd done little more than sample his own cooking, and he'd been losing weight as a result. It had taken a while for Jim to notice, and then he'd been unsure whether to comment on it or not, but after the last couple of days, he realised that Blair was barely functioning on any but the most basic level, and that didn't seem to include feeding himself adequately.

Carefully opening the door, Jim scanned the shapeless lump under the comforter. Even through the concealing bedding, Jim could see the restless twitching, and hear the heartbeat, too fast for normal sleep. The sharp scent of sweat confirmed that Sandburg was in the early stages of yet another nightmare. It settled the question of what he was going to do. Jim crossed to the bed and bent over to clasp Blair's shoulder.

“Sandburg, wake up.” He shook the shoulder gently, and Blair's head shot up from under the covers. “Dinner's ready. You need to eat.”

“Jim?” Blair blinked dazedly at him, his voice croaky with sleep.

He looked and sounded exhausted, but food was more important right now. Jim patted his cheek insistently. “The food's arrived. Come and eat.”

Blair yawned widely. “Oh, man… I'll just hit the bathroom first. Be with you in a minute.”

He went back to the kitchen and started serving up the food. A moment later, Blair stumbled out of his room and down the hallway to the bathroom. Jim repressed a sigh of relief and set out cutlery on the table.

“Smells good.” Blair joined him at the table and proceeded to pick at the food without actually eating much of it.

Jim ate slowly, watching Blair unobtrusively. It had been a long time since their lunch, and Blair hadn't eaten very much of that either. When he'd taken the edge off his own hunger, he reached across the table and captured Blair's right hand in his own. “Eat it, Chief, don't play with it.”

He could almost hear Naomi's voice, and a faint grin told him that Sandburg was equally aware of
his mother-hen impulse. He shrugged, resigned to looking and feeling ridiculous. “You're not eating enough. I can tell you're losing weight.”

“Well, I'm not always on the go like I was.” Blair glanced at him then looked down at his plate. He speared a piece of broccoli and lifted it halfway to his mouth before dropping it back to the plate. “I guess the accident this afternoon wrecked my appetite.”

“It was no accident.” The words escaped, harsh and angry, before Jim could moderate his tone. He hadn't wanted to discuss this, especially with Blair; and that told him far more about his fears for Blair than he really wanted to know.

“No.” Blair's eyes met his levelly enough, without the slightest hint of surprise. “So, I guess you don't approve of suicide.”

“I don't give a fuck that it was suicide. If a person wants to decide when and how they die, then why shouldn't they?” He tried to push down the anger, but it kept spilling over into his voice. “She had no right to involve other people. Do you think that bus driver is ever going to forget what happened? Or the passengers, the passers-by that had to see what she did?”

Jim didn't miss the way Blair flinched minutely each time his voice emphasised his point. When he stopped speaking, the silence was almost oppressive. Blair looked down at his plate and speared another piece of broccoli.

This time it actually went in his mouth and Blair chewed in silence for a few seconds. Then he swallowed and said pensively, “So, it's okay as long as you don't make a mess for someone else to clean up. Is that what you're saying?”

Oh, god… he did not want this conversation. “It's not that simple, Chief, and you know it.” He sighed, exhausted by the stresses of the day and worry over Blair. “Can we not talk about this right now?”

Immediately, a mask fell over Blair's face, and he rose to his feet, picking up his barely touched meal. “Sure, Jim. Look, why don't you watch TV or something while I clear up?”

He ought to keep talking. There was more to this conversation than was on the surface, and he knew Sandburg wasn’t exactly stable at the moment; but he didn't have it in him to discuss the woman's suicide with any degree of calmness, and that was what was needed. He had a feeling that what he'd already said had only made things worse.

“Pauline Dewar.” Catching Sandburg's startled glance, he shrugged. “That's her name. Her next of kin is a brother in Topeka. He and his wife will be coming to ID the body tomorrow.”

He hoped the message was heard – this woman had family, and probably friends, who would be grieving for her. Blair simply nodded and continued clearing away the dishes.

***

“Jim.” The quiet tone of Simon's voice was one that he reserved for children, old people and those to whom he was imparting bad news. His face, when Jim looked up at him, was serious, even sombre.

“What's happened? Is Sandburg okay?” The words were out of Jim's mouth before he had a chance to think. Simon's startled expression was enough to relieve his immediate fears, and to make him groan internally. This was definitely not going to be a good day.

“Why should…?” Simon clamped his jaw shut and frowned down at Jim for a moment, then sighed.
“Look, Jim, we'll talk about Sandburg later. Right now, I've got the brother of that suicide in my office, with his wife, and they want to talk to you.”

“Simon, I'm not—”

“Not the investigating officer. I know. But you were with her when she died and they want to talk to you.” With the instincts that had made him a good cop and an even better captain, Simon stared at Jim suspiciously. “This… case… hasn't got anything to do with Sandburg, has it?”

“I don't know any reason why it should.” It wasn't quite an answer, and Simon's eyes narrowed. Jim stood reluctantly. “I'd better go see them.”

“Use my office. I've got a meeting anyway.” After favouring Jim with a long look that promised further investigation, Simon turned towards the door of Major Crime, his shoulders already tensing in anticipation of the politicking that was certain to come.

Jim rubbed the back of his head, reluctantly trying to gather the platitudes that usually eased the kind of conversation he was about to take part in. He hated this part of policing; if Sandburg had made it through the Academy, Jim would have had someone to take this particular load off his shoulders; and do it a hell of a lot better than him. He walked over to Simon's office and paused in the doorway to inspect the couple seated in front of Simon's desk, their heads close together.

The man looked up and rose from his seat, and Jim felt his stomach drop dangerously. He was a little taller and broader than his sister, but otherwise they were remarkably alike. He smiled faintly at Jim's reaction, and held out his hand. “Rob Pulaski. This is my wife Nina. Thank you for agreeing to see us.”

“Jim Ellison.” He shook Pulaski's hand, and then his wife's. “I'm sorry for your loss, but I'm afraid there's not a lot I can tell you. I was only with Ms Dewar for a couple of minutes at most.” He half perched on the edge of Simon's desk and waited.

“Pauline and I were twins. We were extremely close, Detective Ellison. It always seemed right that we looked so much alike, even though, as you probably know, fraternal twins are no more likely to look alike than any other siblings.” Emotion brought a tremor to his voice, and he swallowed convulsively before continuing. “I knew that something had happened to her, but I also knew that… afterward… she was at peace.”

“I think she was.” Jim nodded. “She didn't seem to be in any pain, or if she was, it didn't seem to matter to her. She was very calm.”

Nina Pulaski sobbed once, then pressed her hand to her mouth. “How could she do it? I just don't understand…”

Pulaski put his arm around his wife, and lowered his head to whisper something. She nodded and he looked up again. “I'm sorry, Detective, would it be possible for Nina to…?”

Jim nodded. It was obvious that Pulaski wanted to know everything, and that he didn't want his wife upset any further. “I'll get someone to take her for a coffee. I won't be a moment.”

He found a young Police Aid and brought her to Simon's office. Mrs Pulaski left, reluctantly, still clutching her sodden handkerchief. Rob Pulaski was obviously steeling himself to say something, and Jim sat down in the chair beside him, waiting until he was ready.

“Detective-“
“Jim.”

Pulaski smiled briefly, “Jim, I guess this probably sounds strange, but I need to know what Pauline said. Everything she said.”

Jim only nodded, having heard much stranger requests than this. “It wasn't much. First, she said she was sorry – because of the bus driver.”

Her brother's eyes filled with tears. “That's so like her... she was always thinking of others.”

It occurred to Jim that maybe if she'd thought a bit more, she wouldn't have stepped out in front of the damned bus. He schooled his face not to show his thoughts, and looked down at his hands for a moment. When he looked up again, Pulaski was watching him expectantly. “I asked her why she'd done it. She said she wanted to ‘go back’, but she didn't say where.”

A sharp intake of breath from Pulaski focused Jim's attention. He frowned, fighting the urge not to remember, then it all came back in a flood. The sound of her breathing, the smell of blood and burnt rubber. The feel of the asphalt under his knees. Sandburg's hand on his shoulder; telling her it was okay to die.

He wasn't going to tell Pulaski about Blair being there; wasn't going to take the chance that Pulaski might want to talk to him too. “She talked about... about light and beauty and peace. That was all. Then she just... just closed her eyes, and she was gone.”

“Oh, god...” Pulaski sobbed quietly for a minute or two, then rallied, wiping a shaking hand across his eyes. “Thank you, Jim. You don't know how much this means to me.”

Pretty sure he was about to find out, Jim made some non-committal noises and waited.

Sure enough, after taking a couple of deep breaths Pulaski smiled waveringly up at him. “You see, about two years ago, Pauline was in a serious accident. She was dead, for several minutes...” he paused as Jim made a choking sound, “are you all right, Detective?”

“Yeah. Uh... that happened to a friend of mine.”

“Did your friend have the same experience? The light, and the voices? The feeling of intense bliss?”

Jim nodded reluctantly. Why the hell hadn't he seen the connection? He'd simply dismissed her words as the ramblings of a dying mind. “He told me about the same things. I didn't put it together with what your sister was saying.”

“Afterwards, Pauline was never the same. Sometimes, she was angry that the paramedics brought her back. Other times, she was just so miserable – she'd say that she wanted to feel the same happiness she'd experienced during those few minutes.” Pulaski sighed. “I tried to understand, but I never really felt I did. Her husband wouldn't even try. She'd get frustrated when people didn't want to talk about it. The subject made them too uncomfortable, but Pauline couldn't see that. To her, they were being wilfully blind. Her marriage broke up, and she contacted me less and less. I tried to keep in touch, but Pauline kept moving around, never staying in one place for very long.”

“I thought this kind of thing was supposed to make people happier.” It certainly hadn't made Blair happier. Jim winced slightly at the memory of the arguments and resentment between him and Blair in those first few months after Alex drowned him.

“After Pauline's experience, when the trouble started, I did some research on near death experiences.” Pulaski shrugged diffidently. “I wanted to understand what she was going through.
Some people are happier. They no longer fear death, and feel at peace, but others can have trouble adjusting. Some of them feel that they don't belong in this world any more. Pauline was one of those people, Jim. That's why I just… I'm relieved, really. She's where she felt she belonged."

The thought of Blair following Pauline Dewar's example was enough to set Jim's jaw muscles twitching. There was no way he'd just accept that his best friend was better off dead. “I… I'm glad it helps. Makes you feel better.”

“But you don't believe in it yourself?” Pulaski smiled faintly, obviously not surprised.

“No, actually, I do believe it – the experience – but I don't… can't believe that it's better to be dead than alive.” He smiled apologetically, “I'm not a philosophical kind of guy, Mr Pulaski. What's here and now is more important to me than the Hereafter.”

“I understand.” Pulaski bowed his head for a moment, then gathered himself together and stood, holding out his hand once more. “Thank you, Jim. And I'm glad that your friend has someone he can talk to about his experience. That was the hardest thing for Pauline to deal with. Her friends didn't want to know about it, and I'm afraid the counsellors she went to were very sceptical. She never felt they believed her.”

Jim shook his hand, a hollow feeling in his stomach. I'm not ready to take that trip with you…

***

“Okay, Jim… you want to tell me what's going on?” Simon's question might be phrased as a suggestion, but Jim wasn't fooled. “Is Sandburg in some kind of trouble?”

He glanced around the bullpen, and grimaced as pain throbbed dully behind his eyes. If the way his senses were starting to play up was any indication, that storm was going to be a lot bigger than the forecasts were predicting. “Can we talk in your office, Simon?”

“Go on.” Simon nodded towards his office, then followed behind Jim, shutting the door with a snap. “All right, spill. What's going on with Sandburg and is it anything I need to know about?”

“No. No, it's nothing like that.” Jim dropped into a chair and hesitated, rubbing his hands up and down his thighs. Should he even be telling Simon personal stuff about Blair? But he needed to talk to someone. “Things have been pretty tough for him lately. I've been… worried.”

The grim lines on Simon's face eased a bit. God only knew what he'd been expecting Jim to say. “I guess that was to be expected.”

“Yeah… but, Simon…” He didn't know how to say this without it sounding melodramatic. “It goes back further than the Academy, or even the dissertation mess. When Alex Barnes… when she killed Blair.”

“Woah! Hang on there, Jim-”

“Come on, Simon, you were there. There was no heartbeat, no respiration. He was dead.” Jim turned his head to look out the window. He couldn't look Simon in the face and say these things. “I brought him back. I went into the spirit world and I brought him back.”

“Look, Jim… even if I accepted that – which I don't – what has that got to do with-”

“He didn't want to come.” He met Simon's eyes for a moment, then looked down at his knees. His hands were clenched into fists and he eased the fingers straight. “He came back for me, but I… I
freaked out and just left him hanging.”

Simon sighed gustily. “Jim—”

“You remember how he was, just after that? We were fighting a lot, for no reason most of the time.” Jim shrugged, “Remember the Ventriss case? You reamed me out over it, and you were right.”

“Because you were both acting like jerks.” Simon scowled at him. “And you think it was because of the drowning? Some kind of PTSD?”

Jim nodded. “And this woman who killed herself yesterday? The same thing had happened to her. Near death experience, it's called. Her brother said that afterwards she just wanted to go back. To die.”

“Christ…” Simon's eyes widened. “You really think Sandburg might…”

“I don't know, Simon.” It was a relief, if a small one, to admit the possibility. “Seeing her… it hit him really hard.”

Simon didn't say anything for what seemed like an eternity, and Jim had nothing left to say. Nothing, at any rate, that he wanted to say. Finally, Simon met his eyes. “Go home, Jim. Take the rest of the day off.” He hesitated, then gestured irritably. “Hell, take tomorrow off too if you need to. Just… talk to him, okay?”

Talk. Jim sighed. He hadn't been so successful at that lately – for a long time, actually – but what else could he do? He pushed himself up out of his chair. “Thanks, Simon.” Some instinct made him pause at the door. “And, Simon? That storm that's coming? You might want to have people on standby.”

Simon looked up from the file he'd picked up. “Do I want to know how you know that?”

He smiled, pinching the bridge of his nose absentmindedly. “Call it a hunch.”

“That's all I need.” But Simon was reaching for the phone as Jim closed the door behind him.

***

The loft was silent when Jim got home; too silent for Blair to be in his room. He could have just gone out on an errand, but Jim doubted it. It was a measure of how preoccupied he was, that it took nearly a minute for him to spot the folded piece of white notepaper on the kitchen counter. When he picked it up his hands were shaking a little.

He's just gone shopping, or to visit a friend. That's all…

But, of course, Blair wouldn't leave a note just for that.

Jim,

I'm going out of town for a few days, I need to think about things and work out what I'm gonna do with my life now. Don't worry, I've got somewhere to stay. I'll be fine.

Blair
Fine. Somehow Jim doubted that. His senses were prickling with energy, screaming a warning, if only he could figure out what it was. Blair could tell him how, but he had no idea where Blair was. And that was the problem.

Jim closed his eyes and took a deep breath. He needed to focus on using his senses. He was sure they were trying to tell him something. He had to learn how to listen.

Dammit, he could almost hear Blair saying it.

Focus.

He brought the notepaper up to his face and inhaled: the scent of Blair, the sharp mineral tang of the ink and a faintly organic smell of wood pulp overlaid by bleach and other chemicals. None of which helped him. There was something else there; something just out of reach of his senses that set his nerves on edge. Jim gritted his teeth and swore in frustration. He tossed the paper aside and went into Blair's room. Maybe there was some kind of clue there.

Other than the fact, reassuring on one level, but ultimately useless, that Blair had taken a small backpack with him, Jim found nothing. He went back out to the lounge, his jaw muscles clenching and just about ready to rip Blair's head off if he should be unwise enough to return in the next few seconds.

“Calm down, for Christ's sake.” He prowled over to the French doors, caught another whiff of Blair, as though he'd stood there for a long time fairly recently. Once again, he felt that tingling of uneasiness. “Stop overreacting and just think.”

God… he was overreacting, wasn't he? So Blair had gone out of town for a few days; he'd done it before. It was no big deal. Yet, something told him it was a big deal. He tried to relax, though the headache from the approaching storm made it difficult. Every time he breathed in, he felt increasingly on edge. Maybe it was something to do with Blair's scent? He tried to separate the various components – Blair's natural body odour, the shampoo and soap he used. Deodorant. Shaving cream. That herbal tea he drank that Jim could always smell on him afterwards; even the laundry detergent he used on his clothes. There was something left; something that made his muscles twitch with a fight/flight reaction.

Was that it? People talked about smelling the adrenaline. Could he really do that? Jim shrugged. If he could smell people's pheromones, then why not their adrenaline? Which didn't really do anything but make him more worried about Blair.

He went back to the notepaper. What could it tell him? The writing… Blair's usual haphazard script but when he zoomed in, it seemed a little more wobbly than normal. Maybe his hand had been shaking. The pen had dug deeper into the paper too. Jim ran his fingers underneath and frowned. The letters seemed jumbled, as though whatever Blair had written was superimposed on another deep impression. Had Blair written two notes, and trashed the first? Jim dived back into Blair's room, and now he had no doubt that what he was detecting was Blair's adrenaline. His skin was crawling with anxiety.

There was no discarded note in the small trashcan by Blair's desk. Jim wrenched open the drawer. Still no note, but the notepad was lying on top of some unopened letters from the university. He carried it out to the kitchen and laid it beside the note. He'd done something like this before, with Blair's guidance, but he'd never tried to read something that had already been overwritten. He tried the note again, but the impressions were too heavy and the letters underneath were simply overpowered. Switching to the notepad, he tried to filter out the deepest strokes and concentrate on the lighter ones. There were still areas where the earlier note had been obliterated, but he could make
out something… not a message, though; it seemed like an address. Something Creek… Jim frowned, pushing his sense of touch up as far as he could without zoning. Midd… rk… .anite Creek… Jim swore. It wasn't nearly enough to help him. He tried again, sliding his fingers up and down, rather than across, and found more letters and numbers. With an impatient huff of breath, he grabbed a pencil and wrote what he could decipher on the back of an envelope:

I 90
…rth Be…
468… .SE
…Midd… .ork…
…anite Creek…
Not an address. Directions.

***

Consulting his maps only got Jim so far. He followed the I90 with a fingertip to North Bend. The last exit was 468th Ave South East, and from there it was easy enough to find South East Middle Fork Rd and follow that to Granite Creek Rd. But Granite Creek Rd was well out into the countryside and went on for miles. There was nothing to indicate housing, so it must be some kind of holiday cabin that Blair had borrowed. It would be a fool's errand to try to find it without more information.

It was around three, when Jim woke for what seemed like the hundredth time, that he remembered Blair saying one time that his cousin Robert had a place near North Bend. He sat up, his skin contracting in the cold air – the temperature outside must be plummeting and the heating obviously wasn't keeping up – and reached for the phone, before he realised that he didn't know how to contact Robert and that it would be a hopeless task trying to find him at this hour. He could find Robert's latest known address on the Police computer in the morning. For the first time, he blessed the fact that Blair had a cousin who was a bookmaker. He'd had a few brushes with the law, nothing serious, and for the last few years Jim had made it a habit to keep a watchful eye on him.

At six, Jim woke and got out of bed. He hastily packed a duffel and showered, not even bothering to make coffee or toast a bagel, and headed into Central. He had Robert's file saved onto his computer, but checked the database again, in case he'd moved recently. He had. There was a new phone number, but Jim decided not to try it. Robert might accept that his cousin had a cop for a roommate, but he had also made it clear he wanted to keep well away from Jim. Besides, Blair might have told him not to give away his location. Jim had the feeling he'd get more information if he talked to Robert in person.

Robert wasn't living at the address, but it didn't take much in the way of quiet intimidation for Jim to get another address. That one turned out to be a bust as well, and the guy who was living there claimed never to have heard of Robert Goldfarb, apart from a couple of letters he'd received and forwarded to a postal box. Jim felt his jaw clench at that. He'd need a subpoena to get any information out of the US Postal Service, and somehow he couldn't see any judge agreeing to that.

Back at Central, the day was now well under way and Major Crime was bustling with activity. Jim's first call, to Robert's mobile number, got him a disconnected tone. Not at all surprised, Jim grabbed his notebook out of his desk drawer and started working his way through the pages. By ten, he'd contacted every snitch and cop that he could hope to pull in favours from and there was nothing left to do but wait.

Usually, he was good at waiting. Not today. He dug more deeply into Robert's files, trying to find any reference to a property in the area of North Bend, but there was nothing. Then he checked out known associates, without any more success. Every moment that passed made him more on edge and
his growling stomach and caffeine headache only made him more irritable, but he couldn't risk missing a call by going to the break room.

He hunched over his desk and tried to think of any clue he might have missed, any connection of Blair's he'd overlooked. Naomi was still out of the country, and he'd already called Kathy, the friend Blair had lunched with back in January. Eli was on another expedition in Borneo, and Jim couldn't think of anyone else, outside of Major Crime, that Blair had kept in touch with.

“What's going on, Jim?” Simon was looming over him, having walked up to his desk without Jim noticing. “I told you not to come in.”

“Blair's…” Jim hesitated, glancing around to see if anyone was in earshot, “he's left town. I found a note when I got home last night.”

Simon frowned. “And you think…” he let the question trail off.

“I don't know what to think, Simon.” He pressed his fingers against his forehead, rubbing the aching spot above his nose. “All I know is, I've got to find him. He's using his cousin's place, and I'm trying to find the guy so I can get directions. I've called in every favour I have.”

“Christ.” Simon perched on the edge of his desk. “You want me to put out an APB on this cousin?”

“I…” Jim thought about the offer. It was a complete misuse of police powers, and Robert – not to mention Blair – would be pissed as hell. “Yeah, if you can see your way to doing it. Thanks, Simon.” Better to apologise later than risk losing Blair.

Simon sighed. “I'll get on it.” He clapped a heavy hand on Jim's shoulder. “Oh, and that storm that's coming? The warning's been upgraded to severe storm, maybe even blizzard. It's expected to hit Cascade early evening.”

“Great.” Jim felt his gut tighten. It only made the situation more urgent – he needed to find Robert before it was too late to go after Blair.

By the time the call finally came it, just after two, Jim was about ready to explode. He'd been pacing, never more than a few feet from his desk, unable to keep still any longer. The rest of the Major Crimes crew were keeping well away, having had their questions and offers of help brusquely turned away. Jim wasn't about to admit to anyone else, not even Connor, his fears for Blair's safety.

When the phone rang, he dived for it. “Ellison.”

“Call off your fucking bloodhounds, Ellison!” Robert's voice came through loud, clear, and angry. “You trying to run me out of business?”

“Robert!” Relief washed over him, leaving him shaking in reaction. “No, I'm not trying to… listen, I need to find Blair. It's really important.”

“So important you had to set the State Troopers on me?” Robert didn't sound even slightly mollified.

“Yes, that important.” Jim's fingers tightened on the phone. He'd rather be doing this in person, so Robert couldn't just skip out on him. “Just tell me what I need to know and I'll call off the APB.”

There was a long silence. When Robert spoke again, his voice was quiet and relatively calm. “I promised Blair I wouldn't tell anyone where he's gone.”

“He's in trouble, Robert. I have to find him.” Jim could hear the undertone of pleading in his voice.
“I really think his life's in danger.”

“Fuck!” He heard Robert take a couple of deep breaths, then: “You better not be shitting me, Ellison. If Blair finds out I narked on him…”

Jim surprised himself with a grim little chuckle. “Don't worry. I'm pretty sure he's going to put all the blame onto me. Now, where is he?”

***

The storm hit just as Jim reached the city limits, and slowed him to a crawl, even on the Interstate. By the time he reached Issaquah, it was considerably worse. The oncoming snow flurries confounded his sight, and there wasn't a damn thing he could do about it. Trying to use his sentinel abilities only made things worse. At times the truck was going no faster than walking pace.

He'd reached North Bend by the time the first front passed, and his hands were cramped from clutching the steering wheel so tightly. He was able to go a little faster now, but there was enough snow on the ground to make the road treacherous, even with the chains he'd fitted. Grimly aware that another storm front was only hours away, Jim was enormously relieved when the turn off Robert had described appeared on the right.

It was only when he reached the narrow, rutted access that led to the cabin that Jim began to wonder how he was going to explain this to Blair. If he was wrong, and Blair had really only wanted some time alone, then he was going to be seriously pissed at Jim's arrival. If he was right… dear god, Blair could already be dead. His stomach lurched, and Jim fought the temptation to increase his speed. Another few minutes would make no difference, either way.

The curtains were drawn on the cabin's single, small window, but Jim could see the light inside, and smell the wood smoke from the fire. He sighed, a load taken off his mind, then steeled himself to face Sandburg's wrath. Grabbing his duffel, he killed the engine and climbed out of the truck. Might as well get this over with.

Blair was standing in the doorway by the time Jim reached the porch, unshaven and looking tired. It didn't look as though he intended to let Jim inside. “What are you doing here, Jim?”

“I was…” Jim shrugged helplessly, wishing he could think of a really good lie. “I was worried about you. Alone out here.”

“As you can see, I'm fine.” His lips tightened. “Why are you really here?”

If obfuscation wasn't going to work – and when had it ever? – then maybe a frontal assault would. “I was afraid you'd come up here to… to…” Jim dragged in a deep breath, “to kill yourself.”

Blair's heart rate went through the roof. His pupils dilated and he turned his face slightly away. The silence between them lengthened uncomfortably. “No, I… think about it, maybe, but…”

That was enough of an admission for Jim's overstretched nerves. “I think you'd better let me in before you lose all the heat.”

***

He supposed he should have expected that Jim would come after him, but in fact he hadn't. Nor had he expected Jim to come straight out and say what his real reason for coming was. They'd operated for so long on unspoken understanding and unacknowledged emotions that the ground had been cut out from under his feet by Jim's blunt admission. He was slipping; time was, he could have spun a
line of BS and had Jim on his way in under an hour.

Instead, Jim was making himself at home on the old couch, his long legs stretched out towards the fire, his duffel and sleeping bag stowed neatly in the corner. Blair fussed over reheated stew and silently fumed. The second storm front Jim had predicted was already rattling the window and this one was going to last a while, according to the sentinel weather forecast.

“Chief.” Evidently, Jim was losing patience. His voice was low and serious. “Blair, we need to talk.”

“Twice in less than a week?” Blair turned his head at the flat silence that greeted his joking remark. He sighed. “Jim, I told you…”

“Well, pardon me for being worried because you're only thinking about suicide.”

He ladled out a bowl of stew and handed it to Jim, crouching beside the sofa. “I think it's okay. I made it yesterday.”

“I'll tell you if it isn't,” Jim said grimly. “Was that your plan? Death by food poisoning?”

Blair’s temper snapped. “I hadn't got as far as the actual mechanics. Sorry about that, Jim.”

Jim's fork dropped into the bowl with a clatter, and Blair almost cringed at the distraught expression on his face. “Look, Blair… I met Pauline Dewar's brother yesterday. He told me about her near death experience.”

“And you jumped to the conclusion that I was planning to throw myself under a bus too?” Unfair, that, when he'd already admitted to considering the act.

“He said enough to make me worried, okay?” Jim pinched the bridge of his nose distractedly, but Blair was unmoved. Relatively unmoved. “I mean, there were a lot of similarities between what she went through and… I just think we need to talk about that.”

Blair sighed. “What do you want me to say, Jim?”

Unexpectedly – he really was slipping – Jim leaned forward and clasped his wrist in a gentle but immovable grip. “Please, Blair.”

Blair sighed and lowered his head. His hair still wasn't long enough to hide his face when he did that; another shield lost. “You were there, Jim. You saw the light, heard the music. I… it was the most…”

“Music?” The puzzlement in Jim's voice cut through Blair's renewed sense of loss. He looked up into Jim's face, seeing his own confusion mirrored there.

“You didn't hear it?”

A slow shake of the head. “I don't remember a lot of the details, just the light and then the two of us…” he flushed slowly.

“There was music, Jim. It was so beautiful…” his voice broke, “so beautiful, and peaceful. I wanted to be a part of it. I didn't want to turn back.”

“But you did.” Jim swallowed noisily, “for me.”

“Yeah.” He waited, but Jim simply watched him expectantly. “At first, you know, in the hospital, and afterwards, I was kinda numb. It seemed pretty unreal. Then I saw you on the beach with her, and she wanted to kill me again, and a part of me… you know, I just wanted her to do it.”
Realisation dawned on Jim's face. “You were angry with me for stopping her?”

“For stopping her. For kissing her. For bringing me back the first time.” Blair shrugged, knowing he could never adequately explain his conflicting emotions. “For letting her kill me. It hurt, you know, the actual killing part.”

He noticed absently that Jim's fingers were stroking his wrist almost imperceptibly. “I spent most of the next month angry. But I guess you remember that bit.” He grimaced at the memory of the numerous sniping exchanges, mostly initiated by him. “Brad Ventriss was just the excuse I needed to let it all out.”

“I guess that helped then,” Jim offered. “After that, things seemed better.”

A short laugh escaped him. “After Simon reamed me a new one, you mean?” He saw Jim's lack of comprehension. “He never told you? I was in his office waiting for you to finish up so we could go home, and he told me if I ever behaved like that again, he'd cancel my observer's pass.”

“After that, I pulled myself together, told myself I still had the ride-along, and… and you, and the diss. I put all my energy into getting it finished.” He paused, remembering how driven he'd been. It seemed like another lifetime now.

“I guess that's why I let Naomi blindside me. It's not like she's never tried to interfere in my life before. I just couldn't see anything else but getting the diss finished and handed in. I don't know… I guess I thought that somehow getting my doctorate, getting my work validated, would change how I felt inside.”

Blair shrugged and drew his hand free from Jim's loosened grasp. “I really tried to make the Academy work. I needed it to work. Afterwards…” God, all that cooking and cleaning; like a demented housewife. The only surprise was how long Jim had put up with it. What had he been thinking? “I had nothing, but I kept trying.”

Jim nodded grimly. “I know.”

“I didn't think about… not consciously, but I guess I was looking for a reason to stay.” His throat thickened and he bowed his head, scrubbing absently at his blurring eyes. “But Pauline… she knew, man. Somehow she knew I'd been through the same things she had. And after that… I couldn't pretend anymore that there was nothing wrong.”

“Blair…” he looked up into Jim's troubled face. “I know this must seem like too much for you to handle, but we can get help. You're not alone in this. I want to understand.”

“You were there, Jim, and you don't understand. I don't know how I can explain it to you, or anyone else.”

“Try.” Blair almost laughed. Jim made it sound so damn easy.

“Ever since I came back, I feel…detached.” He closed his eyes, trying to summon up something, anything to fill the emptiness inside him. He failed. “I died, Jim. My life should be over, but it isn't. And it just doesn't seem that important any more, whether I live or die.” Strange how saying the words aloud made them so much more real. “There are so many people out there who want to live, and they're dying. I feel like I don't deserve…” he choked suddenly, unable to speak.

“What about us?” Jim reached out and stroked down his arm from shoulder to elbow, then back again. He leaned forward and Blair found himself, to his own confusion, leaning into Jim's space. “What about this?”
Jim's lips touched his with just the whisper of a kiss. Then Jim pulled back a mere inch or so, his eyes scanning Blair's face before leaning in again. This kiss was achingly sweet and exquisitely tender, and yet all Blair felt was the emptiness inside him. He had nothing to give back to Jim, and now he knew it. It was almost a relief to surrender that last, fragile connection.

“I… I can't, Jim.” He pulled back, and rose to his feet, stiff after kneeling so long. “Please, not now.”

Jim backed off, though Blair could see from his expression that he didn't consider the conversation closed. He nodded peaceably. “We're not going anywhere for a couple of days. There's no hurry. I just wanted you to know.” He hesitated, and then said: “I've wanted to say something for a while now, but it never seemed like the right time.”

“And now is?” He laughed shakily.

“I don't know.” Jim looked at him levelly, his eyes worried. “Is there going to be a better time?”

He had no answer for that. Fortunately, it didn't seem like Jim expected one.

***

There was enough light from the fire for Blair to see that Jim was sleeping, in spite of the wind howling outside. He'd insisted that Jim take the bed, since the couch was too short for his longer legs. That the bed creaked and the couch didn't was something Jim hadn't needed to know.

He'd long ago realised that the sounds he made, provided he wasn't too loud, or did anything unexpected, didn't register with Jim while he was sleeping. It had been a source of pleasure, once, that he was so far under Jim's personal radar; now it was simply convenient.

Already wearing sweats and a thick pair of socks, all he had to do was pull on his jacket and pick up his boots, then walk quietly to the door. That was the only danger point, but he eased it open silently and slipped out into the darkness.

Was it even worth putting his boots on? He decided he should. He wanted to get as far away from the cabin as possible in case Jim woke and found him gone. Pulling the collar of his coat up around his ears, Blair walked out into the night. The swirling snow made it difficult to tell where he was going, but if he kept going steadily uphill, it should prevent him from tramping in an enormous circle.

***

There was something wrong. Jim lifted his head, listening for anything out of the ordinary. Blair's heartbeat was missing. He sat up and saw that the bundle of bedding on the couch contained no warm, breathing body and his heart began to pound with dread. Surely Blair wouldn't have… but what other explanation was there?

He went over to the couch and felt the bedding. There was some residual warmth; not a lot. Blair must have been gone quite a while. He cursed and grabbed up his clothing, pulling it on roughly, then paused long enough to throw some more wood on the fire. They'd need the heat when he brought Blair back. Any other outcome was unacceptable.

Outside, there was no light at all, and the snow flurries made it dangerous to try to use sentinel vision to locate Blair. He couldn't afford to zone; Blair had already been out there too long. He listened for the one thing he would always recognise – the sound of Blair's heartbeat – and found it, distant, weak and thready.

When he got into the trees, the worst of the wind abated, but he could find no tracks, not even the
faintest signs. Instead, he set himself to follow the siren call of that heartbeat. When the sound faltered and fell silent, he continued, grimly determined to find Blair and bring him back, however he could, or die with him.

The snow under the trees wasn't nearly as deep as it had been in the open, but deep enough to almost hide Blair's body. Not content with walking out into a snowstorm, somewhere along the way Blair had also stripped off all his clothing. His pale skin merged with the snow, but the dark smudge of his hair drew Jim's eye.

He dropped to his knees, pulling off his gloves to search for the heartbeat he already knew had ceased. It didn't have to be the end, not even now. It wouldn't… couldn't, be the end.

“Come on, Chief. Don't do this.” The skin was icy, but not frozen. There was still a chance… what was the saying? Not dead till they're warm and dead… but Jim couldn't do anything here. He dragged off his jacket, and then his sweater and struggled the sweater on over Blair's head, not bothering to pull his arms through the sleeves. Then he pulled the limp body up into one arm and wrapped his jacket around them both as best he could.

It was a struggle to carry Blair, even though he felt curiously insubstantial. At least he was headed downhill, though whether in the direction of the cabin was anybody's guess. Finally, Jim felt a faint, tickling warmth to his left and turned in that direction. Less than a hundred feet away, he found the cabin.

***

The fire was sending out enough heat for the moment. Too much, at this point, wasn't safe for Blair. The mattress from the bed was now on the floor in front of it and Blair lay on it, unmoving, wrapped in the blankets and Jim's sleeping bag. He'd arranged the couch and the disreputable looking armchair to form a rough triangle against the wall. The furniture would absorb some of the heat from the fire and reflect it back into the enclosed area.

Jim stripped off his clothes and crawled into the cocoon of bedding, between Blair and the fire. He pulled Blair's naked body against his own and then, reluctantly remembering the last time Blair had died, he cupped his hands around the sides of Blair's face and let himself fall into the blue jungle of his dreams.

Just like the last time, there was a brilliant light pouring through the trees, and the wolf, running. Running into the light and away from him. He started to give chase, but his legs were sluggish, and no matter how he struggled, he was falling further behind.

“You cannot follow.” The warrior who had first appeared to him in Peru suddenly stood before him. “It is not your time. Where he goes, you cannot follow.”

He howled denial, screamed defiance, and when that had no effect, he felt his body start to change, twisting and elongating until he stood upright, a man again. “Blair! Blair, don't you go. Don't you leave me!”

The warrior stood unmoved. “Your words have no power.”

“Then why am I here?”

“So that you may understand.” The warrior gestured towards the light. “Listen.”

“I don't hear anything.” Jim began impatiently, and then he heard it. The music Blair had talked about; music more beautiful than anything he had ever heard, full of a sombre joy.
This was what Blair had turned back from? To be with him? Understanding and compassion flooded him, and he knew now why Blair had wanted to return. How could he ask Blair to deny himself this beauty a second time?

And yet, the thought of a future without Blair was unbearable. “Let me go with him.”

“It is not your time.” The warrior's face was implacable.

“No!” In the distance the wolf ran on, unheeding. “There must be something I can do.”

The warrior stared at him impassively. “Listen.”

Jim extended his senses, sorting through the layers of sound, hearing the soft bass rumble and the high, sweet harmonics. He allowed the sounds to fill his senses, his body, his soul. Without realising it, he had morphed back into the jaguar; he lifted his muzzle to the sky and added his voice to the music, pouring out his love and despair, his need and his acceptance. The music changed, incorporating his music into itself like a living entity.

Far in the distance, the wolf’s stride faltered. Hope, faint and faltering, added a high, pure note to the song, and the wolf turned back. It loped towards the jaguar, stopping a few feet away, morphing into Blair. At once the jaguar followed suit, and Jim faced his guide.

“Jim. Why are you doing this?” his voice was anguished, but there was love too. The music had faded to a background murmur and the warrior had gone.

There was no room here for anything but the truth. “Because without you, there's no point, no reason… because I don't want to die old and alone, and that's what will happen if you go now.”

“And that's supposed to be enough? For me?” Blair shook his head helplessly. “Jim, I can't. That's why I'm here. I don't belong in your world any more.”

Suddenly, Jim knew how to keep him. “It's different now. Blair, I heard the music. I know. I understand. You don't have to go through this alone.”

“Oh, Jim…” Blair shook his head as tears trickled down his cheeks. “What have you done?”

“What I had to do. I won't let you go.” He reached out, his hand closing around Blair's forearm. As Blair's eyes widened and he began to struggle, Jim pushed somehow, and then it was just like before, a sensation of falling, a burst of light; the feel of an icy body lying still as death in his arms. For a moment he thought he'd failed, then he heard it – the light flutter of a weak heartbeat.

***

It was at least half an hour before Blair stirred. Jim felt the movement, faint as it was and breathed a sigh of relief. Blair was breathing and his heart was beating, albeit slowly and weakly. At this point there was nothing he could do except hold Blair's chilled body against his own and allow his body heat to warm Blair slowly.

He'd had training on how to deal with hypothermia while he was in the army, and he knew that there was still a long way to go. Blair was too cold even to shiver, and that had to put his core temperature somewhere around eighty-seven degrees or lower. Try to warm him too fast and he'd go into shock. It wasn't in Jim's nature to wait, to do nothing, but that was exactly what he had to do now.

Blair sighed, a faint puff of air brushing Jim's chest. Unconsciously, he tightened his arm, drawing Blair closer and with his free hand pulling the blankets more securely around Blair's head. It was
going to be a very long night.

The shivering started about an hour later, and Blair groaned a weak protest. He'd been showing signs of regaining consciousness for a while, but was too disoriented to respond to Jim in any meaningful way. As the tremors intensified, Jim held on, trying to soothe Blair with the tone of his voice and by gently stroking his back. It was a good sign, however unpleasant, and Jim permitted himself just a hint of optimism.

Gradually, Blair's shivering eased a little and his movements became more purposeful. Jim eased him onto his back. “Blair, can you understand me?”

Dazed blue eyes stared up at him, blank at first; then tears welled up, silently overflowing out the corners and down his temples.

“What have you done?” Jim barely heard the words. Blair's eyes closed again, but tears continued to seep out; he was still shivering faintly.

“Shh… Blair…” He brushed the unruly curls away from Blair's face, thumbing away the dampness from under his eyes. “Blair, it's okay. It's gonna be okay.”

The only response was a minute shake of Blair's head. He was breathing steadily, weak, shallow breaths interrupted only by his body's tremors, and that recalled Jim to the necessities. He released Blair reluctantly and turned towards the fire to pour hot water from the pot on the hearth into a mug. He stirred in three teaspoons of sugar with a grimace then cooled it with a generous amount of milk. It would be sickeningly sweet, but Blair would need the energy it provided.

Carefully Jim eased into a sitting position and raised Blair up to rest against his chest. He tucked the blankets around his patient's back and set about coaxing him to drink the contents of the mug, sip by sip. It took a good twenty minutes to accomplish, and then Jim eased him down to rest for a while before starting the whole process over again.

***

Briefly, he'd been free. He remembered the jungle, remembered Jim and that awful moment when Jim tore him out of his haven. And now, something was horribly, horribly wrong. He felt weighted down by his body, too heavy to move, almost impossible to breathe. It shouldn't be like this.

He struggled against the incredible lethargy, becoming more afraid with every passing moment. He needed Jim and he couldn't move, couldn't call out to him. It seemed like an eternity before he realised that the warmth at his back came from Jim's body. As the confusion receded a little he realised he was lying on his side, Jim spooned up behind him, holding him firmly. That was why he couldn't move.

His breath came out in a shaken sob and tears prickled behind his eyelids. What the hell was wrong with him? He found himself trembling uncontrollably needing, more than he needed his next breath, for Jim to wake up and do something, make this feeling go away, but when he opened his mouth the best he could manage was a garbled sound that was barely recognisable as Jim's name, even to him.

Fortunately, it was enough. The solid body stirred against his back and Jim's arms tightened around him for a moment. “Blair?”

He sobbed again, unable to answer, but Jim was awake now and gently eased him onto his back. Blair managed to get his eyes open, to see that it really was Jim, tell himself that everything was going to be okay. Instead the sobs kept coming, and tears continued to seep from the corners of his
eyes, running down annoyingly into his hair.

“Easy, Chief. You're okay, now.” Jim's voice was soft, almost tender, and he cupped Blair's cheek with one hand, using his thumb to brush away the spilling tears.

Blair shook his head helplessly, struggling to marshal the words he needed and failing. The best he could manage was: “Somethin… something's wrong… I ca… can’t…”

Jim hushed him, placing a finger over his lips. “Hypothermia, Blair. You were pretty far gone when I found you.” His fingers stroked Blair's cheek soothingly. “Just take it easy, okay? It's going to be rough for a while.”

Hypothermia. Okay, he could deal with it, now that he knew what was happening. Strange how he could understand quite clearly what was going on, now that Jim had told him, and yet be completely incapable of articulating any of it.

He sighed and closed his eyes, hoping that Jim would continue to touch him like that. Like he was something precious and fragile. Not his usual thing, but right now he felt like he could easily shatter into a million pieces. He let himself drift, stirring only to make a protesting sound when Jim moved away slightly.

“It's okay. I'm not going anywhere.”

Blair felt Jim's muscles flexing as he shifted and only then realised – fuck, we're naked. We're both naked – and even then, it didn't feel real; not the way it should have. He stifled a sigh, vaguely wishing that this weird dislocation between his mind and his body would just stop. Real soon.

He drifted again, only vaguely aware of Jim's presence until his head and shoulders were lifted a little and a cup pressed against his lips. He opened his mouth, obedient to Jim's command and it was flooded with warm, nauseatingly sweet fluid. He choked, trying to protest, but Jim insisted and it was easier to give in than to fight.

There seemed to be an unending supply of the nasty stuff, but eventually Jim relented and laid him back down, rolled him onto his side again and spooned up behind him. For a while everything was fuzzy again as the lethargy threatened to pull him under once more, but the strangeness of feeling Jim's bare skin against his back disturbed him enough that he couldn't quite let go.

The warm press of Jim's hand against the centre of his chest felt like an anchor, holding him in the physical world that otherwise felt vague and insubstantial. He took a deep breath, just to feel the resistance of that hand and Jim sighed, sending a warm puff of air across his cheek, snuggling a little closer, splayed fingers twitching restlessly.

Exhaustion was dragging him under, but his brain, inconveniently overactive if not particularly clear, denied him the oblivion he longed for. Disjointed memories of the last few months flickered through his mind, mercifully blunted by fatigue and mental confusion. He couldn't go through that again. Couldn't put Jim through it either; but nothing had really changed. Had it?

Nothing. Except that now Jim knew how it had felt in that place. And what if Jim couldn't handle it any better than he had? His breathing hitched and he froze, heart thumping in double time. God, if anything happens to Jim…

“Blair?” Jim's voice, soft in his ear, drew him back from the precipice of what was potentially the worst panic attack of his life. He shuddered and allowed Jim to roll him onto his back. “It's okay. It was just a nightmare.”
“No. I just…” He swallowed and closed his eyes feeling more tears squeezing out. Tears of frustration at being so fucking helpless. At needing to talk to Jim and not being able to find the words.

“Don't try to push it, Chief. Take it easy.” Jim patted his cheek gently, and Blair caught hold of his wrist.

If he couldn't communicate in words, then he'd find another way. He moved his fingertips along the muscular forearm keeping his eyes fixed on Jim's face. A faint smile quirked the corners of Jim's mouth as he explored the corded muscle and coarse hairs. “Need this…” he whispered. “Need to feel…”

Jim remained where he was, propped up on his elbow, looking down at Blair. “Whatever you want, okay?”

He nodded wordlessly, fingers still questing upwards until he reached Jim's shoulder, then down… down… to the hard percussion of Jim's heart against his palm. Something real… a lifeline. He closed his eyes again, listening, feeling, and something inside him relaxed a fraction.

After a moment, Jim's hand covered his, holding it in place. Jim's voice filtered through the thrumming of his own heartbeat as it strove to match the other. The words were meaningless, but he didn't need to hear them, only the tone. He felt Jim move closer, sink down to lie alongside him. Felt Jim's arm slide under his shoulders and draw him still closer.

He was hardly aware of the moment when he turned his head towards Jim, and blindly sought his lips. It wasn't the most exciting kiss Blair had ever experienced, but when it ended, he sighed in pleasure and tilted his mouth up for more. The next one was better – slow and deep and curiously undemanding, though Jim explored his mouth as thoroughly as it ever had been.

This was what he needed – to feel the life rushing through Jim's body, to submerge himself in it until he felt real himself once more. It came more easily now, as Jim began to caress his face, his throat, his shoulder, bringing him to life again. Not the half-life that he'd endured for months, but real life, achingly real. He wanted, more than he'd ever wanted anything, to make love to Jim, but his body wasn't cooperating on that front. His skin tingled with pleasure, but his body was still far too weak to react.

Of course, he didn't have to actually do anything… he moaned softly as Jim's fingers ruffled his chest hair and he moved his hand from Jim's chest down to the hard line of heat that lay against his hip.

“Woah, Chief…” Jim lifted his hand away. “Maybe you should slow down a bit. You're not exactly up for this right now.” His eyes twinkled a little at the double entendre and he kissed Blair briefly.

“Not gonna be.” And that was the most coherent speech he'd managed so far. Encouraged, he snuck his hand under Jim's guard and got in a quick stroke over the damp heat of Jim's cock. He made an effort and dragged out a few more words. “Wanna do it… please, Jim.”

If he sounded like a particularly whiny toddler, Jim was decent enough not to say so, but he frowned, looking uncertain.

“Please…” now Blair knew he sounded like a three-year-old, but Jim was at least too distracted to stop him wrapping his fingers around his cock and stropping it quickly two, three times then sliding down to cup his balls.

Jim's body jerked uncontrollably and his breath caught. “Jesus, Blair…” Finally, he lifted Blair's
hand off his balls and held it firmly away from his body. “Are you sure about this?”

Blair nodded firmly, his eyes hopeful, and Jim's face softened into resignation. “God help me, I don't stand a chance against you any more.” He kissed Blair firmly. “I hope you brought something we can use for lube.”

He hoped so too, as he watched Jim unfurl his long body from the bedding and head for the kitchen bench, his skin glowing in the reddish light of the embers. But it seemed he must have done, because Jim was soon easing back into their makeshift bed and placing a small dish of something on the floor.

“We'll take this slowly.” Jim rolled him carefully onto his side. “And you'll tell me if you need me to stop.”

Jim's voice was stern, but Blair honestly couldn't imagine a single reason why he’d ever want Jim to stop. He sighed and closed his eyes as Jim began to caress him slowly, exploring his body and obviously in no hurry. Normally he would have protested his impatience, but right now he was just happy to enjoy the feel of Jim's body wrapped around his, and the big hands gentle and warm on his skin.

It seemed like an eternity before one of those hands moved downwards, hesitating a moment on his belly before continuing. Of course, his cock was about as responsive as an overcooked noodle, but that didn’t stop it feeling damn good and Blair moaned breathily, pushing back insistently against Jim's groin and the hard on that had been nestled in the cleft of his ass all this time.

Jim groaned softly and nuzzled his ear. “Ready?”

He’d been ready for what seemed like hours, but he just nodded and whispered ‘yes’ as Jim reached past him to dip his fingers in the dish. The first touch of slippery wetness on his hole sent a shudder through Blair’s body. Jim was still being ultra careful, simply brushing lightly over the opening for a while before finally, with excruciating care, sliding one fingertip inside.

The slow, careful preparation lasted for another eternity and Blair was squirming with impatience by the time Jim was satisfied. Still, he wasn’t prepared for the way it felt when Jim entered him at last. God, such heat… and the way Jim just filled him up… erasing the emptiness as though it had never existed.

He moaned softly, rocking his hips back in wordless protest at Jim's caution, taking him deeper still. Jim shuddered, and stopped his cautious advance. The fine tremors that ran through Jim's body told Blair how much controlling his own needs was costing him.

“Jim… 's okay… please…” he felt Jim shudder again, the slow invasion halting as he strove for control. “Jus' fuck me.”

“Shouldn't be doing this.” Jim's voice was hoarse with strain. He nuzzled Blair's throat, just below his ear and the hot flow of his breath over damp skin sent tremors of anticipation through Blair. “Have to be careful here, Chief. Don't want you going into shock.”

“Okay.” Blair had no idea what Jim was talking about, but he was the one with medic training, after all. He sighed, relaxing against the solid mass of Jim's body, and resigned himself to Jim's care. Whatever… it all felt good. “So hot, Jim. Feels so good.”

“Yeah…” Jim moved, withdrawing as slowly as he’d entered, and Blair whimpered a little. “You feel good, Blair. Just let me do all the work, okay?” He pressed in again, steady and relentless, his heat searing Blair from the inside out.
It became increasingly difficult for Blair to stay present. Warmed by Jim's body, and his mind distracted by the physical pleasure – because there was plenty of that, even if he couldn't get hard – he found his attention wandering, drifting hazily in the sensations. Almost like zoning, he guessed.

Almost like… and suddenly, he was there again, the blue glow of the jungle, the glorious paean welcoming him home. He felt his spirit opening to the sound unfurling like a new fern frond. Here, he felt completed, at peace. And yet… he was aware, too, of the earthy physicality of Jim’s presence, of how his body was responding to the movement of Jim’s cock inside him.

He didn't have to choose between them; not any longer. He could come here when he needed respite from the hard edges of the physical world, and then return to his place at Jim's side. He smiled, and stretched his arms out wide, feeling the damp caress of the warm air, and the soft vibrations of the music reaching deep into his soul. He could have it all. The chorus reached a crescendo, the subdued glow intensified into blinding whiteness and Blair laughed aloud.

He woke with Jim's heart beating triple time against his back, and the arm slung over his torso heavy and limp. Blair himself felt… comfortably numb. Not like the previous emptiness, but with weary satisfaction. He could still hear faint echoes of the jungle.

Too soon, the moment passed. Tension returned to Jim's body; in a second or two he was going to start cleaning them both up. He'd leave Blair's body, and Blair wasn't ready to be alone just yet. He tightened his grip on Jim's hand. “Don't. Stay with me, Jim. Please.”

With a soft grunt, Jim relaxed again, his arms contracting around Blair. “I'm not going anywhere, babe. Go to sleep.”

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Waking alone in the grey light of pre-dawn was like the worst kind of action replay. With a furious curse, Jim erupted out of the nest of blankets and sleeping bags and reached for his clothes. He dragged on his thermals, too angry and frightened to think much, but by the time he'd shrugged on his sweater – the one he'd wrapped Blair in last night – the cold, hard reality of the situation had crept up and kicked him in the guts. If Blair really wanted to die, he'd find a way to make it happen. And if it was, truly, what Blair wanted, did he have the right to stop him?

Jim dropped onto the arm of the couch, the sock he'd grabbed dangling almost forgotten from his fingers. His heart was pounding as though he'd run a fucking marathon. Letting Blair go might be the right thing, but could he actually do it? He began to shake as the idea took hold.

Or, he could just go out there, find Blair, and lie down in the snow with him.

He was saved from making an impossible decision by the sound of something moving outside the door of the cabin. Two steps took him to the door. Jim wrenched it open, and then had to catch Blair as he tumbled into the cabin. He propped Blair against the wall and slammed the door shut.

“Would you mind telling me what the fuck you think you're doing?” His voice was barely recognisable, hoarse and shaking, and Blair's eyes widened.

“Hey, Jim, take it easy there. I just needed to pee, okay?” He smiled placatingly, but his face was greyish and sunken with exhaustion and his voice was creaky.

Jim looked him up and down, tension easing a little as he took in the heavy sweatpants and sweater under an oversized jacket. The sneakers might be inadequate but it was only a few yards to the small outhouse. Blair had even had the good sense to pull on that ridiculous hat with the earflaps. Balked
of any fresh outlet for his anger, Jim growled wordlessly and stepped back a little.

Luckily, he retained his grip on the front of Blair's jacket as the other man's knees began to buckle. He half dragged, half carried Blair to the couch. “Stay there,” he ordered. “And if you need to do anything, use the damn bucket. I'll deal with it. You get that?”

He turned away, ignoring Blair's irritated muttering to separate out the blankets and sleeping bags. The fire needed stoking too, but that could wait a moment. His hands were shaking but otherwise he was okay, he thought, as he turned back to face Blair.

Obviously not. Blair stopped in mid grumble and stared at him, his hat clutched tightly in his fingers. He tossed it aside, eyes still fixed on Jim's face. “Oh god, Jim. You didn't think…”

“What the hell was I supposed to think?” Jim roared, and tossed a sleeping bag in Blair's general direction. He struggled to bring his voice back to a normal level before he continued. “Last night you just walk out of here, and… and this morning I wake up and find you gone again…”

Blair's face lost every bit of colour. “I'm sorry… oh fuck, I'm so sorry… I just…”

“Needed to pee.” Jim took a deep breath. Let it out again. I am calm.

Blair shook his head, eyes suspiciously moist. “Didn't think.”

He couldn't stay angry. Not when he was just so goddamned glad to have Blair here, safe. Not dead. “Don't 'don't think' again, Sandburg. My blood pressure won't take it.”

Blair grinned shakily and Jim leaned towards him, removing his jacket and arranging the sleeping bag over him. He tucked it closely around Blair's body. “I'll make us a hot drink, and then breakfast. How does that sound?”

“Great.” Blair blinked uncertainly, obviously still off balance. “It sounds great.”

“Okay.” Jim cupped a hand against his cheek for a moment, and stood.

The water he'd had on the hearth since last night was still pretty hot and wouldn't take long to boil on the sullenly glowing embers. He spooned sugar into Blair's mug and coffee into his own and went to the kitchen bench for the milk. By the time he got back the water had just begun to boil, but a glance over to the couch showed Blair limp and slack-jawed, and starting to snore a little.

Blair was safe. It was going to be okay. Jim let that feeling sink in for a moment and then grinned. He poured the water into his mug and took the coffee to the kitchen to investigate what breakfast supplies Blair had thought to bring with him.

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This falling asleep thing could get old fast. Blair took a deep breath and inhaled the enticing aroma of oatmeal and coffee. Oatmeal… he smiled faintly, his eyes still closed.

Although he hadn't heard a sound, he realised that Jim was beside him, and that he was still cocooned in Jim's sleeping bag. He opened his eyes and the smile broadened. “Morning.” His tone made it a question.

“Nearly ten, lazybones. The storm's more or less over, but the cloud cover's still very heavy.” Jim's eyes travelled over him, openly appreciative. “Sit up and eat.”
He took the proffered bowl and stirred the contents with the spoon. It looked like Jim had emptied half a bag of trail mix into the oatmeal. The swirls of melted chocolate, combined with the strong scent of honey told him it was going to be excruciatingly sweet. He looked at Jim dubiously.

“Go on, eat it. You need something hot inside you.” After a frozen second, he actually blushed a little. It was the cutest damned thing Blair had ever seen and he manfully refrained from sniggering.

Jim rallied quickly. “Eat it. Your core temp's still too low. I can feel it.” He placed a hand squarely in the centre of Blair's chest to emphasise the point.

Blair spooned a small amount into his mouth and nearly gagged. “Is that what that is? I thought it might be lo…” Now it was his turn to freeze. Last night they'd been operating purely on instinct and need. There was no guarantee that, this morning, Jim still felt the same way he did.

Patiently, Jim took the spoon from his suddenly numb hand and scooped up some more oatmeal. “Love. Hypothermia. There's a difference?” He lifted the spoon to Blair's lips and Blair took it automatically.

It was a struggle to force the gluey mass down his throat and Blair choked a little as he swallowed. “Well, if you put it like that…”

It earned him a small, tight smile. “Listen, Blair, about last night…” Jim hesitated, his jaw muscle twitching, and Blair's heart sank. He wasn't sure he could deal with any more of Jim's issues. Not right now. “You know I don't really feel comfortable with all that mumbo jumbo stuff-”

“It's okay, you-” He fell silent when Jim pressed gentle fingertips to his lips.

“I just want to say… I was wrong. Okay?” He hesitated again while Blair tried to figure out exactly what he was talking about. “I don't like that kind of stuff, and I don't understand it, but… I'm ready to take that trip with you now.”

Wow… that was unexpected… They'd never once talked about that first spirit walk, not since Jim had rebuffed him in the hospital, and it came as a shock to realise how much of that rejection he'd carried with him for all these months. Now, he could feel the lingering traces of pain and regret slipping away from him. He smiled weakly. “The water's still fine.”

“Yeah.” Jim's face was impassive, but Blair could see just a hint of humorous resignation lurking in the blue eyes. “Guess we'll have to work on my swimming techniques.”

They could deal with that later. Along with… well, a hell of a lot of other things. Outside this cabin, his life was still a mess, and he had no idea what he was going to do about that. Inside the cabin, they'd found peace with themselves, and with each other. It was enough of a foundation for them to build on.

Blair shrugged, satisfied for the moment, and swallowed another mouthful of the oatmeal. “If I eat up all my oatmeal, can I have some coffee?” he whined pathetically.

Jim appeared to be taking a perverse satisfaction in his temporary supremacy. “Weak coffee, with plenty of milk and sugar.”

“Forget I asked.” Sullenly, he allowed Jim to spoon more oatmeal between his lips. He downed it as quickly as he could and was rewarded with a prolonged exploration of his mouth by Jim's tongue. He leaned into the kiss, aching for more but knowing he still wasn't recovered enough yet. And, god, relieved beyond measure that Jim really did seem to want him. He was still trying to absorb that concept.
When he could talk again, he smiled at Jim hopefully. “So, does this mean we're okay?”

Jim sat back on his heels and cocked his head to one side. He looked impossibly gorgeous in sky blue thermals and a heavy, cream coloured sweater, with his hair a little mussed and a hint of beard on his jaw. Then he smiled. It was the same smile Blair had seen after he'd pulled out of the expedition to Borneo, hinting at a much deeper emotion than Jim was comfortable with expressing. It was a smile that said, 'I don't know why you want me, but I'm glad you do'.

Prosaically, Jim held up another spoonful of oatmeal. “Yeah. We're okay.”

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