Double Edged Sword

by Jael_Lyn

Summary

This story was written as a collaborative effort with Susan Foster in Susan's GDP Universe.

Simon adjusted the headset again. It kept cutting out every time he tried to communicate with the snipers on the roof. Not that they were doing anyone any good. The Currency Exchange, designed for security rather than accessibility, was a terrible site for mounting a SWAT operation. Simon cursed under his breath — at the building, at the gung-ho SWAT Captain, at the thieves-turned-hostage-takers, at the sun, moon and stars. Most of all he cursed Jim Ellison for being inside of the building instead of outside where he needed him.

How could he have done it? Even for a sentinel, it violated every procedure. In a hostage situation you negotiated, you planned, you delayed, you promised, you negotiated some more. You damn well didn't just give yourself up like a sacrificial lamb. According to the five terrified children they had found huddled in the parking lot, that's just what Jim had done. Simon Banks believed in the values of Serve and Protect, but his heart still quailed at the thought of Jim trading himself for those kids and the critically wounded guard they had managed to drag out with them.

An appalling amount of time had slipped by since their last contact with Jim. After the first flurry of negotiation, which had confirmed Jim and the other hostages were alive, the hostage takers had become increasingly erratic. The negotiator's calls went unanswered. There had been more
gunfire. Simon was becoming increasingly pessimistic about the outcome.

"Captain Banks?" Sentinel Lisa Pais and her guide Karl were kneeling beside him. "We've posted Sentinels all around the building. We're estimating seven to ten individuals by the heartbeats, and none of us can get a reading on Sentinel Prime Ellison." She shook her head. "Detective Ellison is too heads up not to be signaling us."

"What are you telling me, Pais?" growled Banks.

"He's either seriously injured, dead, or zoned. Are we sure Blair wasn't with him?" Karl's hand tightened gently on Lisa's elbow. Both were clearly worried.

"Unfortunately, yes," was the terse reply. "Blair's on his way, finally. It's taken forever for us to track him down. He was in some special Sentinel area of the library at Rainier and his cell phone didn't work. They've been on leave, for God's sake!"

"Then why was Detective Ellison here?" Lisa asked incredulously. "It's not like you have an ordinary bank account at the Currency Exchange."

"One of a thousand things I don't know," Banks answered. "I just don't know. Something just doesn't add up."

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"What do you know?" Blair asked anxiously.

"Not much," Henri Brown answered, trying to concentrate on his driving. His siren was blaring, but the narrow streets around the University just weren't designed for high speed travel.

"When Simon sent me over, all they knew was some incident at the Currency Exchange had dissolved into a hostage situation. One security guard was killed, one was critical when I left. According to some kids, some cop had traded himself to get them out of the building." Henri looked at his passenger. Blair's only outward sign of distress were his whitened knuckles as he grasped the familiar leather backpack. "I'm sorry, Blair, from the description it just couldn't have been anyone else. We did have one voice confirmation early on. Jim was okay then."
"It doesn't make any sense," Blair murmured. "He wasn't going anywhere. He was staying at the loft. He was building me a bookshelf."

"Maybe he needed something at the last minute," Henri suggested.

"You don't go to the Currency Exchange because you ran out of screws. I never should have left him."

"You couldn't have known, Blair. No one told you that the white noise generators in the Sentinel Section of the library were blocking cell phones."

"It's my duty to know," Blair protested. "I'm his guide. Jim comes first, always, in all things. This is my fault."

"Blair…"

"Don't say it. Just don't say it, Henri. Just get me there."

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"Sandburg, get back here!" Henri called frantically. "You need a vest. You're gonna get yourself killed!"

Blair showed no sign of hearing. He had bounded out of the car and dodged through the police lines before anyone could react. To Henri's dismay, Blair's headlong dash was taking him straight towards the killing ground in front of the Currency Exchange. With everyone's attention fastened on the building, Blair was going to go right through without a hand laid on him.

Sentinel ears saved the day. Lisa Pais heard the commotion and intercepted him. She towered over Blair, but was barely able to drag him back to safety without him breaking free.

"Captain, a little help?" she asked.
A muffled "Let me go!" was all Simon could hear through Lisa's firm headlock. He grabbed both of Blair's arms and used his weight to pin his observer to the SWAT van. "Sandburg! Hold still!" Blair's wild struggle gradually calmed. "Look at me, mister. You're not going to do Jim any good that way."

"Where is he, Simon? I need to get to him." Blair's deep blue eyes were frantic.

"I know that, kid. It's one of my top priorities. We're doing another recon, and the plans to the building are coming. Just hang with me here for a minute." Banks and Pais exchanged glances. It wasn't the time to tell Blair that they weren't confident of Jim's condition.

Simon turned the smaller man and pushed him firmly to a seat on the pavement by the rear tire. "Don't you move." He waited, and sighed in relief when Blair nodded. "I'll be right back and then we'll figure this out. Stay with him, Lisa." Giving Blair's shoulder a reassuring squeeze, Simon filtered back to the command station.

Blair sat motionless. His eyes drifted closed. Anyone except Jim would have thought he was meditating, or just scared to death.

Jim Ellison, Dark Sentinel, understood his Dark Guide as others did not. Blair had read the silent exchange between Lisa and Simon. His sentinel was zoned, injured or dead. If zoned or injured, he needed his guide, and no risk was too great. If dead... well, then there was no reason for Blair to be concerned with his own safety.

A gentle empathic push and the bright intensity of Lisa's eyes dimmed. For a Dark Guide, a light zone was easy to achieve. Karl would have no problems calling her back, but she was incapable of interfering with Blair's plans. It would only take a moment.

Simon was crouched over the building plans when Joel Taggart grabbed his arm. Both men watched in horror as they realized the slight figure of Blair Sandburg was already halfway across the blood stained parking lot. His open hands were extended shoulder high, and he was heading straight toward the main doors. It was too late to stop him.

TWO WEEKS EARLIER

"Okay. There they are, right in the center of the quad. Take a good, long look." Garth Dobbs handed the binoculars to the young man standing next to him.
Frankie Archer fumbled with the binoculars. Finally he managed to bring them into focus. "I found Sandburg. He's easy enough to pick out. The tall guy, that's Ellison?"

"Leather jacket, short hair," Dobbs prompted.

"Yep. That's who I'm looking at. So that's the Senior Sentinel Prime of Cascade, or should I say Senior Slaver?"

"You're supposed to be the Guide Liberation Army. Do you believe your own press or not?"

Archer whirled on the man standing beside him, nearly dropping the binoculars in the process. "Don't ever question my commitment to the movement. EVER."

"Take it easy, Frankie. It was a rhetorical question. We're here because I know you're a true believer." Dobbs just managed to keep a straight face. He wasn't at all sure that this collection of college kids, academics and social do-gooders that made up the GLA in Cascade weren't all talk. In any case, he needed them. Correction, he needed their information.

"Just so we don't have any misunderstandings," Archer answered, allowing himself to be mollified. "You have to prove yourself to us, not the other way around." He went back to the binoculars. "I had Sandburg as an instructor a few years ago, when he was working on his Masters. I can't imagine why he'd stay with someone like that. He's got to know that the GLA would take care of him. His mother was active in the movement, for God's sake." He turned slowly, apparently following Sandburg and Ellison as they moved across campus. "Just look at the guy. You can tell even from this distance that Ellison is the typical alpha bastard sentinel." He looked back at Dobbs. "The GLA knows the truth. All the bullshit about Ellison letting his guide return to the University, letting him avoid guide manners." His thin face twisted into a sneer that matched his voice. "It's all just a ploy. The sentinel is the master, no matter how they try to dress it up."

"Just imagine the impact we can make on the exalted Guide Development Project when we pull this off," Dobbs cajoled, knowing this was the critical moment.

Archer lowered the binoculars again. He was grinning from ear to ear, his expression the picture of smug satisfaction. "Oh yeah, that will be so sweet, so very sweet. Hand me the camera. I want to take some photos to bring along when we meet with the others."
Garth Dobbs allowed himself a brief moment of quiet satisfaction while Frankie took his pictures. Archer was on board, and getting the rest of the GLA with the program would be easier. He'd cleared the first hurdle.

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Jim Ellison breathed a sigh of relief when he saw Sandburg round the corner of Hargrove Hall. He wasn't in panic mode every time Blair went to the University anymore, but their time apart was more difficult than Jim would ever admit. He actually thought it was easier for Blair. It took every ounce of the young man's considerable energy to function and keep his barriers up at the same time. He didn't have time to worry and fret like his sentinel did. These lunchtime rendezvous' on Tuesday and Thursday were supposed to be for Blair's benefit, but that was just a convenient fiction. Jim knew the sentinel needed them more.

A contented smile blossomed on Jim's face. Blair had just caught sight of him, and was waving madly. No one could say that Sandburg hid his emotions. He pulled his long frame gracefully off the bench and started across the quad.

"Hey, Jim, you're early." Blair's eyes twinkled as he leaned gently into Jim. "At least I think you're early. Or am I late?"

Jim gave his hair a gentle tug. Blair had it tied back today, and was wearing his glasses. He looked particularly studious. "You were born late, Chief. Couldn't get rid of your adoring students after class, huh?"

"Sorry. I swear, there is something about freshmen that keeps their ears from functioning. I had at least six kids who came to ask me about their paper, and I'd already spent ten minutes going over it in class. Don't they ever learn to take notes in high school anymore?"

"Kids today," Jim answered in mock dismay. "Besides, they just like talking to you, Sandburg. Tone down that magnetic personality a bit." They started across the quad. Jim resisted the temptation to wrap his arms around his guide and pull him close. Blair would never have objected, but Jim consciously avoided behavior that called attention to the fact that Sandburg was a working guide whenever he could. Blair had enough trouble overcoming the simmering prejudice at Rainier University without adding to his burden. "I thought we'd go for Chinese. My mouth's been watering for sweet and sour chicken all morning."

"No complaints from me. Chinese sounds great," Blair answered cheerfully. He was in the midst of telling Jim about his busy morning when Jim froze, on full alert. Alarmed, Blair shifted his backpack and placed on hand on the small of Jim's back, the other on his wrist. "What is it, Jim?"
He waited as the taller man did a slow three-sixty, scanning every inch of the quad. "Jim?"

"Nothing." The intent expression softened to an expression somewhere between confusion and embarrassment. "Sorry. For a second there, every hair on my neck was standing on end." He wrapped an arm around Blair's shoulder. "False alarm. I'm jumping at shadows. Let's go get our lunch. Tell me the rest of your story."

Far above them, hidden in the bell tower, the high-speed camera shutter continued to whir.

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Garth Dobbs pressed himself into the brick alcove. Even though this was a necessary risk, he didn't have to like it. The GDP kept continuous surveillance on a lot of the Guide Liberation groups. It was hard to know whether this block of apartments was really as secure as Frankie Archer claimed they were.

"Come on, Dobbs. Everyone else arrived at least half an hour ago. If the GDP was going to do anything, they would have done it by now. The group is just waiting on us."

Dobbs caressed the pistol in his jacket pocket. Even if the GDP busted in on this little gathering, he had no intention of being taken. "Lead the way, Frankie," he whispered. "I'm right behind you."

They slipped down the alley. Archer produced a key that unlocked the back door. Before they entered the building, he pointed up to the fire escape. "Our meeting is in an apartment on the second floor. We've made some modifications. If anyone comes, we can get into the next flat and use the fire escape. We can either go down or over the roof. The others will delay the goons long enough for us to get you out of there."

They made their way to the second floor. One lookout was posted on the stairwell. Archer whispered that another kept watch on the front entrance. At the fourth doorway Archer knocked twice, then twice more. The door opened and they were hustled in.

Three women and two men were seated around a battered table. Another woman perched near the window sill, apparently watching the street. Archer indicated two empty chairs at the table, but remained standing while Garth Dobbs sat down.
"Okay, everyone, this is Garth Dobbs. We're taking extra precautions tonight, as you know. That's partially because this operation has the potential to strike a huge blow against the GDP. The other reason is that Dobbs here is a rogue guide, and we don't send one of the brothers into harms way." A few murmurs of approval rippled around the table. "If anything goes down tonight, we get Garth out at all costs," Archer continued. "Everyone clear on that point?"

"Let me make the necessary introductions. Last names aren't very important." He pointed to the woman sitting closest to Dobbs. "That's Kitty, Jacky and Lora. The one tall one over there is Michael. The one with the glasses is Terrel Hansen, who just happens to be Jack Kelso's Research Assistant. Terrel, why don't you start."

The invitation was met with a stony silence. Finally, Terrel answered. "We don't know this guy, Frankie. Why should I trust him with my information?"

Archer bristled. "My word isn't enough? I brought you into this organization, Terrel!"

"And I've learned the importance of being a skeptic," Terrel countered stubbornly. "You're the cell leader, and I respect that, but I need more than just your word on it."

The two men glared at each other. Garth sat tensely, waiting for this to play itself out. It was all he could do to keep from launching himself over the table and choking the information he needed out of this idiot Terrel. He concentrated on keeping his emotions under control. He'd come too far to blow it now.

Frankie laid a hand on Dobbs' shoulder. "I'm going to let Garth tell you his story in his own words. After you hear it, I think you'll be convinced beyond a shadow of a doubt." He sat down and looked expectantly at Garth.

Garth settled himself. He had to make this good. "My name is Garth Dobbs. I'll do anything, absolutely anything, to bring out the truth about the GDP. You already know I'm a rogue. What you don't know is that the GDP has destroyed my family, and I want them to pay."

He looked around the room, trying to judge what would pull at their heart strings without losing it himself. Sometimes it was hell being an empath. Old memories never lost their emotional impact. Each pain was as fresh as the day it happened. Where to start? Ken? Maisie? Both? The mental images almost overwhelmed him, and Garth fought his way back. Begin at the beginning. They'd buy it for sure.
"My parents died in a car crash. My big brother, Ken, stepped up, left the university to take care of me and my little sister, Maisie. Almost three years ago, he collapsed at work. He was a latent guide. He was immediately turned over to the GDP."

Garth looked around the room, letting that horror sink in. One of the women had tears in her eyes. "You all know what that means," he continued. "The latent gets a trip straight to the Institute, aggressive training, and the Correctional Facility if he doesn't cooperate. Their only goal is to break you. They gave him two days at home to arrange things with Maisie and me."

A wave of anger swept over Garth, for both the GDP and Ken. Why had his beloved brother played the hero? He swallowed his rage and continued. "Ken knew that when he went in, all our property would be transferred to his sentinel. Maisie and me, well, we weren't the GDP's problem, but since he was a guide, they'd sure be looking at us for our empathic potential. We already knew I was an empath. At best, our family would be broken apart, penniless, and if we were lucky we might get a chance to see him once a month, maybe twice if the sentinel was generous."

"Ken took the only course he could see. He drove out into the woods, telephoned the police, and ate my dad's gun." Garth took a deep breath. His emotions were nearly out of control. One of the women was sobbing.

"He was very brave." Garth heard someone say. The others agreed. Garth struggled to keep going.

"I heard the tape of the call, the police dispatcher trying to talk him out of it. Ken told them he didn't want an innocent person to find the body, that it was for the best, that he had left letters and his will on the dashboard of the his car, and that he loved his brother and sister. His final words were the location of the car. When they got there it was already too late."

"The GDP didn't waste any time. They came after Maisie and me. As far as the GDP is concerned, I'm officially a rogue, and Maisie needed to be examined as soon as they could lay hands on her. We were on the run the minute the funeral was over. After we went into hiding, a family friend sold the house for us, so we had a little cash."

The surrounding group burst into conversation. Everyone was talking at once – criticizing the GDP, praising Ken, congratulating Garth. He let them carry on. He was lost in his own thoughts, replaying those early days.

Maisie looked up from her homework, "Why Cascade?"
He pitied his little sister. She just couldn't grasp the concept that school was now a thing of the past.

Garth turned in the chair to face her. “Simple. Cascade is the one place no one would expect a rogue guide to run to. It's GDP City. We'll have to go right after the funeral, in secret. Did you pack your bags like I asked you to?

"But Garth, our friends will be there. We need to pay our respects to Ken." Tears streamed down her face. "There's a dinner at the church, and…"

He grabbed her by the shoulders, shaking her hard. "Maisie, join the real world. The GDP is going to be standing at the door, waiting to take you in for testing. They already suspect me, and I won't be able to fool them if they test me again. We have this one chance to give them the slip." His only answer was her silent tears. "Remember if anyone questions you about your GDP medical, you had it last year. That officially gives us eighteen months grace before we have to start hacking the computers again, although I'm not sure the GDP isn't just going to go ahead and test you anyway. Do you understand me, Maisie? It's now or never." She nodded.

“All right. I know a guy in Seattle. His name is Colin. He's a major flake, but he's one of the good guys. He's a computer wizard, he can do everything with one but make them sit up and beg. He can edit our records; help us get set up in Cascade. We're going to be safe, Maisie. If you just do what I tell you, no one is ever going to get their hands on us.”

The group had finally returned their attention to him. He had their sympathy at this point. Garth lowered his barriers just a fraction. Terrel was still hostile. He'd have to give them more. He braced himself for more emotional pain.

"We got set up in Cascade, thanks to Colin," he said. "Other than Sharpe, we kept our distance from the rest of the GLA. That's why you don't know about us. I thought it would be safer for Maisie. I stayed underground. I had the computer skills, and Colin is well connected. It was easy enough to get work, even if it was on the black market. I tried to talk her out of it, but Maisie wanted to go to school."

"Where is she, Garth?" said one of the women. "Is your sister still free?"

Now that was the real question, wasn't it?
"We got Maisie set up taking classes at Rainier. I was walking her across campus. Three or four guys were having this altercation. The smaller guy was getting a good shaking, and got tossed in our direction. I couldn't pull us out of the way, and we ended up in a heap along with a couple other students." He stopped for a moment, the hate bubbling through him. "They were off-duty GDP personnel. One of them was a sentinel by the name Morris. An unbonded sentinel."

"All hell broke loose. It was chaos. I got separated from Maisie, and the unbonded put a hand on her when he pulled her out of the tangle. He knew immediately. With all the GDP around, she never had a chance."

Garth felt the dismay ripple around the room. The look on Maisie's face haunted his dreams. "That was the last time I saw her. Now you understand," Garth finished. "I want them to pay." He wouldn't tell them the rest. That was for him to know. It would be his final justice.

The group looked first to Frankie, then to Terrel. Frankie was their leader, but Terrel was the one who controlled the vital information. Finally, Terrel nodded. "Okay, Dobbs, I'm satisfied. Here's what I know. I've been Kelso's research assistant for two years. I'm sure you've heard of him. He's in a wheel chair, so mostly he needs me for fetch and carry stuff. He's very security conscious. I rarely get a look at the serious shit that he's working on. When he's ready to publish, that's when I usually get a look."

"It was a fluke, but I got a peek at some info he had on the GDP. Maybe he wasn't as careful with it for some reason, and he has no idea that I'm with the GLA. The short version is that an underground segment of the GDP is selling guides overseas. The proceeds are being deposited in numbered private repositories in the Currency Exchange. I had time to get the computerized access codes before Jack knew what I was about. Unfortunately, the codes are useless if you can't get into the main vault at the Currency Exchange. According to Frankie, I guess that's where you come in."

Garth Dobbs smiled. "Oh, yeah. I can get you in the vault." He leaned forward, a conspiratorial smile on his face. "The main vault is controlled by a state-of-the-art sonic system. Instead of tumblers or numeric codes, the sequence to open the vault is based on a series of twenty tones."

"That's why we need a sentinel," Frankie Archer explained. "We need a sentinel and someone who knows how to guide him. Garth can be the guide." Archer pulled a series of eight by ten photos out of his bag and passed them to the group. "We can't use just any sentinel, either. The unbeatable system needs a special touch, a dark sentinel. They are the rarest of the rare, people. Here he is - Jim Ellison, Senior Sentinel Prime of Cascade."

"You have got to be kidding," Terrel hissed. "That's your plan, to use the Senior Prime?" He gestured scornfully at Dobbs. "And just how is he supposed to deliver all that?"
Dobbs pushed back in his chair and crossed his arms. "I can deliver, all right."

"There are other guides," Terrel challenged. "Why you? How would someone like you know the details of opening the vault?"

"Sure there are other guides," Garth said dismissively. "Go find one that knows sophisticated electronics. Go find one that isn't already a prisoner to the GDP or half drugged out of their mind with damper drugs. More importantly, find one that knows about Dark Sentinels." He let those thoughts sink in. "Right, that's what I thought. Now pay attention."

"One of the few Dark Sentinels in recent times was a woman named Alex Barnes. She was a seriously deranged woman, a born criminal." Dobbs inwardly rejoiced. He could tell from their expressions that he had them in his pocket now. "I'm one of the few people still alive who had any contact with her. She needed a guide, and because she was out of control herself, she couldn't get one through normal channels. She needed a rogue." He tapped one of the photographs in front of them. "She took Sandburg. She had some – uh, needs, shall we say – of a sexual nature, and Sandburg's pretty. She had a real fixation with the boy."

"So where did you come in?" Terrel asked.

"She kept me around for my technical expertise, and if she ever lost interest in Sandburg, she probably would have tried to use me as a guide. I kept a real low profile, but I took the opportunity to learn about Dark Sentinels. Here's the real kicker. Sandburg killed her, and wound up with the GDP Corrections Facility. By some cosmic accident, he ended up bonded to another dark sentinel – Jim Ellison. The information about the vault? Well, that was a little parting gift from Alex after she died, not that she ever intended to share it with anyone."

"So there it is. Sandburg is the key to Ellison, Ellison is the key to the vault, and I'm the only one you'll ever find who knows how to use them." He scanned the room, going from face to face. "I'm giving you thirty seconds to decide, and then I'm walking out of here. You'll never see me again." He needed to bring this to an end. His barriers were fraying. He needed to get away from these people, and all the memories.

"Terrel, come on," pleaded Archer. "It will work! We expose the GDP for what it is, and bring down the Sentinel Prime and Guide Prime in the process. What could be more perfect?"

Terrel ignored Archer completely. Instead he stared at Dobbs. Garth glared right back, meeting the silent challenge. Finally, without breaking eye contact, Terrel nodded. "I'm in," he said
quietly. "Let's get it done."

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Jim surveyed with dismay the stacks of term papers Blair was unloading from his backpack. It held a lot more than he expected. Still, the stacks kept coming. There couldn't possibly be that many from Blair's two classes.

Blair picked up on his sentinel's anxiety. His eyes widened, and he started gathering the stacks hastily. "Sorry, Jim. I shouldn't be strewing these in the living room. Just give me a sec, and I'll work in my room."

"Sandburg, take it easy." Jim stilled the fluttering hands and pulled his friend to the couch. "It's not the mess. It's just – there's so many. How can you possibly read all of these? You keep a killer schedule as it is. There must be hundreds."

"Uh, there are ninety-seven, to be exact. I have an overload in one class. Still, that's not so bad."

"Not so bad?" Jim asked, completely incredulous. He picked up one of the papers and scanned it. It had to be ten pages. "How fast can you read and grade one of these?"

Blair frowned. "Well, I've never really thought about it that way. It just takes however long it takes." He looked hopefully at Jim. "The well-written ones go really fast."

Jim looked skeptically at the piles. "They can't all be good ones. What's the average? Ten minutes per paper? Do the math, Chief. That's hours of grading, at a minimum, probably days, on top of everything else you do."

Blair wasn't exactly sure where this was going. "Jim, I know it seems like a lot, but it is part of my responsibility as an instructor. I've done it before. A couple of late nights, a long weekend, and they're done before you know it." Blair could sense Jim wasn't convinced. If anything, he seemed impatient, even a little angry.

"Listen to me, Sandburg. Not only do you work with me, but our time apart wears you out. Do you think I don't know how much your barriers fray during the day, or how much energy it takes to maintain them? Do you really think I don't know you drop into bed exhausted at night, every night? It's not going to work." Jim's face hardened, the way he looked when he had come to a
decision and wasn't going to change his mind. He left the couch and headed across the room to the phone.

Blair watched the retreating back. A cold fear suddenly gripped his heart. Jim had been so good about accommodating his studies. What if he changed his mind? Jim was within his rights to revoke his permission and have his guide at his side full time. Blair began to panic. Jim was already dialing.

"Simon? Ellison. Glad I caught you at the office." He had his back to Blair, completely unaware that the younger man had dropped to his knees. "Blair and I need to change our schedules. We've discussed this possibility, and I hate to have to go this route, but it's necessary." Jim was silent, and was nodding his head slightly, apparently listening. "I realize it's a big change, but it's for the best. I'll take care of notifying Dr. Woodward if you'll handle the other." More silence. "Yes, sir, that will do it. See you tomorrow."

He hung up the phone and turned around with a broad smile on his face. "All fixed, Chief." Jim did a double-take as he realized that Blair was kneeling, his blue eyes wide with fear. He was mouthing words, but no sound was coming out. "Chief? What the hell?" He grabbed Blair by one arm, hauling him to his feet.

"Please, Sentinel – Jim, please. I won't let the work interfere. I won't neglect my duties to you. I can make it work. Please…"

Jim realized his guide was in near panic, and interrupted the plaintive voice. "Hold it, Sandburg, just hold it a minute. What did you think was happening here?" Blair gave no answer. He just couldn't get the words out. "You thought I was going to jerk you out of the University, didn't you?" Jim wrapped the quivering shoulders in a hug, pulling Blair close. He cursed himself for not realizing that Blair might jump to the wrong conclusion. "Take it easy, Chief. Simon and I discussed this long ago. We knew there might be times when you'd need to be full time with your other responsibilities, and we have a backup plan. As of tomorrow morning, I'm off the schedule in Major Crime and on four days of research. That should be enough time for you to read your papers, won't it?" He gently moved Blair away so he could see his face.

"Four days?" Blair stammered. "You're going on desk duty so I can read papers?" he asked, totally overwhelmed by this gesture of support.

"Chief," Jim said gently, "I made you a promise, and I didn't make it frivolously. You're going to have as much of your own life as it's possible for me to give you. I can't make it perfect, but I'll do what I can, when I can. In this case, doing two jobs is too much. I can't live with myself any other way."
Jim settled back on the couch. He pulled Blair with him, tugging him into his lap, wrapping his arms round the still shaking guide, a hand pressing the curly head against his shoulder. With touch Jim tried to center his younger guide. He pressed against their link, all too aware that he did not have the lightest of touches. Breathing a prayer of thanks, he felt Blair’s mind open up to him. It was like entering a storm, and once again he regretted frightening his guide. Jim was battered but clung to their connection, and slowly the tempest calmed. The incident proved again just how close to the surface Blair’s fears still were. His guide could not believe that his life would not just be pulled out from under him.

The need to bond was beginning to course through them. Using his strength, Jim lowered Blair back onto the couch, feeling the smaller body relax. As Blair began to draw from their bond, Jim opened himself to fill the need. This was what the GLA and the GDP did not understand. Neither group, blinded by their own bias, had any idea that the bond was not static. It was a living essence, and changed from day to day, depending on the needs of the sentinel and guide. At this moment, Blair needed to feel that he was cherished and protected. In the completion of their bond there were no boundaries. Blair could feel the very source of Jim’s emotions, and that was the reservoir which calmed him. Blair reached up and wrapped his arms round his sentinel, feeling the older man settle against him. They gave themselves over to the peace of the bond.

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This should be their final meeting. Garth Dobbs looked around the room dubiously. Frankie Archer and Terrel Hansen had supposedly selected their best people. They still looked like a bunch of flakes to him. He hated putting his future in their hands. He let Archer get things organized. His moment was coming. They had a date selected, the following Saturday. It would give them a few more days to get everything in place. Finally, Archer turned the meeting over to him.

"Moving on a Saturday is important. The Exchange is closed, and almost no one enters the building during a closure. We'll have fewer guards to deal with, but our intent is to avoid them completely. As far as the building designers are concerned, the first floor doors are the only way in and out. We aren't going that way, and they should miss us completely. Two things need to happen before the main group moves on the Exchange. First, we have to get Sandburg out of the way. Even with the drugs we're going to use, I can't override the bond of a Dark Sentinel if his guide is nearby. Terrel, is that set up?"

Terrel Hansen nodded. "Couldn't be more perfect. On Friday Sandburg will get a message that some manuscripts will be at Rainier for a limited time period, and will be housed in the Sentinel Section. They don't like Sandburg in there, because he's a guide. I'll send a message in the name of his favorite librarian that she'll get him in for a few hours Saturday morning. He won't be able to resist. We'll have our own person at the desk. I've swiped a little gizmo from Jack Kelso that will block all cell phone calls, in and out. Sandburg never uses the phones in the Sentinel Section because he has to sneak in to begin with. Once we get him to the library, he'll be totally isolated and more importantly, out of contact with Ellison."
Garth continued his explanation. "The second thing that happens is we kidnap William Ellison. Other than Sandburg, he's the only viable leverage we can use. All it will take is a simple phone call to Ellison threatening his father's life."

"What's going to keep Ellison from contacting the police, or going for Sandburg?" Jacky asked.

"We'll have someone at the loft to drive him, but they won't know where they're going. It will keep Ellison on a time limit, and he won't be able to threaten the information out of the driver, because the driver will be getting the directions en route," Frankie Archer answered.

Garth continued his explanation. "The Currency Exchange will be shut down, but, as I said, we'll be going in through a security gap that Alex Barnes discovered. By the time Jim Ellison arrives at the Exchange, we'll be waiting with William Ellison in hand. Under my direction, with a little help from the drugs, our Dark Sentinel will replicate the tones to get into the vault. We'll be gone before they even know we were there."

"We take what we need, and expose the whole charade," Archer chimed in gleefully. "The GDP, the Sentinel Prime, the Guide Prime – we discredit all of them, and even get their secret funds to finance our own GLA operations." He gestured expansively. "All we need to do now is break into teams, so everyone knows their role."

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Jim was working at the kitchen table and struggling to concentrate. After three days of research, he was tired of case files and bored out of his mind. He glanced at Blair, who was completely focused on yet another term paper. Jim marveled at the man's ability to focus. They'd separated to work hours ago when Blair had come home from class, and for all intents and purposes, his friend had dropped off the face of the earth. He was sitting sideways on the couch with his knees pulled up, balancing a textbook for a writing surface. Apparently, this particular paper had some problems, because the red pen was flying.

Jim shook his head. His original estimate of ten minutes per paper hadn't been far off. If anything, Blair tended to spend longer on his grading. Jim was positive that in some cases Mr. Sandburg spent longer on the comments than the student had in the writing. Finally, Blair sighed, scribbled something on the last page, and tossed the paper in the completed pile. He was reaching for another when Jim decided it was time to step in.

"Hold on there, teach. It's time to come up for air." Blair looked a bit startled. He pulled off his
glasses and rubbed his eyes. Jim crossed the room and confiscated the book. "I declare it dinner time."

"Is it that late?" Blair asked.

"Sort of, but it's Friday and your sentinel says it's time to take a break. Dinner is as good an excuse as any." He surveyed the wreckage that had been his living room. "How many left?"

"Uh, let's see," Blair said, searching the piles, "Maybe fifteen or twenty. I can get most of them done tonight."

"Correction, you'll do them on Saturday and Sunday. If we go back on Monday, that's still a day early."

"Really, Jim, I can finish tonight."

Jim waved the protest off. "Let me supply the translation for the Sandburg version. If you read every waking moment into the wee hours of the morning, you can finish tonight. That includes the fact that you'll be living off coffee and will fall asleep at some point while you're reading. You'll turn into a broken human pretzel and then try to convince me you're not beat. Come on, Chief. You were at Rainier until one, and I know you skipped lunch. You were tired and frazzled before you started this marathon." He smiled at the look on Blair's face. "Just because I let it slide doesn't mean I can't tell. Someone hassled you this morning. Why don't you get it over with and tell me what happened?"

Blair lowered his eyes and didn't answer.

Jim waited. As the silence continued, he set down the book, moved to the end of the couch and massaged the tight shoulders. Whatever it was, Blair really didn't want to discuss it. Jim opened the link between them. It was the surest way to calm his guide and get to the truth.

"The GLA has been dropping a new batch of leaflets this week," Blair said in a small voice.

"Idiots. So what? It's always the same song, second verse. It's not as if anyone takes them seriously."
"They mentioned me by name this time. That's never happened before."

"What?" Jim's voice rose in anger. He was facing Blair in a heartbeat. "They singled you out personally? Why didn't you tell me?"

"I – it's hard – Jim, just sit down so I can talk to you for a second, okay?"

Jim didn't miss the forlorn note in his roommate's voice. He sat down, trying hard to rein in his emotions. Blair sat up a little straighter and wrapped his arm around his knees. The younger man was clearly upset.

"The GLA are a bunch of idiots most of the time, but their hearts are in the right place. Part of me agrees with them, even if I don't approve of their methods. I didn't go rogue in the first place because society makes it great to be a guide." He gave Jim a worried glance. "I hope you can hear me say that without thinking I don't appreciate what you do for me. You do understand that, don't you?"

"Yeah, Chief, I understand. Neither one of us is crazy about the system as it exists. I didn't think I wanted a guide either. I'm not angry, not at you, at least. Tell me what they said."

"It was like an editorial. The gist was that as Senior Guide Prime, I'd abandoned my fellow guides, betrayed them. That my being at Rainier was just camouflage and that I was allowing the GDP to use me as a smokescreen."

"That's ridiculous. The GDP has fought us every inch of the way."

Blair shrugged. "They don't know that." He was silent again, and his eyes filled with tears. "They even mentioned Naomi, and had her picture," he said softly. "You know Naomi. I can't imagine how she'll react, how hurt she'll be. I can't do a thing about it."

Jim said nothing. He wasn't entirely comfortable with Naomi, and didn't completely trust her. In the eyes of Naomi Sandburg, Jim Ellison would always be a bit of a jack-booted thug; a slaver who had taken her son and made him nothing more that a pet. Even though she had seen the way the two of them interacted together, Jim was well aware she had not abandoned her deep-rooted concerns. Her ideas still had the potential to endanger his guide, and he had every reason to be cautious. Still, he knew how close Blair and his mother were, and didn't wish them any more pain. "Did you keep one of the leaflets?" he finally asked.
"Yes. You don't want to see it."

"Hand it over, Chief," he said. Blair hesitated. "Either you give me one, or I'm out the door to Rainier to get one of my own."

Blair responded with silence and rustled around in his backpack. As he handed it over, he pleaded, "Don't go ballistic on me, okay?"

Jim scanned the text, his fury growing. If anything, Blair had minimized the virulence of the attack. As he continued to read, Blair's hand tightened around his wrist. His guide was trying to keep him calm. By the time he reached the last paragraph, he exploded. "Damn them to Hell! They've threatened your life, Sandburg!" He read aloud, "...if Sandburg is going to be traitor to his own, refusing to act on the behalf of enslaved guides everywhere, he's better off dead..." He pulled away from Blair's grasp and started pacing. "When did these first come out?"

"One of my students brought one to me yesterday. There were posters left on my office door and in my lecture hall this morning." He slumped under Jim's withering glare. "I didn't want to talk to you about it until I wasn't so freaked out. The posters really set me off."

"Did you keep the posters?"

"In my desk at school."

Jim stomped to the phone. "I'm calling Slater. The damn GDP can earn their keep doing something useful for a change." He was still shaking his head as he angrily punched in the numbers.

Blair was curled up on the couch again, the picture of misery. "Don't be mad, Jim. I would have told you." He met Jim's eyes. "Really, I would have."

Jim gave him the barest of nods before his voice rose again. Commander Slater was getting an earful.

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"Are you absolutely stupid?" Garth shouted. "How could you have done anything so completely foolish! What kind of an operation are you running anyway?"

"Back off, Dobbs!" Frankie Archer shouted right back. "You don't call the shots. We need to prepare the way for Saturday. The public will be more receptive when we reveal the scandal if we prepare them a little."

Garth gritted his teeth. This kind of anger wasn't good for his barriers. He needed to keep this under control. "It would be nice if the operation was successful. You can't use the results with the public if we DON'T GET IN." He looked down at the floor. He'd give anything to just scream at Frankie and all the rest of his crew. "Did it ever occur to you that Ellison might find out about this stuff? Go into Blessed Protector overdrive?" He let Archer process that thought. "Do you have any idea what kind of clout this guy has? It's well within his authority to roust every known GLA cell just for the entertainment. What happens if half of our personnel end up under lock and key before the night is over?"

"I – they can't – I'm sure-" Archer stammered.

"Oh yes they can. Easily. Get everyone we need in a hotel within the hour. Pay in cash. Do it now, Frankie, or all our planning will go down the drain." He turned his back on the GLA activist and moved to the window. He was still staring at the watery streaks trickling down the window when the door closed and the apartment went silent.

"One more day," Garth whispered to himself. "Only one more day to go."

*****

"Sandburg, I know you love this office, but even I think it's freezing in here. Don't they ever heat this place?"

"Periodically. It usually isn't this bad," Blair said. He rummaged in his desk, almost afraid to look at Jim's face. After raging at Slater, Jim had made repeated calls to the investigative branches of the GDP. The Senior Sentinel Prime of Cascade was a hard man to ignore. GDP officers were out checking known GLA activists. Despite all the action being taken, Jim was on slow simmer.

"I ought to call Campus Maintenance and get their sorry butts over here."
Jim took one step toward the phone and Blair lunged, laying both hands over the receiver. "Jim, please. Let's have one crusade at a time. Leave Maintenance in peace for the moment, okay?"

"Okay, but I'm buying you a space heater tomorrow. Where are those posters?"

"Here," Blair said, handing over the crumpled sheets. He shrugged at Jim's knowing look. "I was a little upset when I saw them the first time. After I wadded them up and threw them in the trash I decided maybe I should keep them. Like I said, I planned on giving them to you eventually."

"Right." Jim shook his head angrily as he sorted through the sheets. Aggression poured off him in waves. When Blair moved close he took a step back. "Don't connect to me right now, Chief. I need a minute."

Blair retreated to his desk chair. He knew Jim was trying to shield him, but he hated it when Jim shut him out, even on a temporary basis. For lack of anything better to do, he turned on the computer and checked his email. Most of it was routine; department notices, grad student chatter, seminar announcements. Jim was on the phone again, talking to Slater, so he worked through the list, sending replies and making notes in his planner. The last one almost took his breath away.

"Just a second, Slater. What?" Jim asked, pulling away from the phone. "Did these bastards send you something?"

"Nothing like that, Jim. Good news. Go back to your call." Blair reread the message, barely able to contain his eagerness. A new manuscript, possibly a Burton or one of his students, was in the Sentinel Section. He had to get his hands on it while it was available.

This would be tricky. Blair had never mentioned that parts of the Rainier Library were still officially forbidden territory. Considering Jim's protective mood at present, now wasn't the time to bring it up. Jody, his favorite librarian, would be there tomorrow morning and let him in. Somehow, he'd have to convince Jim to let him go, and go alone. If Jim found out he had to sneak in, there'd be an explosion of epic proportions.

Blair shut down the computer. He and Jim could go out for a meal, and then settle in at the loft. He could let Jim defend his territory for the evening. Jim would be a lot calmer in the morning, and he'd be able to convince him that a Saturday trip to the library was no big deal.
Jim took one last swipe at the counter and surveyed the loft. After breakfast, Sandburg had packed up the majority of the term papers and was making a run over to the University. Not only did it make the loft a lot neater, it was obviously a trip Blair really wanted to make. A few hours of burrowing around the library would probably balance out being totally smothered by his sentinel the day before. Under the circumstances, he hated letting Blair out of his sight, but he’d relented. Blair had looked like a kid opening Christmas presents when he had sailed out the door with a stuffed backpack and a wide grin.

Sipping a mug of coffee, Jim settled in an open area near the balcony. A pale morning sun was filtering through the windows. He pried open a cardboard carton and carefully started to remove sections of his latest project, a bookshelf for Blair. He could do the sanding and assembly while Blair was out playing scientist, and then they could haul it outside to do the staining and finishing.

Jim lost himself in the task, polishing the boards to a satiny smoothness. Sentinel touch set a pretty high standard. After fretting over his guide’s safety half the night, it was soothing to relax with a repetitive task. When the phone rang, he stretched toward the table and grabbed it.

"Ellison."

"Jimmy? Jimm…"

"Dad, is that you?" Jim was on his feet, his heart chilled. He could hear sounds of a struggle, and muffled voices. "Dad!"

"Detective Ellison, if you want to continue this call walk out on your balcony."

"Who is this? Let me speak to my father." Jim searched frantically for the cell phone. If this was a kidnapping, he needed to get Simon on the line.

"Listen carefully, Detective. If you don't do exactly as you are told, your father is dead." Jim heard the unmistakable click of a gun being cocked. "Get your cell phone. You have one for work. Walk out on the balcony. There's a blue sedan in the parking lot. Step out where our colleague can see you. Ten seconds, and I hang up."

Jim moved cautiously. Below him he could see a young man standing by the blue sedan,
Jim moved cautiously. Below him he could see a young man standing by the blue sedan, speaking into a cell phone. Immediately he dialed up his hearing.

Okay, he's on the balcony.

"That's very good, Detective. Now throw the cell phone over the edge, and I'll let you speak to your father."

Barely restraining his anger, Jim hurled the cell toward the man below. It smashed into the pavement at his feet.

Cell phone's down.

"Jimmy, they haven't hurt me." Jim heard more whispers and shuffling in the background. "You're supposed to go down to the car and take the other guy's phone. I'm to read you the driving directions. The man driving the car doesn't know where I am, and doesn't know where you are going." There was a pause. "They're giving me cards to read, Jimmy, one at a time. You have twenty seconds."

Jim Ellison had no choice. He tore down the stairs two at a time.

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"Dobbs, the car is here."

Garth allowed himself a moment of triumph. He had the Senior Sentinel Prime dancing to his tune, and one of the wealthiest men in the city on his knees in front of him. He handed the last card to William Ellison. The older man glared at him. He looked battered but defiant. Garth tugged on the leash until it began to choke. How poetic to truss the sentinel's daddy in a punishment wrap. He eased off and motioned to Ellison to begin reading.

"Jimmy, you're to open the glove box. There is a pair of handcuffs inside. The driver is to put them on you. You're to walk to straight ahead and turn left into the alley. This is the last card."

Jim was on full alert as he turned into the alley. A stocky man with dyed blond hair stood lounging by a dumpster. He was motioned forward.
Jim stopped about ten feet away. "Where's my father?"

"Inside." A rickety wooden door was pulled open. "Don't try anything, or he'll be the first one to go."

Jim nodded. As he passed in front of the man, a hand was placed firmly between his shoulder blades. Reflexively, Jim lashed out, but the blonde had dodged away, just out of reach.

"Don't touch me, you bastard," Jim snarled. His flesh crawled. This man was an empath, but his mental signature was not the gentle warmth of any guide he'd ever known. Instead it was deathly cold, reptilian - an evil to be avoided.

"Just keep walking, Detective," Garth said. "I'll get to you soon enough."

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David Chandler fondly surveyed the boisterous group of children sharing his breakfast table. He valued the peace and quiet of a well-managed home, but even all these years after his own offspring were grown and gone, he still missed the laughter of the young. It was worth putting up with chocolate chip waffles on a Saturday morning to enjoy his grandchildren. "Davey, are you sure your mother makes these things for you at home?" he asked.

The curly blonde head next to him nodded enthusiastically. "They're great, aren't they, Grandpa?"

"I suppose, Davey, I suppose. How long does it take the little ones to come down off the sugar high?" At twelve, his namesake was usually a pretty reliable source of information. Chandler looked pointedly at the six year old twins at the other end of the table.

"Well," Davey said thoughtfully, "Mom does say that she runs them for awhile after breakfast."

"She does? Well, of course." He leaned over with a conspiratorial air. "I don't suppose the zoo would be an acceptable place to run them?"
Davey's eyes lit up. "I think we could tire them right out, Grandpa."

"Well, then it's settled, my man. You can be my noble assistant." He surveyed the troops, which included two of Davey's cousins along with his twin sisters. "Ladies, go get your shoes and coats. We are going on an expedition." He couldn't help laughing as the cheering mob bolted up the stairs.

"Honestly, David, what are you thinking? Those little girls will run you ragged, and the zoo doesn't open for another two hours." His wife shook her head. "I hope you weren't counting on me to herd them around with you. I have to be at the art museum at eleven."

"I didn't forget, my dear." Chandler brushed a kiss on her forehead. "It will take awhile to drive into the city, and we'll stop off at work first. They'll love the new aquariums in the reception area." He grinned. "It's one of the perks of being the boss. No one says anything if you bring in an invading army on a weekend." He rustled around in his pockets. "Actually, love, do you have some quarters? If all else fails, I can get ten minutes worth occupying them with the vending machines."

"You are such a little kid, David." She handed some change. "What would everyone think if they knew the Managing Director of the Currency Exchange had to hustle quarters?"

*****

Garth Dobbs concentrated all his attention on the electrical box in front of him. One more panel and they'd be in the service basement of the Currency Exchange. He could disable the cameras in the south stairwell and they would be on their way.

"Hurry up," Terrell said with a hiss. "That sentinel is going to pull something any second. The guy is lethal."

Garth threw a quick look over his shoulder. Ellison's eyes were covered, and he was wearing headphones that contained a white noise generator. Other than drugging him unconscious, they couldn't do any more. They certainly couldn't have carried him through this maze of tunnels.

"Don't be paranoid. He's cuffed and blinded." Garth went back to work, connecting one last bypass wire. "We're in," he said. "Everybody stay close."
Dragging the two Ellisons along, they scaled the first flight of stairs. Once reaching the first floor, they had to cross a back corner of the main floor reception area to reach the south stairwell. The security surveillance was concentrated on the external exits. No one would be looking for entry from the supposedly sealed basement. If he trusted their control of Sentinel Ellison a bit more, he would have used the man's hearing to screen the area near the door. Unfortunately, the Dark Sentinel was the biggest wild card of all. It wasn't worth the risk.

Garth drew his revolver and flipped the safety. Despite their intention to do this in secret, they were well armed. He saw the sentinel’s nose twitch. He must be able to smell the gun oil, or the ammunition. It was just as well that he knew there were weapons around. Garth pushed the door open and moved into the lobby, motioning the others to follow.

Frankie had William Ellison by the elbow. Two of the women steered the Sentinel through the doorway. Garth kept his distance. The man had nearly shredded his barriers on the first touch. He'd need the drugs before approaching him again. Terrel was at the rear, along with four others, also with weapons.

They were slow! Garth cursed inwardly. The older Ellison had an excuse. They'd roughed him up during the abduction, and he wasn't too steady on his feet. The Dark Sentinel must sense this was a critical moment and was slowing them down on purpose. They were right in the middle of the corridor, exposed to all the world.

A shriek of laughter came from their right, startling him. Garth spun around, bringing the gun into the face a freckled child with red hair. She skidded to a stop, confused by the strange group in front of her. Garth lunged to grab her, and she screamed, stumbling backward. An older, taller boy rounded the corner, and shouted, "Gun! Grandpa, he has a gun!"

Everything started to move in slow motion.

The two children darted away. A security guard, following their screams, was just pulling his weapon when the others opened fire. Their plan to enter secretly evaporated. Another guard arrived, more bullets flew. A tall, grey haired man had gathered up the children and was desperately trying to shield them. Garth grabbed him. One hostage was as good as another in a fire fight.

The din was just dying down when Garth felt the barrel of a gun in the small of his back. "Don't move a muscle, or you lose your spinal chord."

Garth didn't have to look. It was the Sentinel. He was shouting at the others to stop firing.
It was a stand-off. The guards were down. Garth had a gun on the children, Ellison had him cold, and every other weapon in the place was pointed at their little group of dominoes.

"Everybody listen up. Here's how it's going to go," the Sentinel shouted. "These kids are walking out the front door. My dad and this man go with them. There's one guard still alive, and he goes, too. As soon as they leave, you have me."

"No way," said Terrel Hansen. "We keep the adults. The kids, they can go, no problem. We aren't here to kill kids."

"The guard needs to leave," said William Ellison. He'd moved to stand next to his son, guarding his back. "There's no need for a wounded man to die while this plays out."

"Davey," said the grey-haired man in a quiet, steady voice, "Go find your sisters and take them to the door."

"Gandpa, no."

"Do as I say," the man said sharply. "Your sisters are too little to do it themselves. Get everyone over by the door. Just walk slowly and be calm. You can do it, Davey."

"Go on, kid," Jim said softly. "We need you, big guy."

"Come on, Britney." Slowly, step by step, the two children eased their way past the GLA gunmen. The younger girl nearly stopped near the guard, sprawled in a pool of his own blood. The boy kept her going. As they neared the door, he called, "I'm going to go get my sisters. Britney will stay here."

"Ladies, get the guard over to the door," Jim ordered. The man was in bad shape, but Jim figured the man could at least struggle outside. After another agonizing minute, Davey had three more girls by the door. The security guard struggled to his feet. The heavy door swung open as he fell against it, and he tumbled down the steps. With one traumatized look back, the boy shoved the rest of the group out.

Jim tossed the gun to the floor. At least the children and the guard were safe. He could do no
more. He knew the first blow was coming before he felt it. As the world went black he heard the others shouting, and his father calling his name.

PRESENT TIME

Blair stood at the door of the Currency Exchange, his arms outstretched. Simon and the others had finally given up trying to stop him. He had no intention of turning back, no matter what happened. The heavy security glass was smeared with blood, but he could barely make out several figures moving beyond. He whispered a silent prayer that Jim was all right. He wasn't going to wait much longer. A loud metallic snap came from the door. The lock must have been thrown from inside. He edged the door open just a crack and slipped his foot in.

"I'm unarmed! I'm coming in! Do you hear me?" He nudged the door open a bit more and slipped his hand through, palm out. "See, no weapons." He slid his arm through and pushed the door a little farther with his shoulder. "Don't shoot." He eased in the rest of the way, and stopped with his back to the door. He was looking down the barrel of an assault rifle. No one spoke to him.

"Okay, I'm going to take one step forward and lose the coat," he said to the vast, empty space. He couldn't see anyone, but their fear and anger battered against him. "Then I'm going to turn around, so you can see I'm not hiding anything." He took a step forward. Silence. "Now the coat, and then I'm going to turn." Slowly he rotated, anticipating a shot at any moment. Nothing happened.

Once again he was facing the assault rifle. He began to walk forward, still carrying his jacket. "My name is Blair. You have my sentinel. All I want is for you to take me to wherever he is. I'll do anything you want if you'll just take me to him." He kept walking, making minor changes in his path to avoid the body of the guard.

"Stop at the elevator." The voice had come from his right.

"Okay. Do you want me to get in?"

"Lie down on your stomach and face the wall. When the elevator stops don't even think about moving."

Blair was shaking uncontrollably by the time the doors slid shut and the car began to move.
"I guess this will teach me to come to work on a Saturday," said David Chandler. The men holding them at gun point seemed to be ignoring them. He scooted closer to Bill Ellison, who had his son’s head cradled in his lap. "How is he?"

"I have no idea. He's barely breathing. What ever they gave him in that damn syringe, it didn't work as expected."

"I don't suppose we can ask." Chandler checked over his shoulder again at their guards. "I've never heard of a sentinel and guide reacting like that. The other guy looked like his head exploded."

"I hope his damn head did explode. I hope his brains are draining out his ears," William Ellison said bitterly. He stroked Jim's forehead. "I'm no expert, but if I've learned anything from Jimmy, sentinels and guides are one on one, not some sort of mix and match. I think the drugs were supposed to override that, and Jimmy fought back the only way he could." A few more moments passed. "David, we've been friends a long time. My boy's life is at risk. Can you open that damned vault?" William asked in a whisper.

"Bill, believe me, if I could, I would. I'm the Director, but even my access is limited to working hours for security reasons. Since they intended to use a sentinel, I guess they were going to try to match the sonic tones directly. There isn't a thing I can do." They were silent again.

"What about buying them off? We could make a wire transfer for a ransom."

Chandler nodded. "I'll give it a try. Lord knows, the two of us have done enough deals in our lifetimes. It's better than sitting here wondering when the SWAT team is going to come flying through the door. Getting caught in another crossfire sounds like a bad idea to me." He moved away, and held his hands up. "Gentlemen, it's time for a conference. Get me out of here for a minute, and let me speak to whoever is in charge of this fiasco."

*****

"Dobbs, will you get with it! We don't have forever to make this work."
"Shut up, Frankie. You want to give it a try? Go right ahead." Garth pushed himself shakily up into a sitting position. He almost blacked out from the searing pain behind the eyes. Whatever Ellison had hit him with, it wasn't going away. "Okay, how long since we communicated with the goon squad outside?"

"At least thirty minutes," Terrel said.

"Right. Go get someone on the phone, and start negotiating for a helicopter, and, I don't know, a couple of million. Keep them occupied."

"We don't want a helicopter," Terrel said.

"Of course we don't. We're going out the same way we came in. We just need to buy some time. I'll give Ellison a stimulant and see if we can get anywhere."

One of their two-way radios beeped. Frankie's face went blank as he listened intently. "You sent him up?" he said. He turned to his two companions. "Guess who showed up at our door? Sandburg. Our people downstairs recognized him and let him in."

"Well, well," said Terrel. "Isn't that a surprise. Why would the cops send him in?"

"Doesn't look like they did. Word from the ground floor is that they were yelling at him to come back."

"So, the rogue is still freelancing," Terrel mused. He sneered at Garth. "Fine, Dobbs, you can't guide Ellison, maybe Sandburg can. I'm giving you thirty minutes, and then I start working on getting us out of here."

"Thirty minutes? You'd throw everything away because it won't fit into some stupid timetable?" Garth was desperate. He couldn't let this chance slip away.

"Terrel? Frankie? That Chandler guy wants to talk to you. Should I bring him in?"

"Go ahead," Frankie said. He turned to Garth. "I agree with Terrel. You've got thirty minutes"
with Sandburg, and we'll start working on other alternatives. I'm not going to rot in jail because you can't do your part." He looked at the guard. "Sandburg's coming up on the elevator. Toss him in there with Ellison, and bring Chandler in to us. Let's hear what he has to say."

*****

The elevator ground to a stop, and Blair forced himself to stay motionless. He wanted to fling himself at whoever was there, fighting his way to Jim. How had this happened? Who were these people?

The doors opened, and a voice said, "You can get up. Face forward and walk straight ahead."

Blair did as he was told. He wasn't surprised when he felt the barrel of a gun in the small of his back. "What do you want me to do?" he asked.

"Third door on the left. I'll be right behind you. Don't try anything."

The gun, the voice, the rest of the world dropped away. Jim was the only things that mattered. Throwing caution to the winds, Blair flew down the corridor.  

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"Captain Banks, they've made contact again!"

Staying in the shelter of the SWAT vehicles, Simon and Joel hurried to the communications area. The negotiator nodded as they approached. He flipped a switch so they could listen.

"The money we can manage. We can do the helicopter, but it will take time." Simon couldn't quite hear the response. "That's right" the negotiator said. "We need to have confirmation that your hostages are still well." There was a long pause.

"We'll let you talk to Chandler."
Simon shook his head. Ellison, he mouthed at the negotiator.

The negotiator nodded. "We need to talk to Detective Ellison, too."

"No. Chandler's enough."

"It isn't enough. It's a gesture of good faith. I can't clear the arrangements for a chopper if we don't know everyone's okay."

Another pause. "He's okay. We – we took special precautions. I can't bring him to the phone. You'll have to believe us."

"Look, since it's just logistics, we'll wait. Take your time. Just a few words from Ellison and we can get working on the helicopter."

"Do you need anything? Can we send in a medic, or some food?"

The negotiator broke the connection. "Sorry, Captain Banks, they quit transmitting."

"Why would they have separated them?" Simon asked. "Do we have any kind of a fix on their location?"

"We have heat sensing equipment," said Captain Folson, the SWAT incident commander. "We show four on the first floor. The rest must be somewhere else in the building, but we're not exactly sure where. Have they given any indication what they're trying to accomplish?"

The negotiator shook his head. "Not a clue. In fact, the whole thing sort of rings false to me. I think they're just buying time. The request for the helicopter and money never came up until that last contact."

"I had tapes sent to Forensics when they reinitiated contact. I asked them to do a voice match with everything we have on file. Maybe we'll get lucky and find out who we are dealing with. Uh, Banks, isn’t that one of your guys over there?"

Simon looked up to see Rafe and Henri Brown trying to attract his attention. "Give me a minute, gentlemen." Motioning Taggart to follow, they dropped back. "What have you got, Rafe?"

Simon asked.

"You won't believe this, Captain. I finally found a neighbor that saw Ellison this morning. According to her, when she was coming back from a morning run, Jim was just coming out of the building. Some guy she'd never seen before was waiting for him, and they both got into a dark
building. She thought it was weird. Anyway, she wrote down the license plate, and I ran a trace. The car is registered to a Robert Timms. No record, other than multiple arrests for civil disobedience."

"What kind of civil disobedience?"

"Looks like he's a GLA activist, Captain," Rafe said. "Why would Jim get in a car with someone from the GLA?"

"Maybe he didn't have a choice," Taggart said.

"What are you thinking?" Simon asked.

"I talked to the kids, the ones who were inside the Exchange, before they took them to the hospital. The oldest boy identified a picture of Jim, but he said over and over that there was an older man that looked like him. I didn't think much of it at the time. What if it was Jim's dad? There's a family resemblance. If someone were trying to force Jim's cooperation, kidnapping his father would be pretty powerful motivation."

"I agree. Jim might cooperate under those circumstances, even with the GLA. Joel, get Commander Slater on the phone. See if anything's been happening that we don't know about. Rafe, Brown – I want you to get over to the GDP office at Rainier and see what you can find out." Simon looked at his detectives. "Now we move to our next question. What possible reason would the GLA have for breaking into the Currency Exchange with the Senior Sentinel Prime of Cascade?"

*****

"Blair, thank God you're here!"

Blair made dropped to his knees. He made no attempt to move Jim from William Ellison's lap. He grabbed both of Jim's hands, and was shocked at how icy they felt. "How long has he been like this?"

"I don't know. I've lost track of time, and I don't have my watch. He didn't want to help them, but they shot at us. Threatened to kill David Chandler and me, and Jimmy gave in. They gave
him some kind of drug. One of them said he was a guide. I couldn't hear everything, but I think he tried to bond with Jim."

"What happened?" Blair asked. Anger welled up inside of him. Jim would recoil from any attempt at linkage from anyone other than his bonded guide. The Dark Guide stirred. Who had tried to interfere with their bond, and had injured Jim in the process?

"They had him in the other room, by the vault. We could see a little. The other man put his hands on Jim's chest, and then I heard him scream. A few minutes later they dumped Jim in here. He never spoke. He hasn't even moved."

"Give him to me." William shifted Jim into Blair's waiting arms. "He's in a deep zone," Blair said, gently stroking Jim's face. "If the drugs were designed to weaken the bond, Jim may have retreated into himself to avoid being linked to another."

"Can you reach him? I – will we lose him?"

Blair tossed his coat aside. "The drugs will interfere. He's so deep. I need to get close to him. Cover him with my coat and his, and keep everyone away. What ever happens, don't touch us."

"Blair, what if you can't bring him back?"

"Mr. Ellison, if I can't reach him, my fate is with his. Let us go, together. Just let us go."

Giving him one last nod, Blair stretched out next to his sentinel and pulled him close. He cradled Jim's head on one arm and leaned close so he could whisper into his ear. This would take everything he had – touch, voice, smell. Blair was barely aware of William trying to shelter them, wrapping the two of them up as best he could. As he reached out in the bond, he heard William whisper softly, "Oh, Jimmy, come back to us."

Blair gently opened his pathways. He expected to be blocked by whatever protective wall Jim had thrown around himself. Instead, the connection was abandoned and empty. No evidence of Jim remained. Blair reached deeper, hoping for some echo from his sentinel's soul. It was as if a vast, barren, wasteland stretched out before him, without feature or landmark. Teetering on the edge of the void himself, Blair pushed further, beyond his own ability to reclaim himself. He would find his bonded soul-mate or follow him into the depths.
Blue. Two gleaming points of blue. The ethereal image of the panther hovered before him, the spirit guide, the essence of his sentinel. Using the last of his strength, Blair reached, and felt the barest flicker of Jim in response. He cast open the pathways and his sentinel, ever so slowly, began to follow him back.

Cocooned in the darkness, Jim was surrounded by his guide. All he could smell was his scent, all he could feel was the heat of his body, all he could hear was his voice and the beat of his heart. When Jim returned, it was not the man that answered, but the sentinel. Blair, absorbed in the bond, heard the deep rumbling from Jim's throat.

The Dark Sentinel held the Dark Guide. He could feel the emotions of his chosen rushing to meet him. There was a need to kill, to protect what was his, and to destroy those that would feed off them. These people had brought fear into his territory, threatened and endangered his guide, and attacked his very bond. For the Dark Sentinel, there was only one outcome to be sought. The violators must die.

Together, they tumbled through space and time. The warrior cried for justice, the guide restrained. Control was needed, reason over rage. The time to strike would come.

*****

Commander Dan Slater was easy to pick out as he worked his way through the police barricades. The dark uniform of the GDP contrasted sharply with the police blue and the camouflage of SWAT. "Banks, I got here as quickly as I could. Are you sure Ellison is in there?"

"Thanks for coming, Slater. We're sure, and Blair walked in after him before we could stop him."

"I'll have to notify Dr. Claydove immediately," said Slater. He scrubbed his face with his hands. "How am I supposed to explain that we've managed to lose both Senior Primes?"

"Make sure he understands that this is not the GDP's jurisdiction," Simon said firmly. "I welcome the assistance, but this is our show. Then I want some answers from you. We have reason to believe the GLA may be involved in some way."

Slater considered that statement, and reached into his pocket. "Take a look at this." He handed a slim leaflet to Banks. "The GLA started distributing these a few days ago. Ellison was on the phone with me yesterday afternoon. He was justifiably upset. They refer specifically to Guide Sandburg. Under the present circumstances, and based on what Captain Taggart has told me, I'd
have to say it's related."

"So why didn't you contact us as soon as you saw these?" Simon asked angrily. "Blair is our concern as much as he is yours."

"Captain Banks, the GDP has a perfectly competent investigative branch. We don't run to Major Crime every time the GLA puts up a new poster."

Simon looked skeptically at Slater. The man was hedging. "Well, then you tell me what the hell is going on. What could possibly be in the Currency Exchange that the GLA would want?" Slater was good, but Simon caught the flicker of doubt across the GDP officer's face. "What do you know, Slater?"

Slater shook his head. "I need to talk with Claydove. If he gives the okay, then we'll talk – privately. That's the best I can do."

The tension of the day came to a boil. Simon could barely keep from exploding. "Then do it. But if I find out you have information that we could have used, I swear to you, I'll bring the whole lot of you up on charges of obstruction."

*****

Jim's eyes fluttered open. The smooth floor tiles were cold, and his head was pounding. He pushed up on one elbow. "Blair? How...did you get here?"

"Easy, Jim." Blair was stretched out beside him and looked totally exhausted himself. He was shaking, and his face was deathly white. He helped ease Jim up to a seat against the wall and leaned into the larger man's chest. "I was so scared. You'd gone so deep."

Jim wrapped him in a hug, burying his face in Blair's curls. "I know. I heard you. It's okay now. Just rest. God, Blair, the risk you took!" Blair relaxed against him. Jim realized that his father was keeping a silent watch from the other side of the room with the second hostage. "Dad, tell me what is going on."

David Chandler looked cautiously towards the outer office. Their captors had backed off, and they had a few moments of privacy. He nodded to William Ellison. "Go ahead, Bill. I'll let you know if they're coming."
"When they couldn't get into the vault, David met with the leaders. He tried to convince them to deal for ransom. They're not interested."

"If they're not interested in money from you, then what's in that damn vault that they want?" Jim said. He looked at Chandler. Surely the Director of the Exchange would have an idea.

"I've been racking my brain since they brought us up here," said Chandler. "Most of our transactions are done electronically. Our other functions deal with setting rates of exchange, and administrative functions for international lending." He shook his head. "Despite the name, there's very little currency actually kept here. If they were looking for a big haul, they'd have better luck knocking off a bank downtown. As I said, the money doesn't seem to be a huge concern. They could get a bigger monetary payoff from the ransom on either William or me."

"And the vault?"

"Some of the highly sensitive computer equipment is housed there, and there are individual repositories. They're completely accessed by number, like a Swiss bank. Because the Currency Exchange is essentially international territory, they are highly secure. For example, it's difficult for a law enforcement agency to gain access to the contents of an account, or examine the records."

Jim considered the information. "Who did you speak with?"

"Two young men seemed to be in charge, besides the one who took you to the vault. They didn't seem concerned about concealing their identities. One of them mentioned something about the GLA, although I can't imagine a bunch of protesters having anything to do with the Exchange. Somebody Archer and Hansen, Terrel Hansen."

At the mention of that name, Blair pushed away from the shelter of Jim's arms. "I think I know him. He's a student assistant for Jack Kelso at Rainier. What's going on, Jim?"

"I'm what's going on, Pet, and you're going to do exactly as I say."

Blair whirled to face the voice. He could already sense the presence of another guide. Jim was pulling him back, trying to shield him. "Dobbs? Garth Dobbs?"
"Long time, no see, Pet," Garth sneered. "You missing Alex these days?" As Blair tried to surge forward, he calmly took aim. "I'll gun you down without a thought." He smiled as Blair settled back warily. He motioned to Jim's father and David Chandler. "You two move over there. The Sentinel and his Pet have work to do."

Jim's eyes flashed. If this guy was somehow connected to the late Alex Barnes, he didn't plan on cooperating. "Don't count on it," he said with a touch of menace.

Garth smiled contemptuously. "Since you wouldn't cooperate with me, Pet here can help you open that vault." His eyes flicked quickly to Ellison. "The conditions really haven't changed, Sentinel. Do I need to start shooting again to remind you of your situation? Imagine how your father is going to look when I start blowing pieces away, maybe a kneecap to start with. We don't have much time. The others are going to try to cut their own deal if we can't breach the vault, and if I can't get in the vault, I certainly don't need you alive. In fact, I'm the only person here that would prefer to have you dead."

Frankie Archer and Terrel Hansen joined them for the first time. "Tone it down, Garth," Frankie said. "We don't have any reason to harm these people if they cooperate. We're only using the force that's necessary for the cause."

Blair's was shaking his head. "Terrel, what are you doing mixed up in this?"

"Too bad you don't listen to your mother more, Sandburg," Terrel answered. "This is a GLA operation. Not everyone in the organization is content to wave signs and hope for the best. It's sad that I'm more dedicated to fighting the slavery than you are, a guide. Inside that vault is information, information that we'll be releasing to the press. It's going to leave the GDP a shambles. We want it, and we want it now." He looked at Blair, his expression a mixture of contempt and pity. "This is so wrong. You should be working for your own kind instead of leaving it up to people like us."

Frankie Archer leaned down to look Blair in the eye. "Terrel's right. You still have a chance to redeem yourself, you know. Help us and you could come with us. The damper drugs are better all the time. We could sever the bond and keep you sheltered in the underground." He gestured toward Jim. "You'd be free, away from him."

Wordlessly, Blair turned his back to them, and buried himself into Jim's shoulder. His answer was clear enough. Jim wrapped him securely, sensing his horror at the suggestion. Blair had risked death to maintain their bond. What was being suggested was unthinkable. "You people are certifiable," Jim snarled. "You sacrificed the lives of who knows how many to stage a media event? Kidnapped innocent people, terrorized children – what kind of morality do you think you're defending?"
Frankie sniffed in disdain and stood up. "We never intended to hurt anyone unless it was absolutely necessary. Besides, you're a Sentinel. We don't expect you to understand. Just imagine how damning it will be when the world knows the truth about the GDP, that a Sentinel Prime was nothing more than our tool. You, and your Judas Guide."

Garth motioned with the barrel of the gun. "You know where the vault is, Sentinel, and you know how it works. The electronics are all set up." He leaned closer so the others couldn't hear. "If you and Pet don't get that open right now, I don't care what they say. I'm going to start giving you some incentives."

*****

Simon Banks waited impatiently. Slater had retreated to his car, apparently to talk with Director Claydove. If he didn't come back soon, Simon intended to find him and demand whatever information they had. Time was running out. Their contact with the hostage takers had gone sporadic again, and SWAT was getting antsy. If he'd learned one thing from having a Sentinel-Guide pair in his bullpen, it was that the public face of the GDP was never the whole story. He was determined to get the rest.

He was joined by Joel Taggart. "Simon, your suspicions about the building were right on. I had our people speak with the surviving security guard before they took him into surgery. He was sure the breach came from the south stairway."

"It all makes sense," said Simon. "The south stairway that SWAT says we don't have to worry about, because it connects only with the supposedly sealed basement. Joel, get us another copy of this building plans, and the grids for all the utilities in the area." He smiled knowingly. "That includes the not-for-the-public ones you can get as the Captain of the Bomb Squad. We're going to start backtracking before that idiot Folson blows my people to bits with a frontal assault."

"Can I pull some people from Major Crime?" Joel said.

"You bet. Start with Rafe and Brown. I sent them to Rainier, but call them back, and keep in touch. I'm going to talk with Slater, whether he's ready for me or not. Speak of the devil." Simon crossed his arms as Slater approached. "Give." He nodded to Taggart. "Joel's working with me on this. Whatever you have to say, he's cleared to hear."

They withdrew to the most secluded spot they could find. Slater checked to see that they were
alone. "The GDP has been following a rumor for some time now that a group of officers is supplying guides to foreign entities for profit."

Memories of Wilson and his gang flashed through Simon's head. "How many perverts do you have in this organization, Slater?" he said.

Slater bristled. "I'll let that go for the moment, Banks. This has nothing to do with perversion. The guides who seem to get lost, if you will, are always from the top of their class. We suspect they're being placed in situations adverse to our national interests."

"So we're talking espionage?"

"Yes, espionage and enormous profits. The investigation has gone slowly, because the GDP officials who seem to be involved are very highly placed. Dr. Claydove is determined to ferret them out, but you can imagine the difficulties. He has to move carefully."

"Especially if he wants to keep everything under wraps and out of the press," said Taggart. "That's more to the point, isn't it?"

Slater ignored the question. "Last night, at Ellison's behest, we questioned a number of known GLA activists. We actually keep pretty close tabs on them anyway. A handful of them never came back to their residences last night, and seem to have cleared out in a hurry. One of the missing is an assistant to Jack Kelso. I don't need to tell you that Kelso has access to all kinds of information."

"So what's the connection?" Simon asked.

"Dr. Claydove believes that the transactions for the guides are going through the Currency Exchange. Legally, you know that makes them difficult to access."

"And he doesn't want to confront the guilty in the GDP until he's sure he has them cold," Simon guessed. "How close am I?"

Slater didn't answer.
"That's why they didn't ask for money right off the bat," said Joel. "We've got a bunch of GLA nuts who want to splash dirt about the GDP all over the media. They're going for the records and evidence you've been too cowardly to go after yourselves."

"This is not a matter of courage," Slater said. "It's a matter of prudence."

"So far, I don't see any reason to involve Jim specifically." Simon flicked the GLA pamphlet. "If your guess is correct, the fact that Ellison was in there was not random chance."

"Honestly, Simon, that I can't answer, and neither can Dr. Claydove." He noted the skeptical expressions on the faces of both men. "I'm not holding out on you. The only reason he could think of was that they needed a Sentinel to enter the vault. Selecting the Senior Prime seems incredibly risky, but there may be other agendas we don't know about."

Simon considered all the information. "Do we have your total cooperation?" he asked Slater pointedly.

"Yes. Dr. Claydove is already trying to contact Jack Kelso. He promised me he'd be in contact, and he gave me permission to proceed as I saw fit."

"Joel, bring any plans you can get. I'm going to track down Sentinels Edwards and Pais. We're going hunting in our own way."

*****

Garth Dobbs stayed at the door. After his encounter with Ellison, he wanted plenty of distance between himself and the Dark Sentinel. "Get the vault open, Ellison. No playing around."

The two men knelt near the vault. The distance was great enough that Dobbs couldn't listen. Jim explained the concept. "I guess Dobbs rigged this up. The tones can be inputted manually on the keyboard. They cycle through the electronics every five minutes. You can't hear them, but I can. He made me listen to it once before he gave me the drugs."

The Dark Guide bubbled to the fore. "Bastard. I want to kill him for interfering with our bond." He looked at Jim, who leaned close. For once Jim was faced with the task of bringing Blair back into control, soothing and comforting his guide through their connection. Blair settled, and focused on the problem at hand. "I know. Not now. So the tones, you just replicate them from
focused on the problem at hand.

"I know. Not now. So the tones, you just replicate them from memory?"

"Yeah. The tones are very subtle. I'm sure I can't do it without you, and even then, it'll be iffy. It'll take more than one try, for sure."

"How long before the next cycle?"

"It just played. I want to listen to it at least one more time before we try. Are you up to this, Chief?"

"I'm just tired, and my barriers are shot. I'm a lot more worried about you. A zone that deep is so dangerous. Are you sure he didn't hurt you?"

"As long as you're here, and we're connected, I'm okay. I think we're reinforcing each other." Jim tightened his grip momentarily. "I never felt anything like that. There's something seriously wrong with that guy."

Blair stroked Jim's arm. It was hard to calm him when he wasn't centered himself. "Jim, aside from the obvious, I'm worried about Dobbs."

"For some reason besides the fact that he has a gun on us?"

"Oh, yeah. He's always been pretty scary. On the way in I broke our connection for a moment and 'read' him. The others may be interested in embarrassing the GDP, but I'm pretty sure Dobbs has something else in mind. He's just using them."

Jim nodded. "Then he must still need something from them. You're sure it's a double cross?"

"I'm certain. The emotions are very intense. He considers everyone expendable." Blair shivered. "It's like dealing with Alex again. The basic patterns are all twisted and perverted."

"Then when he makes his move, we'll be ready. He's not going to touch either one of us. The next cycle's coming up, Chief. I need you."
Blair shifted to place one hand on Jim's back, and left the other firmly clasped around his wrist. He flowed into his Sentinel's mind, focusing all his energy on assisting him. Jim's mind rose to meet him, and they slipped into the bond.

*****

"Captain Banks? We found a vehicle on Slater's list. We're two blocks east of you, on the Corner of Pine and Third."

"Ask him for the plate number," Slater hissed.

Simon repeated the number, and the two men started walking. Slater was working with a handheld computer. "Francis Archer. We know about him. He's a very radical individual, even for the GLA."

"Slater, I don't know whether to kiss you or kill you. Why isn't this information shared with the Cascade PD?"

"Simon, I don't set policy. You'd have to take that up with the Director."

"Of all the stupid..." Simon muttered. "And another thing, why didn't you call me when these leaflets came out? I would have put both of them under protection, even if Jim didn't like it."

"You're assuming that we didn't have them under surveillance."

"What?" Simon stopped dead in his tracks. "Did Jim know this? He would have made you in less than five minutes."

"I didn't say Jim. I don't have a death wish. We were shadowing Sandburg. A GDP officer was sitting right next to him in the library when Henri Brown came barging in. It was our mistake. We never considered the possibility that the Senior Prime would be the target."

Simon snorted. "Plus the fact that you figured you could tail Sandburg without getting Ellison's permission."
"Can you blame us? Ellison’s a handful and a half under the best of circumstances."

Their group had already gathered by the time they arrived. Edwards was there with his guide David, and Lisa Pais with Karl, along with several members of Major Crime. Simon quickly explained the idea – to work from here, trying to find some trace of Ellison, then use Joel's information to search for the hidden entrance to the Currency Exchange. Both sentinels agreed that it was a long shot, but feasible. They were discussing how to divide the area when Rafe called to them from down the block.

"Captain, over here! It's the car Ellison's neighbor saw. The plate matches!"

They stood back as Edwards and Pais prowled around the car. Edwards looked up with a smile of triumph on his face. "He was definitely here, Captain. There hasn't been any rain, and we may be able to pick up a trace of his scent. Does Captain Taggart have any suggestion as to a direction?"

*****

"How many did you get this time?" Blair asked.

"Out of twenty tones, I have sixteen." Jim rubbed at his forehead. His head ached despite Blair's presence. "They come so quickly. I dropped a few in the middle. I need one more try and then I should have it."

"Stay here, and try a little meditation. It should help, even though what you really need it major down time." Blair started to rise. "I'll go tell them we're almost in."

Jim grabbed his wrist and pulled him back down. "No way, Chief. I'm not letting you out of my sight." Jim looked warily at Dobbs. "I don't want you near him."

"I need to get near him. It will give me another chance to read him. We need the edge, Jim. Besides, he won't bother me until he gets into the vault."

Jim released his hold. "I don't like it, but I guess it makes sense. Try to get one of the others in here. Maybe they can keep Dobbs from blowing our heads off at the earliest opportunity."
"Yes! He was definitely here." Edwards was squatted in a dark hallway. The shattered wooden door swung on its hinges. He conferred with Lisa. "There's another scent here, very similar to Jim's, and some blood. It must be from his father."

"So we're on the right track. Joel, what do you think?"

The bomb squad Captain studied the printouts. "The closest thing is a tunnel for electrical maintenance. It doesn't show any particular access here."

"It doesn't matter," growled Edwards. "We'll tear this rat trap apart until we find it."

"Spread out, everyone," Simon ordered. "Check every door, every grate, every drain. We've got to be running out of time."

"Stand over there. If you're too close I can't concentrate," Jim snarled at them. He had kept Blair in check, but it wasn't as easy to keep himself out of Blessed Protector mode. The Dark Sentinel was beginning to claw its way out of the box.

Jim managed to communicate the idea that more distance would only be prudent. Frankie Archer and Terrel Hansen stepped back to the doorway. Both men knew Jim didn't need a weapon to inflict great pain, and the flash in his eyes made it clear he'd be happy to do so. Archer was speaking into the radio, telling the other members to meet at the vault. Jim wanted to laugh out loud. Dobbs wasn't pleased with all the extra bodies in the vicinity, and was arguing with Archer about bringing the others up. To Jim's dismay, he seemed to be winning the exchange.

"Two minutes, Chief." Blair scooted beside him. Jim wound his arm around Blair's waist. He needed the physical contact to maintain his baseline on his senses, and more importantly, keep the Dark Sentinel at bay. The closer their captors came, the more likely the primal sentinel was to appear.
"I read Dobbs," Blair said, sentinel soft. "Money, power, control, and revenge – that's what I'm getting from him." He pressed closer as he spoke.

Jim ran a hand over Blair's back and shoulder, sensing the tension. His guide's barriers were low, and though he had willingly taken the risk, any contact with Dobbs placed him in greater danger. He was perilously close to overload. Jim was relieved when he felt the tug on the back of his mind as Blair connected with him, drawing from him, and stabilizing the tattered barriers. "Whatever is in here, he wants it for himself, not the GLA," Jim said in a whisper.

"Good guess. Jim, this is important. I think he wants you."

"No way. He's a rogue. He doesn't want a sentinel." Despite his words, the Dark Sentinel pushed forward, reacting to the threat.

"Jim, he doesn't want to be a guide in this society, but every empath yearns for the shielding. He wants you the way Alex wanted me. He thinks he can substitute control for the true bond."

"I nearly killed him." Jim looked in the direction of Dobbs. "I would kill him the next time in a heartbeat. No one threatens our bond."

It was time. Blair leaned into position. At the last moment, he whispered, "When it opens, run. We need to get away from him. Please, get away."

“Only with you. We live or die as a bonded pair." Jim met his guide's eyes. The intensity of his gaze took Blair’s breath away. “Claimed and marked, Blair, in this life and the next”.

Blair's hand brushed his sentinel's jaw, and repeated the vow. "Claimed and marked, in this life and the next.

*****

They struggled along. Edwards and Pais took turns, the small smears of blood their only viable trail. The traces were so faint it stretched them to their limits, and they tired quickly.

"Hold up, Simon," Taggert said. "I need to locate our position, and the sentinels need a break."
Someone bring a light over here."

Henri Brown knelt beside them. "Captain, I don't have the eye for this. Where are we, and where is the Exchange?"

"Here," Joel said, "and here. However these two connect, it's not for electrical maintenance. We need something that runs east to west."

"What about water?" Lisa asked. "I can hear water."

Edwards nodded. "She's right. It's close by, and somewhere below us."

"Simon, it's that third one," Joel said, as they searched for the correct chart. They waited as Joel matched the coordinates, so they were looking at the same grid. "There's a storm drain that is supposed to run to the river, but it doesn't go near the Exchange."

"It doesn't have to." Simon traced a line with his finger. "Double back that way. Edwards, your turn. Find us a way into that storm drain."

*****

Jim let his hearing float from tone to tone. It was like memorizing a song. To anyone else it would have been a monotonous buzz, but not to him. Blair was close, lending him support. They were breathing as if they were one. "Blair," he whispered, "I'm going to try. Follow my lead." His hands danced over the keypad. On the twentieth tone, a bar of lights on the side of the vault door changed from red to blue, and the door slid open.

"Everybody stay right here," Terrel ordered. "I'll find the boxes and use the entry codes." He disappeared into the vault.

Jim edged around the nearest desk, pulling Blair with him. They needed some distance, and they needed a weapon. He heard Blair hiss, and something cold and smooth was pressed against his hand. It was a heavy glass paperweight. Keeping an eye on Dobbs, Blair slid it into his coat pocket. Using Jim as a partial shield, Blair searched the desktops for anything else they might use.
Jim felt Blair stiffen and lean into his back. Dobbs - Blair must be picking something up from Dobbs. Jim made a decision. "Archer!"

"Yeah." The GLA activist barely looked Jim's direction. He was far more interested in what was going on in the vault.

"You have guards in the other room. I want to see my father." Jim tapped his ear. "He's not doing well. It's his heart. I'm worried about him."

"Go ahead," Archer said. He clearly didn't care. Dobbs started to protest, and then let it go. For the moment, he was also more concerned with the vault. Jim slid by, keeping himself between Blair and the other empath. He immediately went to his father and Chandler. Blair halted near the remaining GLA men.

"We're going over here," Blair said to the guard. The man was aiming a deadly looking automatic weapon in his direction. "No problems, okay?"

The man nodded. "They're in the vault?"

"Yes," Blair said, trying to keep the guard's attention while edging toward Chandler and Jim's father.

"Great. Then just stay out of the way, and you won't get hurt." He looked at Blair with a thoughtful expression. "Terrel meant what he said, you know. The GLA could help you. You'd be safe with us."

Jim was already on the floor, speaking quietly with the two older men. Blair's hand wrapped around the paperweight, taking comfort in its weight. He was sure the guard was wrong, and that his greatest moment of danger was coming.

*****

They'd found it. Someone had chipped through the masonry. They'd made a credible effort to conceal it, but the two sentinels were not fooled. Below them was the storm drain. It was a long drop.
"They may have had a rope," said Lisa.

"We'll have to rig a substitute. We don't have time to backtrack," said Simon. "Something tells me we're going to be too late if we do."

"Simon, I can't get through there." It was true. Joel Taggart was a big man. The hole in the masonry was too small, and they had no tools to enlarge it. Joel shrugged, accepting his fate. "I'll go back, let the others know. Give me one of the radios so I can stay in contact."

Simon agreed, and took the charts in case they still needed them. "Get moving. We'll get down there somehow."

*****

Jim laid a hand on his father's chest. It hadn't been a lie. William Ellison's heart was pounding, and his skin was flushed.

"I'll be okay, Jimmie. I have medication. I just took the last one."

"Mr. Chandler, is your office nearby?" Jim said. Blair was still speaking with the guard, keeping him occupied.

"Two doors down. I thought about that. It has additional protection. If we can get there, I can activate security and seal us inside."

"Blair thinks there's a double-cross going down. The empath, he's going to try for whatever is coming out of the vault. If there's any disturbance, we're going to have to make a break for it. Dad, what about you?"

"I can make it. Just do what needs to be done."

Jim was listening. He softly told the others what seemed to be happening. "The guy who works for Kelso, he's found the box – he has it open. He's sorting. There must be some cash."
"It's all here! Everything! The money, the contacts, the records." It was Hansen, calling joyfully to his co-conspirators. "They even have pictures of the guides they sold. Someone help me move this stuff."

"Jim!" Blair was clutching his shoulder, swaying as he stood. His eyes were wide, and he looked about to collapse. "Now – Dobbs, he's going to do it now."

The touch to Jim's shoulder was like a burning brand through his head. The Dark Sentinel roared his challenge. His guide was hurting, and the threat was near. He reached down and hauled his father to his feet as they heard a gun start firing in the next room. Screams and more gunfire poured from the direction of the vault. Blair hurled the paperweight at the guard, clipping him in the head. It was only a glancing blow, but it was enough to give the Dark Sentinel the edge he needed.

Jim powered across the space between himself and the guard, throwing a fist into his stomach. The man went to his knees, but managed to point the gun in Blair's direction. It was a poor choice. The next crushing blow snapped his head back, and the gun clattered to the floor.

Chandler was already out the door, William Ellison right behind. Jim shoved Blair in the right direction. He scooped up the gun before following his guide into the hall.

Two more GLA members, posted at the end of the hallway, had spotted the fleeing hostages. They were nearly on top of Blair. Unwilling to risk Blair's safety to a stray bullet, Jim launched himself at the closest GLA member. His attack was furious, using every trick an ex-Ranger would have at his command. The stunned man was no match for him, and Jim saw no particular reason for mercy.

Blair flung himself at the remaining guard. The man was shocked to find himself under attack by a guide, but Blair was still at a disadvantage. Even with the element of surprise, the larger man was only knocked off balance. They went down in a tangle. The GLA member rolled, using his weight to pin Blair beneath him. Before he could press his advantage, a vicious kick from Jim dropped him to the floor.

Jim pulled Blair up, and shoved him down the hallway toward Chandler's office. The real threat would be coming from Dobbs. A bullet whistled past his head and thudded into the wall. Jim snapped off a few shots of covering fire, forcing Dobbs back and out of the hallway. He made a break for the office.
Blair made the doorway of Chandler's office, but turned back rather than go through. Jim was running down the corridor. Dobbs was at the further door, a murderous look on his face, raising his gun again. He was taking careful aim at Jim's retreating back.

Blair braced himself against the door jamb. He reached out for Jim and pulled. Using the larger man's momentum, Blair swung neatly around to stand between Dobbs and his sentinel.

*****

They were in the basement.

"Edwards, Pais – outstanding work." Simon smiled at his sentinel officers and held up his hand for silence. Edwards had his head cocked. Simon recognized the gesture from watching Jim.

"There's gunfire upstairs, Captain."

"What floor?"

"Up – a long way up."

Simon was already on the radio. "Find the stairs," he ordered. "We'll secure the first floor and then move up. This has to be the only way for them to get out, and they don't expect us to be here."

*****

Blair slumped. Jim caught him on the way down, horrified at what his guide had just done. He pulled Blair through the doorway, and his father slammed the outer door shut, flipping the lock. They could hear bullets crunching into the wall.

"In here," shouted Chandler. "I can seal the door once we're inside."

"Dad, go. I'll get Blair." Jim had felt the pain and shock through their link when the bullet had
struck. Blair was on his feet, but reeling. He was stumbling, and had no sense of direction. Jim steered him across the plush carpeting, forcing himself to ignore the heat of the blood that was seeping through his fingers. He could not allow the warmth and stench of his guide's blood to pull him into a zone.

Jim heard bullets shriek through metal – Dobbs was shooting through the flimsy lock on the outer door, trying to get it open. The man was screaming, kicking at the door, swearing to take revenge on the sentinel and guide. It didn't make any sense. What had he and Blair ever done to him? What did he think was their fault? No matter what his motivation, the next time his saw Dobbs, he would be the object of a Sentinel blood vendetta. The man had attacked his family, threatened his bond and his guide. Sentinel law would take precedence. Honor demanded Dobbs not see the dawn of another day.

Chandler sealed the inner office door behind them, hastily punching in a series of numbers on a security pad. Jim lowered Blair to the floor, frantically reaching through the link to reach a flicker of conscious thought in his guide. So many things needed to be done at once.

When he snapped at his father, his voice was barely recognizable. "Dad, find a phone, and call 911. Tell them where we are. Let them know we're safe, and SWAT can take the building." He saw Chandler hovering nearby. "I need towels and if you have it, a first aid kit."

"Jimmy, they said they're patching me through to your captain."

"Good," Jim answered. His father's face was pale, and he looked shaken. "Dad, sit down while you wait. You look awful." Jim could do nothing more for him. At the moment he only had time for Blair.

Chandler returned. He laid towels and a tiny first aid kit by Jim's knee. "How is he?" he asked.

"There's no exit wound," Jim said. He probed gently, trying to determine the extent of the damage and still keep pressure on the wound. "Grab some books for me, would you? We need to keep his feet up. He's in shock". A series of loud thumps drew their attention back to the door. Dobbs was beating fruitlessly at it from the other side, still screaming that it was Sandburg's fault, that he'd kill them both. A low growl rattled in Jim's throat. He gestured to Chandler, and the executive retrieved the gun from where Jim had left it and set it on the floor close by. "How secure is the door?" Jim asked.

"At the time, I thought it was overkill, but the designers said it's supposed to be blast proof. It would take C4 or some such nonsense." Chandler shook his head. "Tomorrow, I'm sending a check with an apology. God, what a day."
"Jimmy, they’re on their way in." His father was sitting nearby on the floor, his back to a nearby desk. He’d picked up the gun and was watching the door. "Concentrate on your guide, son. I won't let anyone come close."

"Jiimmm…"

"Don't worry, Blair. We're safe." Jim needed to keep pressure on the still bleeding wound, but he took Blair's hand. Their fingers laced together. "What were you thinking?"

"I Protect and Serve you, Sentinel."


*****

Jim hated hospitals. He wanted Blair to wake up, but he wasn't selfish enough to rouse him. After the surgery, Blair had fought his way through the anesthesia and the pain medication until they could bond. Once satisfied with the connection, he had dropped into his first real sleep.

"You should go home, you know," Simon said from the doorway. "I can sit with him."

"You can come in and keep me company. You can tell me how everything went down." Jim smiled. "I might even pay attention."

"Yeah, I've noticed that when Sandburg is hurt you pay no attention to your Captain." Jim's eyes flashed. "Not that I mind." Simon dropped into a chair. "For starters, none of the GLA people actually died. Archer is still in intensive care, but he'll pull through." Simon read Jim's expression accurately. "They're all at Mercy. No way I'd have them over here. You would have tossed them out the windows before the first night was over."

"You got that right. They deserved it. What about Dobbs?"
"We caught Dobbs in the stairwell. He was raving, incoherent. The best we can figure is that he planned on using the information in the vault and take over the guide selling. How crazy is that? He was an empath himself."

"Where is he?"

"Just put that Blessed Protector overdrive to rest, Detective. He's dead. He turned the gun on himself. He died screaming that it was all your fault, that you needed to be punished. I have Brown and Rafe at his apartment now, trying to figure out what was really going on. Slater's there, too, although the GDP is playing this close to the vest."

"He was damaged somehow, Simon. Blair called him twisted, like Alex Barnes. Maybe we'll never know how he got that way."

A feeble voice interrupted them. "You know, Jim. You just have to find the memory."

"Blair? Hey, you're awake." Jim turned all his attention to the figure on the bed. "You listening to our conversations now?"

Blair's eyes drooped, but he smiled. "You bet. You guys leave me out if I don't keep track of you."

"How are you feeling, Sandburg?" Simon asked. He was standing by the bed, opposite Jim. The young man looked terribly fragile and worn, despite the smile.

"Hey, Simon." Blair shifted a little and groaned. "My shoulder hurts."

"Taking a bullet does that, Chief. I'm never letting you out again without a vest." Jim pushed a lock of the tangled hair off his friend's face. "I'll call the nurse and get you something for pain."

Blair waved a hand lazily. "Keep the drugs away from me. I'm tired of LaLa land." He reached the hand out and Jim clasped it. "I was being serious. When Dobbs was pounding on that door, I read him one last time. There was a girl, someone he was close to. A girl and the GDP. It was at Rainier, and we were there." He seemed to drift off and fought his way back. "We need to do a meditation. Somewhere, we crossed paths with him, and you can remember it if you try. I can…"
"No you can't," Jim said firmly. "The only thing on your dance card is to rest and heal. No guide mumbo-jumbo until I say so."

"But, Jim…"

"Shhh." Jim's voice, already soft, changed to gentle coaxing. "They'll let you have some Jello. You want red or yellow?"

"Man, you're serious. Mother hen, big time." Blair yawned. "I want ice cream." The eyes drifted shut. His breathing evened out.

"Down for the count," Jim whispered. He motioned Simon to the door. "Slater knows more than he's telling. If he won't tell you, I bet he'll tell me."

"I'll let you know. I'll come by later, and bring you something to eat."

"Thanks, Simon."

Jim returned to his chair. With his senses wrapped in a protective blanket around Blair, he dozed off himself.

Blair woke up twice more. The second time he got his ice cream, and then slept again. The doctor checked in and changed the dressing. He'd cleared Blair to eat, and he could start having visitors that evening. As long as there was no sign of infection, they'd take Blair off the IV's in a day or two and send him home. Jim was relieved. They'd both feel better in the safe territory of the loft, but until then he would stand watch.

Jim heard Commander Slater's voice down the hall. He wasn't sure talking to the GDP officer was the best idea at the moment. Checking Blair one last time, he left his chair and moved to the doorway.

"Sentinel Ellison, how is our young friend doing?"

"Quite well for being shot," Jim said frostily. "I assume you have a reason for being here."
"I do. They have a conference room down the hall. Perhaps we could use it and avoid disturbing Blair."

"All right. You get five minutes."

"I don't blame you for being angry," Slater said as they settled into two chairs.

"Somehow I think I'm going to be angrier when I hear what you have to say."

"That's quite possible," said Slater. His voice was steady, but Jim knew his heart was racing. "Do you wish to continue, Senior Sentinel Prime?" he said formally.

"Go ahead, Dan. I promise to give you a head start if I come after your head."

"I feel so much better," Slate said sarcastically. "Garth Dobbs was orphaned as a teenager. He and a younger sister, Margaret, were raised by their older brother, Ken. Apparently both older brothers doted on her. They called her Maisie. In any case, I suppose that's beside the point."

Jim's eyes narrowed. "Why does the GDP have that kind of information on the family?"

"Ken, the elder brother, was identified as a latent guide."

"Let me guess. The GDP did their usual compassionate job and snatched him."

"No, we did not. Once he was identified, we followed standard procedure, which includes a thorough examination of family members to identify any other possible latents. Ken was given the regulation time period to prepare." Slater sighed. "It's not a perfect world. We can't anticipate everyone's reaction, Jim. He committed suicide. Garth and his sister Margaret went underground."

Jim gave the other man a scornful look. "And then the GDP is surprised. What do you people expect to have happen?"
Slater took the rebuke without protest. "There's more. Shortly after Blair started at Rainier, there was an altercation on campus. You may remember. Blair was confronted in the quad by some off-duty GDP personnel. His situation wasn't common knowledge at the time, and they…"

"I remember all about it," Jim said darkly. "They shook him like a rag doll and pushed him around. It was a mess. Students, GDP all tangled up on the ground. You're lucky I didn't break every bone in their bodies. Blair was damn near overloaded between the confrontation and being touched when his barriers were down. It was a lucky thing that I was there. I chewed them out and took Blair home."

Slater nodded. "One of the students was Margaret Dobbs. During the confusion she was identified by Darrin Morris, an unbonded GDP Sentinel, as an empath. She was detained."

"Dobbs was there?" Jim asked.

Slater nodded. "Yes. Apparently he came to the conclusion that Blair could have intervened and saved her. He came to blame his sister's detention on the both of you."

"Where is sister?" Jim asked. "At some correctional facility, treated as a rogue?"

"No. Despite what you may think, we're not monsters, and sometimes things work out. Margaret and Sentinel Morris were compatible. They received special permission to bond. They spent half days in a new training program we're piloting. From every possible measure, including Margaret, it's been a success. She's happy, and they're very settled as sentinel and guide."

"Didn't Dobbs know this?"

"He knew, and didn't accept it. I've spoken with Margaret. Apparently, he began contacting her by phone recently, claiming that he'd be coming into money soon. He was obsessed with breaking her bond and rescuing her. She tried to dissuade him."

"He didn't listen," Jim said. "Why didn't she tell anyone?"

"In fairness to her, she told Sentinel Morris. He's young, Jim, and very protective of Margaret. They were trying to decide what to do without compromising Dobbs. Margaret was convinced he
would never accept bonding."

Jim shuddered. He remembered Garth's strange empathic signature. "She was probably right. I think he would have always been a danger to himself and others, bonded or unbonded."

"They're here, you know. I left them in the reception area. Margaret is quite distraught, and wants to see Blair. Will you allow it?"

"Why should I? If they had said something, maybe my guide wouldn't have taken a bullet protecting me," Jim said bitterly. His emotions were running high. Down the hallway, Blair was stirring, no doubt disturbed by his distress.

Slater stood. "I understand, and it's within your rights. I'll inform them of your decision. Sentinel Morris will be disciplined for withholding the information, if that makes any difference."

"Big deal. My guide is injured and he gets a slap on the wrist. You're lucky I don't kill him." Jim's posture announced clearly their session was basically over.

"It will be noted on his permanent record." They began walking together, Jim toward the room, Slater toward the elevator. Slater continued, "It's between sentinels, but I hope you show restraint, Jim. I – I think you would like him if the circumstances were different. He has already approached us with allowing Margaret to continue her studies at Rainier." Slater glanced toward the man walking next to him and decided to let it drop. Jim Ellison didn’t look in a forgiving mood at the moment, and the only person that could change his mind was lying in a hospital bed with an IV in his arm. Sentinels followed their own rules of conduct, and he'd done what he could to defuse a volatile situation. Any more would require the touch of the Guide Prime. As they neared the room, Slater added, "Give Blair my best. I hope you know how sorry I am. We did try."

Blair was awake and spotted Slater through the doorway. He smiled and managed a feeble wave.

"He looks like he'll be fine," Slater said. Jim had shifted, clearly blocking the doorway. Obviously the Blessed Protector needed a buffer around his guide. Slater stepped back, content to leave things as they stood. "Rest well, Blair. I'll be going."

Jim sensed the presence of another sentinel. Looking towards the elevator at the end of the hallway, he saw a young couple. The woman was tiny, her dark hair just brushing her shoulders. Tears were streaming down her cheeks. If he had any doubts that this was Margaret Dobbs, he
lost them when she slipped to her knees and bowed her head. The man, about Blair's age, stroked her hair. Jim could hear him say, "Senior Sentinel Prime Ellison, please accept our apologies."

"Commander…" Jim started angrily. The Dark Sentinel was bristling. Obviously, the two people he considered culpable would not be tolerated so close.

"Jim?" A weary voice came from the bed. "Is there…another guide here?" Blair was pushing the covers away and struggling to sit up. "A guide…hurting so bad…where?"

Jim abandoned the doorway and restrained the well meaning young man. How like Blair to look for someone else in need when he was barely alive himself. Jim's anger surged again. Morris and the Dobbs girl - it was their fault for agitating his guide. Then he looked back at Blair, and his emotions softened. Blair didn't hold grudges. Blair always led with his heart first. "Dan," he said, "Why don't you give me a moment with Blair, and then bring Sentinel Morris and Margaret in. I'm sure Blair will agree."

He focused his attention completely on his guide. Jim lowered gently back onto the pillows and stroked his forehead. "There's someone here to see us, but I need to tell you some things first."

Blair's smile was the only answer Jim needed.

The End

STORY MENU PAGE

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