



But if so dire a love your soul invades
As twice below to view the trembling shades
If you so hard a toil will undertake
As twice to pass th' innavigable lake
Receive my counsel

Virgil, Aeneid

Blair Sandburg gasped for breath as he sat bolt upright in bed, one hand clutching at his chest. His heart thundered against his ribs, his pulse pounding in his temples. He swung his legs over the side of his bed and took a few deep breaths.

That had been a hell of a dream. The details were fading, but he remembered the gist of it. He'd been shot; the sensation was at once familiar and terrifying. Years ago, before he'd become Jim's official

partner, The Iceman had opened up on him at close range. He'd been wearing a vest then. It had still hurt like hell.

He hadn't been wearing a vest in the dream, and it had hurt even worse. First the pressure, like being kicked by a mule. The wind rushing out of his lungs. Then – the new part of the experience – a burning sensation spreading over his chest, like a wave of fire ants.

He scrubbed his hands through his hair, trying to shake loose of the lingering dream, and took a few more deep breaths. His heart had settled down to a steady, if fast, beat. In fact, he was a bit surprised that Jim hadn't come storming down here, demanding to know what was going on.

For that matter, what was he doing sleeping in his old bed? He hadn't slept down here since he and Jim had become lovers. Blinking, he peered around the room. The boxes of books he'd salvaged from his office at Rainier were gone, as were a few odds and ends of furniture they'd stuck in here. They'd been talking about turning this into an office, with space for a guest bed. Had Jim moved all that stuff in preparation for that project?

It was possible, he guessed, that he'd just laid down for a brief nap rather than go up the stairs to their bedroom. Try as he might, he couldn't remember what he'd been doing before he'd fallen asleep, though. He couldn't even remember what day it was.

He looked down at himself. Bare feet, jeans with ripped knees, and a nondescript gray t-shirt. Weekend wear, then. The room renovation project was looking more likely. Maybe he'd just zipped in for a brief visit, a sort of farewell/remembrance tour of when he used to live in here most of the time? And fallen asleep?

But then where was Jim?

He opened the door and poked his head out. The loft was cool and dim, the bamboo shades drawn against the setting sun. The lack of light made it difficult to make out details, but it looked like the TV was off, the couch empty, the kitchen table clear. There was an odd barrenness to the place that Blair found unsettling. No sound, no movement, absolutely nothing to indicate that there was another living soul in the place.

"Jim?" He moved cautiously out of his old room. There was something about the quiet, the dimness, the stillness that unnerved him. Had Jim run out for supplies? He glanced over to the door, although it was difficult to make out details in the gloom. It looked like there were two jackets hanging on the coat rack.

Had Jim gone upstairs for a nap, too? It was more than weird for Jim to nap in the middle of the day... but maybe he wasn't feeling well. A vague sense of dread crawled under his breastbone as he softly mounted the stairs to their bedroom. Had something happened? Had Jim's senses gone haywire?

But the bed was empty, the yellow coverlet spread out neatly, just as they had left it this morning.

A bolt of panic shot through him, as though he'd shocked himself. His heart was thundering again, suddenly, and he clattered back down the stairs. "Jim?" he said, a little louder. If this was some kind of joke, he wasn't getting it.

"Jim's not here." The voice was male, quiet and kind, and vaguely familiar, but Blair's heart still lurched. He spun towards the kitchen, where the sound had come from.

"Who are you?" The gloom was thickest there, and he could dimly make out a dark shape, roughly human. He blinked several times, trying to draw the figure into better focus. "What have you done with Jim?"

"I haven't done anything with him."

He eyed the distance to the coat rack, estimating his chances of reaching the gun in its holster under his jacket. "Then where is he?"

"Blair, take it easy. Everything's going to be okay."

He bounced lightly on the balls of his feet, preparing to make a lunge for the door, when an old, long-buried connection flared to life in his brain. "Roy?" he breathed.

"That's right." He could hear the smile in Roy's voice. "I didn't know if you'd remember me."

"Of course, man, I'd never forget you. I just needed to hear your voice." The disquieting feeling was back, like a spring coiling tight in his belly. He blew out his breath in a shaky laugh. "Boy, this is a hell of a dream – first I'm shot, and then you show up."

"Blair. It's not a dream."

"Wh-what do you mean?" His voice sounded squeaky and high in his ears, and he couldn't catch his breath. "How come I can't see you clearly?"

"For the same reason that everything around you is a little dim. There are things you don't want to look at yet."

His breath was whistling in his throat, and he felt about two seconds away from a full-blown panic attack, the kind he hadn't had in years. He tottered over to the couch and slumped down onto it, his head in his hands. "What are you saying?"

Roy didn't reply.

"This isn't a dream. But you're here, and you're dead. Then... then I-I'm, I'm dead, is that it? I'm dead?"

He felt the cushions dip as Roy sat next to him, felt a warm hand in the middle of his back, between his shoulder blades. "It's okay, Blair. Take a few deep breaths."

He did as told, concentrating on making the breaths deep and long, and after a few moments it no longer felt like there was a trapped animal trying to claw its way out of his chest. "Being shot. That wasn't a dream, either."

"No."

The memories flooded back, then. The guy had agreed to let one hostage go, but some overeager Fed hadn't got the message, or had his finger too tight on the trigger, and a gunshot had gone off. And then they were exchanging fire with the hostage taker.

His first thought, of course, had been for the hostage, frozen in the yard as bullets suddenly started whizzing past her. He'd sprinted out to get her, ignoring Jim's shout. He'd thought he'd been low enough that he wouldn't get hit.

He'd been wrong.

Being shot, though, hadn't hurt as bad as the shock and fear on Jim's face. Jim had tried hard to sound reassuring, but his eyes had given him away. Blair tried to apologize, but he was so cold and talking was difficult. He hadn't even remembered to ask about the hostage, if she was safe.



He hated that he was going to put Jim through this again. He remembered grabbing Jim's sleeve, remembered his feeling of surprise when Jim bent down and kissed him. They hadn't exactly been out in the department. He'd heard Jim plead with him to stay and he'd tried, he'd really tried to hang on, but it had been like trying to hold onto the ebbing tide. He'd tried to tell Jim he loved him. He hoped he'd been able to get that out at the last.

He brushed the tears from his eyes with the back of his hand. "Can I see him?"

The gloom had lifted in the loft, the sun shining through the shades, and Roy's face and form were clearly visible. He looked like Blair remembered him from his younger days, dressed in his familiar workout gear of sweats and a hoodie. "That wouldn't be a good idea."

"Why not?"

Roy sighed. "You can't do anything. He won't be able to hear you or feel your presence."

"But what about all those stories of people who come back after death to deliver comforting messages to their grieving families...?"

"Wishful thinking, for the most part."

"But there is a way...?"

"There's a way." Roy rubbed a hand over his face. "But you need to wait. Wait for some time to pass. I've seen too many here lose themselves in watching their loved ones."

"I understand." He swallowed against a fresh wave of tears. "I just... I want him to know that I'm okay, and that I love..." His voice cracked on the last word, and he found he had no breath for speaking.

"I know. I'm sorry."

As the room had gotten brighter, the loft came into sharper focus. Seeing the artifacts of their life together, things that had such sentimental value for him – the sofa they'd bought together; the tribal mask that Jim had given him as a graduation gift; a candid photo of them, heads together, that Megan had shot at the last Policeman's Ball – made his heart ache. He'd known that being a cop was potentially dangerous. Hell, given their life together to this point, just being them was potentially dangerous. But he hadn't really accepted that there might be a point at which they would be separated. He hadn't thought about it all that much, but he guessed he'd had some unconscious notion that the two of them would always be together, in death as well as in life. Which was pretty ridiculous when you thought about it.

"Why here?" he choked out. "Why does Heaven look like the loft?" He tossed a glance askance at Roy as a frightening thought occurred to him. "If this is Heaven... is this Heaven? Or am I in..." He couldn't finish the thought. Although being forced to live in the loft without Jim for eternity would probably be a decent description of Hell.

"No, no," Roy replied, patting his back. "It's not really like that. Heaven, Hell – they're ways people used to describe this, but they're not the reality. This is... call it what you want: Valhalla, paradise, Heaven, the bardo, the Summerlands, it doesn't matter. It's the part that comes after life. It's as good or as bad as you want to make it."

That was reassuring, if not entirely clear. "So... you're on the welcoming committee?"

"For you. It helps people to have a familiar place, a familiar person to help them adjust to the idea."

He nodded. That made sense. "So... what happens now?"

"Now I show you around, help you learn how things work around here."

Growing up with Naomi had taught him that it was best to look forward, not back. Immerse yourself in the place where you were, and try not to think too hard about the things you'd left behind.

But as he looked around the loft, he realized that he wasn't quite ready to leave Jim and his life in Cascade behind. A fresh wave of grief swelled his throat. "Actually, I think I'd like to be alone for a while, if that's okay."

"Of course."

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How time passed in this place, Blair was never able to say. There was no day or night here, just a constant soft golden light that felt like early morning or late afternoon, depending on your mood. There was no need for mealtimes, and no one really slept, although everyone went through periods of "downtime" where they sat quietly with their eyes closed. "Dreams here are memories," Roy explained to him. Everyone spent some time going through the memories of their prior life in preparation for whatever they were going to do next.

Blair avoided that as much as he could. Most of his memories were of Jim, and it just made it harder when he opened his eyes and realized that Jim wasn't there with him.

The irony of the whole situation hadn't escaped him. He was the one who'd died, and yet he was mired in grief, struggling to accept the loss of his partner. He didn't want Jim to be here, he was happy that Jim was alive in the world, living his life, but... it seemed that every moment there was something that reminded him how much he'd lost.

He'd tried to stay in the loft, he really had. But it was too hard. He kept expecting to see Jim when he rolled over in bed, when he came down the stairs from their bedroom, when he came in the door. The constant reminders of their life together combined with Jim's absence grated on his nerves like sandpaper. He was irritable and restless in the loft, and sullen and miserable outside it.

Roy helped him find himself a new place – well, not really find, since nothing here existed independently. It was more a matter of helping him manifest it, create it.

And that was a whole new skill he'd had to learn. You didn't have to go to the store if you needed something. You could manifest it yourself, create it out of the energy that surrounded you, but it took practice. He hadn't usually had problems learning new things, but this came hard. He often found himself annoyed and tired, unwilling to put in the time and energy needed to learn. He lost patience with Roy more than once about it.

He chose a house on a beach in the hopes that Jim, when he showed up, would like the surfing. For a while he was occupied in furnishing it, trying to create the warm cozy feeling they'd had in the loft. What he came to realize was that a whole lot of that had been them and their shared experiences, and not because of the Red Heron poster on the door or the brightly colored rug he'd found. But he tried anyway, for a while. He had nothing better to do.

As time went on, though, he succumbed to lethargy. Most days he just sat in the house. Sometimes he'd read – Roy had taken him to the massive library, filled with every book ever written – but most of the time he sat on the porch and watched the ocean waves roll in and out. Apparently even in paradise there were tides.

The thing was, he'd expected Jim to show up before now. It wasn't that he was eager for Jim's life on earth to end, he'd... he'd just sort of assumed that they wouldn't be apart long. Like they were meant to be together. He'd do the advance scouting, get things figured out here, and then Jim would arrive – hopefully not because of anything majorly traumatic like getting shot in the line of duty or anything – and he'd go back to the familiar role of guide, showing Jim around the place, and they'd settle into their life together in the afterlife.

And he was pretty sure that however time passed here, it was passing faster in the world of the living. That seemed to be what he'd gleaned from what Roy and others had said, although no one could give him a consistent conversion rate. So what seemed like a long time here was certainly even longer in the real world. And it felt, to him, like a long time since he'd come here.

It wasn't like Jim had been old or anything when Blair had died. He'd barely reached middle age. He had most of his life ahead of him. While Blair was sure that Jim had been upset about his death – he knew that Jim would blame himself for not making Blair wear a vest or be more careful – maybe he'd managed to move on. Maybe he'd gone on with his life. Maybe he'd met someone else – maybe he'd even gotten married again, had a family.

Maybe, when Jim died, it wouldn't be Blair that he'd want to spend his afterlife with.

It hurt to think that, so much so that he got angry at himself. "You're a shit," he told himself out loud, watching the waves. "Here's someone that you love, and you're gonna begrudge him a happy life, all that joy and everything, just because you're not the one providing it?"

It didn't work. He didn't feel any better – in fact, he felt worse – and missing Jim was still a heavy ache in his chest.

He tried being positive. "Come on," he told himself, "you're an anthropologist – or you were, at least. What is this but a new fascinating culture to learn about? Get up and go do something, learn something." There was the library to explore, and there were other buildings, housing works of art and miracles of science and fantastic artifacts from the past.

But instead he just sat in the sand and watched the waves.

When Roy showed up it was a welcome distraction. "You're needed in Admitting," he told Blair, and for a moment Blair's heart leapt so high that he was dizzy.

"It's Naomi," Roy added.

He struggled to keep the smile on his face. "Right. What do I need to do?"

"Is there a place that she would recognize, that would be comforting, like home, like the loft was for you?"

Frowning, he scratched his chin. "There was a place we stayed in Big Sur; a retreat. Our room was surrounded by redwoods and I remember Naomi saying how peaceful it was. I think she went back there several times."

"Do you think you remember enough about it to recreate it?"

"Sure."

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"Oh, Blair, it's so good to see you again!"

He hugged his mom, feeling some of the heaviness lift from his heart. She smelled like clove and citrus, a familiar smell from his childhood, and he blinked away the tears that gathered in his eyes. "It's good to see you, too, Mom."

And it really was. Naomi, to her credit, was not at all surprised at being in the afterlife; as she explained to Blair, her years of meditation, not to mention the decades she had spent exploring the spiritual worlds, had completely prepared her for this moment.

He chuckled as he led her to a low table where he'd made tea, and poured for them both as she talked about her latest trip to a monastery in Tibet. She wasn't sure what the monks would make of the fact that she had died in her sleep, but she was sure that they would manage, since they were some of the most centered and most spiritually advanced beings that she had ever met in her travels. And anyway, she had been well into her 90's, and the altitude was high...

It was soothing, on some level, to listen to her talk, and get caught up on what had happened with her and the rest of their family since he'd died, but after a while, he started to feel restless. She'd mentioned practically everyone he'd ever known except the one person he wanted to hear about.

During a lull in the conversation, he reached over to pour her more tea. "So, Mom," he said, trying to keep his voice light and ignore the way his heart thumped against his ribs, "what's Jim up to? Do you ever talk to him?"

Naomi frowned. "Jim?"

"Yeah, you know – Jim Ellison, the cop? My partner?" Typical, he thought. She never could remember that much detail about my life.

She lowered her hands to her lap, cradling the tea cup, her eyes wide. "I thought you would know more about that than me."

"Huh?"

"Sweetheart, Jim... Jim is dead. He died the same day you did."

He heard the words, but he couldn't put them together in a way that made sense. "Wh-what?"

Naomi took a deep breath, then reached out and touched his hand. "Blair, Jim killed himself. After you were shot."

Shock made him mute, turned him to stone. All he could do was stare at her.

"I'm sorry, honey. I guess he told people at the scene that he was all right. But when no one could reach him later, they went by the loft and found him. He'd shot himself." She fiddled with the tea cup. "I assumed you'd know. I assumed he'd be here."

White noise shrilled in his head like static. He lurched to his feet, nearly upsetting the tea table. "I... I need to go find... find someone...."

"Blair, wait a minute...."

"Just... just stay here, and... and I'll be... I'll be back...." There was a terrible pressure in his chest, something rising to the surface. He wasn't sure what would happen when it did.

"Blair, honey, just wait..."

He turned away from her and closed his eyes.

One of things he had learned since coming here was how easy movement was. Oh, sure, if you wanted to you could walk, or run, or drive, or even fly – with or without a plane, as you liked – but if you wanted to talk to someone right away, all you had to do was close your eyes and think of them, and you were right there by their side.

"You lied to me," he growled.

Roy was sitting and reading on the steps in front of the library. He sighed and ran a hand across his face, then marked his place and closed his book. "We should have this conversation somewhere else," he said, without looking at Blair. "Like maybe a coffeehouse. You want a coffee?"

In the next moment, they were at a small table in the corner of a dim coffeehouse, secluded and private. Two cups of coffee sat in front of them.

Blair was not going to be distracted. "You lied to me."

"I didn't." Roy still wouldn't look at him.

"You told me Jim wasn't dead!"

"I told you he wasn't here."

"Semantics. You let me believe he was okay."

Roy took a deep breath, and let it out slowly. "Yeah. I thought it'd be easier for you."

"Easier? Yeah, moping around pining for my partner is so much easier."

Roy didn't reply.

His hands were shaking so badly, he couldn't hold his cup. "So where is he?"

"Somewhere... else. Not here."

"In Hell?"

"If that's what you want to call it. Just like here, there are a lot of names. Purgatory. Hell. The underworld. Hades. The place of eternal torment."

"What the fuck, Roy?" His voice cracked and he felt his eyes burn. "That's not fair – he hasn't done anything wrong!"

"I don't make the rules, brother." Roy met his gaze then and his eyes were full of sadness.

"I want to see him."

"That's not possible."

"Why not?"

Roy sighed. "There's nothing you can do, Blair."

"I refuse to believe that." Roy didn't say anything and Blair could feel his face heat up. "You're telling me that, in this place, there's no possibility of redemption? No second chances? That's what this place is all about?"

"Damnit, Blair. No one I've talked to has ever seen a suicide brought back."

"That doesn't mean it can't be done."

Roy shook his head and looked away.

"I want to see him, Roy."

"It's not possible."

"You said I could go anywhere."

"Blair, you have no idea how dangerous—"

"So it is possible?"

Roy's mouth formed a thin line. "You don't understand, man. There are things here that can seriously fuck you up. In the world of the living if you screw up it's just one lifetime. If you make a mistake here, you could lose your soul."

"So it is possible."

Roy pushed his cup away in irritation.

"Tell me how."

"Blair, no. Don't ask me again."

"Tell me how, or I'm just going to try and figure it out for myself. I don't care how dangerous it is. I have to do something. I can't leave Jim there."

Roy shook his head.

He sat back and took a deep breath. "Roy, don't you see?" he said quietly. "I'm no good without him."

Roy was silent for a while, then exhaled heavily and stood. "Okay, fine."

His heart surged as he jumped to his feet. "Okay? So we're going there?"

"No. I'm taking you to someone who's going to explain just exactly how dangerous and impossible this is. Since you won't listen to me."

It wasn't what he'd wanted to hear, but Blair steeled his resolve. He was going to find a way to get Jim out, and no one was going to stop him. This was at least a step closer to an answer. "Fine."

Roy transported them to the bottom of a mountain. Steps had been carved out of the stone; Blair followed them with his eyes as they curved up and around the steep, craggy sides. Far above he could see a glint of something metallic that might be some sort of structure.

"Let's go," Roy said, and started climbing.

"Why can't we just transport ourselves up there?"

"It's a matter of respect," Roy replied. "There are other beings here who have called this place home far longer than we have. When you come as a supplicant, you need to come with humility."

Blair wanted to find out more about that, but figured he should save his breath for the climb. Up and up they went. After what felt like several hours, Blair glanced up, only to find that the structure looked no closer than when they had started. His heart sank, but he grimly marshaled his spirits and kept trudging.

He tried counting to pass the time. Twenty steps, and then another. And then another. After each hundred steps he'd look up, to find the top no nearer. It was grueling, but there was no way he was going to stop. If the trip to the underworld was as difficult and as dangerous as Roy said, he wasn't going to convince anyone that he could do it if he gave up on something as simple and straightforward as climbing stairs, even if they were as long as eternity.

His heart ached to think of Jim being tormented somewhere, being punished for something that wasn't his fault. He knew better than to think that Jim was sitting in a pool of fire being poked by red devils with pitchforks – he'd given up that belief when he was a kid – but every culture he'd ever studied had the same sort of concepts. Actions that could not be forgiven. Eternal damnation. Suffering and pain in endless atonement for the wrongs you had done in life.

It wasn't right. Sure, he understood where it came from – during the times when life was mean and hard, a religion had to have a prohibition against taking your own life, or soon there wouldn't be anyone left to be in your congregation or pay your tithes. But Jim and he, they'd been living in the twentieth century. People were more enlightened. They understood that suicide came from a place of pain and hopelessness, not sin and fault. Surely here in the afterlife they couldn't be less understanding? Surely it didn't make sense to punish someone for making that awful decision, for being so weighted down with despair that they couldn't see any other way out but death.

His eyes blurred, and he stumbled, falling to his hands and knees. Roy reached back and gripped his arm, pulling him to his feet, steadying him. "Not long now, Blair," he said, and Blair nodded, wiping the back of his hand across his eyes. Maybe counting had been a better idea.

He was lost in his second – or was it the third – hundred when he bumped up against Roy's back. "We're here," Roy said.

Blair gazed around in astonishment. "Here" was a vast expanse of white marble floor, shot through with dark veins, which covered the entire top of the mountain. Golden pillars rose in erratic locations across the space; in some cases they were clustered close together and gauzy white fabric was spread across the top and sides of them, creating a shaded pavilion. Blair could see low couches and tables of white and gold where some of the side panels were drawn back.

A being emerged from one of these pavilions and came towards them. She – because Blair felt instinctively that it was a she, although she lacked breasts or genitals – had two arms and two legs like a human, but was covered in fine, short golden hair. Two pairs of gossamer dragonfly wings helped propel her towards them. As she got closer, Blair could see that she had a head like a human, except that there was an eagle's beak where a human nose and mouth would be, and her dark golden eyes had narrow pupils, like a cat's. Two short, stubby white horns curved out from her temples, amid a mass of white-blond curls.

She alighted in front of them, looking at each of them. "Roy Williams." Her voice was light and musical, although Blair found it bizarre to hear the human voice emerging from the bird's beak. "It is good to see you again."

Roy bowed from the waist, his hands pressed together in the middle of his chest. "And you as well."

The being turned its golden gaze on Blair. "Blair Sandburg. It is good to meet you."

Blair mimicked Roy's bow, his heart thumping under that unearthly regard. "And you as well, uh... uh."

The being laughed, a silvery sound that sent shivers of joy down Blair's spine. "I am one of those that your people call 'cherubim'. My name is unpronounceable in your human tongue, but you can call me Tephra. Come." She turned and motioned them towards the pavilion she had emerged from.

When they were settled and refreshments had been brought, Tephra spoke. "And what brings you here to me today, Roy Williams?"

"Actually," Blair interrupted, his heart in his mouth, "it's me. It's my request. I want to travel to the underworld."

Somehow, in spite of her alien features, Tephra's expression managed to convey sadness. "It is not possible."

"That's not true." The words came out before Blair could stop them.

"Blair—" Roy flung his hand out.

"It's not. Don't stop me." That was to Roy.

The honeyed eyes darkened, and the wind rose, snapping the delicate panels draped around the pavilion. Blair remembered that, in Hebrew tradition, cherubim were considered to be deities, and storm deities, at that. He swallowed convulsively, his throat dry.

But nearly as quickly as they had arisen, the winds died away, and the cherub's gaze cleared. "You are right, Blair Sandburg," she said. "Travel to that place is possible, if fraught with danger. Why do you want to go there?"

"There's someone down there that's dear to me. I want to bring him back."

"It cannot be done."

Blair girded himself for more environmental displays of disapproval. "Cannot? Or has not?"

"Many have tried. All have failed."

"So if they've tried, then there must be a way – a set of rules, guidelines, a... a protocol, or something like that."

Tephra did not reply.

"It's not fair that he's down there. He didn't do anything wrong."

"Life is not fair." Tephra's eyes were full of compassion, but her voice was clear and sharp. "What makes you think the afterlife is?"

"But.... it's not... he's not...." His throat was tight and he could feel tears pricking at the back of his eyes. "It's my fault," he forced out, barely able to lift his voice above a whisper. "It's my fault he's there. I was reckless, impulsive, and it... it killed him. I killed him." He cleared his throat and wiped the back of his hand across his mouth. His knees were shaking, and he gripped them hard. "I have to do something to set it right."

Tephra sighed and her gaze shifted to Roy. "Soulmates," she said softly.

Roy shook his head from side to side, his expression sorrowful.

Blair looked from one to the other. "So I can go? Because Jim and I are soulmates? That means I can bring him back?" Hope bubbled up in his heart like a spring. Although he couldn't understand why Tephra and Roy looked so sad.

"You will not be able to bring him back, Blair Sandburg," Tephra said. "If you manage to survive the journey to the underworld, the best you can hope for is to get some closure on your feelings of guilt and the circumstances of Jim Ellison's death."

She's wrong, Blair thought. She doesn't know me, she doesn't know Jim. I'm going to get him out of this.

"To get to the underworld, you will need to pass through seven gates. Each will demand something of you, and to pass through each you will need to answer the challenge."

"Are we talking physical or mental challenges here?" He'd usually been the brains in the partnership; not that Jim was dumb – far from it – but feats of strength and endurance had been his forte, not Blair's. Of course, the rules were so different here.

"I do not know. For each person the challenge is different."

"Okay." Ultimately, it didn't matter. He was going to use whatever tools he had available to him here to find Jim and bring him home.

"You will need a guide. I will accompany you."

"Thank you." It was hard to hide the surprise in his voice. He'd gotten the impression the cherub disapproved of him.

"Do not thank me. I go as a provider of information and a witness only. I can offer you no help. The task is yours and yours alone." Her gaze was solemn. The sky overhead darkened and a chill wind lifted the gauzy panels. "If you fail, if you falter, if you lose your way, then your immortal soul will be trapped there for eternity."

Blair swallowed, his excitement dampened by the gloom in her voice. "I understand."

"We will leave when you are ready. I will come to your dwelling when the time is right." Tephra rose and glided away.

Roy didn't say anything to him as they climbed down the steps. At the bottom, he turned to Blair and stuck out his hand. "Goodbye, Blair. It's been good having you here."

He took the proffered hand but refused to acknowledge the sentiment. "I'm going to do this. You'll see. I'll be back. And I'm going to bring Jim back."

Roy looked down, shaking his head, then met Blair's gaze. "I hope you get some closure, brother. If you make it there." Then he turned away from Blair and was gone.

It hurt to have Roy doubt him, but he put it out of his mind as he returned to the beach house and tried to focus on getting ready for the journey. What did you pack for a trip to the underworld, anyhow? It wasn't like he needed food or water. He didn't know what the challenges were, so he didn't know what he should bring to get through them. And it wasn't like Tephra's explanations had been very helpful. He hoped her information was going to be more useful once they were actually on their way.

In the end, he decided to gear up much the way that he would for an expedition. Jeans, sturdy hiking boots, good socks, and long-sleeved Henley with flannel shirt. He manifested his trusty backpack and made sure he had his Swiss army knife. And just in case it was needed, he produced a copy of Burton's book. Who knew what havoc the underworld might wreak on a sentinel's senses, if Jim still had his senses down there.

He zipped the pack closed and straightened. Tephra was standing in the open doorway. The sunlight glinted off the water behind her and made it look like she was limned in light. "Let us go," she said, and held out her hand.

A brief electric jolt, and they appeared in a green meadow that sloped gently up on all sides, giving Blair the feeling that he was on the inside of a giant bowl. At the center was a gray metal hatch with a wheel set in the top.

"Come," said Tephra, and she headed towards the hatch. When they reached the structure, she turned and faced him. Her eyes raked him over. "Are you absolutely sure that you want to do this?" she asked.

"Yes." There was no doubt, no hesitation.

"Then open the hatch."

He did as she bid him, turning the wheel until he heard something click, then lifting the heavy metal lid to reveal what looked like a huge pipe set into the ground. A metal ladder descended down the side of the pipe, but only the first few rungs were visible. After that it disappeared into the darkness.

His throat went dry, but he swung one foot over the rim of the pipe and planted it on the first rung of the ladder, clutching the rails on either side. "I take it down is the way to go?" he said, trying to make his voice light.

"Yes." Tephra watched him solemnly.

"Okay then. Here we go." With a deep breath, he brought his other foot over and started down the ladder.

Within seconds he had descended into a thick, heavy gloom. He could see the rungs and sides of the ladder in front of him, but if he glanced up, he could only see a few rungs, and down, nothing but darkness. There was no sign of Tephra; if she was above him, climbing down, he couldn't see or hear her.

He climbed down steadily for what felt like hours. The muscles of his arms and legs were starting to shake with fatigue when he suddenly noticed that the space around him was growing significantly lighter. A current of cold air lifted the hem of his shirt, and he realized that he was emerging from the pipe into what looked like the ceiling of an enormous cavern.

The ladder kept going, though, straight to the ground, and Blair climbed down quickly, landing on a broad expanse of gravel. As he turned around, he saw Tephra standing at the edge of a huge body of water that stretched from one side of the cavern to the other and as far out as Blair could see. The water was the same dark grey as the gravel and the cold stone that rose and arched above them. It was utterly flat and still. "Come," Tephra said again, beckoning.

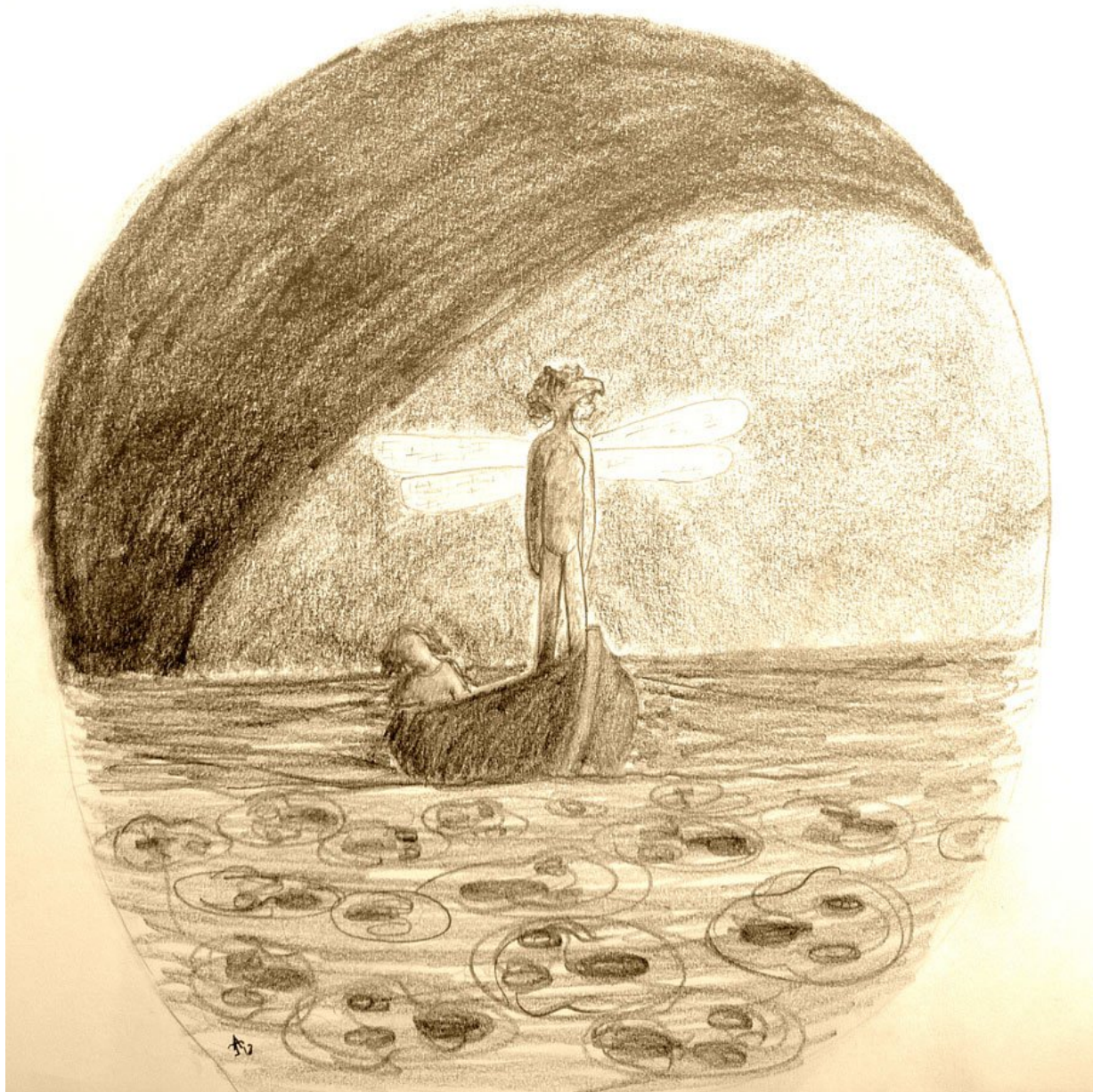
This time they ended up in a long narrow boat made of black wood, without oars or sail. Tephra went forward and stood in the bow, and when she did, the boat slipped off the gravel bank and headed smoothly across the lake.

"How does it know where to go?" Blair asked. He couldn't see how the boat was propelled; let alone how it knew what direction to go in. Everything was a dull dark grey, water and cavern nearly indistinguishable in the distance.

"It knows because I know. No human can navigate these waters." One hand motioned at the waves. "You can see some of those who have tried."

Blair leaned his head over the side of the boat. Although the water looked murky, he could see quite far down into it. Deep below he could see bodies floating, pale-skinned, dressed all in gray, eyes wide

open, staring at the ceiling above. He shivered in spite of his warm clothing. "They failed the challenges?"



"No, they attempted to travel to the underworld without a guide. If I was not with you, the boat would simply drift. Eventually those below would become aware and would capsize the boat."

"Oh." He swallowed and drew back. He didn't want to look in the water any longer. "So the ladder, the climb down – that wasn't one of the challenges?"

Tephra turned to look at him and he could have sworn there was amusement in her eyes. "No. That was simply part of the journey. The challenges have not yet begun."

His stomach twisted a bit at that, but he pushed the feeling aside in favor of pulling his notebook out of his pack and writing down some of his impressions. Old anthropology habits die hard, he thought.

He had just finished describing the final sprint down the ladder when the boat gave a lurch and he heard the scrape of wood against gravel. Raising his head, he saw that they had landed on a beach – a beach that looked exactly like the gravel beach that they had left. Except that there was no metal ladder descending from the ceiling, and halfway up the beach there was a white door.

The door stood alone on the beach. There were no walls around it, just the white wooden frame and the white wooden door, and a gold knob in the right-hand panel.

Blair stuffed his notebook back in his pack and clambered out of the boat. Tephra was waiting for him on the beach, her gaze on the door

“That is the first gate you must descend through to find your friend,” she said. “There will be seven gates in all. To pass through each gate you must give up something.” Her head turned and her golden eyes fixed on his. “Are you ready?”

“How...how will I know...” He felt as though there were snakes twisting in his stomach. Closing his eyes, he took a deep breath and let it out slowly. Kundalini breathing, he reminded himself as he opened his eyes. “How will I know what to give up?” he asked Tephra.

“You will know.”

He settled his pack on his shoulders and faced the door squarely. “Then let’s go,” he said, as he took a step forward.

A burning pain lanced through his right thigh. He cried out as his leg crumpled beneath him and he crashed to the ground.

“This is the gate of Sickness, Death, and Tears,” Tephra intoned. “To pass through here you must be willing to give up your strength and your health and accept a life of pain and limitation.”

Clutching his thigh, Blair struggled to sit up. The denim under his palm was damp; when he pulled his hand away, the material was stained red. He lurched to his feet and undid his jeans, pushing them down far enough that he could see his leg. “No way, no way,” he muttered.

There was an open, bleeding wound precisely where he’d been shot by Quinn.

His head spun, his leg throbbing in time with his heartbeat. He inhaled, but he was cut short by a sudden, fierce ache across his lower chest. His breath hitched in his throat, making him cough, and he grabbed his ribs and groaned.

The time he’d been shot by the Iceman. His ribs had been aching afterwards and Jim had wrapped them to help with the soreness.

A flush of heat rushed through him, making him break out in a sweat. His eyesight blurred and he swayed, suddenly dizzy. His stomach ached as if someone had punched him.

And this was like the time he'd been poisoned at Clayton Falls, as part of the scheme to steal the government's old money. It was as if he was re-experiencing all the injuries and illnesses he'd sustained as Jim's guide.

He fastened his pants and staggered forward a few steps, but a wave of nausea sent him to his knees, retching. When the spasms had passed, he wiped his mouth and sat back on his heels, gulping shallow breaths of air. He pulled his hair back from his face, reaching for a hair tie, but stopped when a big hank of hair came away in his hand. Fear tightened his throat. He ran his hand over his head several times, and each time clumps of hair settled to the ground around him like fall leaves.

His stomach twisted with another bout of nausea, and his ribs exploded in pain as he fell forward and threw up. The world tilted under him and his vision narrowed to a tiny circle right in front of his eyes. All at once everything seemed very far away.

No, damnit, you can't pass out! He remembered Tephra's warning: If you fail, if you falter, then your immortal soul will be trapped for eternity.

He couldn't let that happen. He couldn't let Jim down.

Grimly, he began crawling on his hands and knees towards the door. After a few steps, his injured leg gave out and he collapsed, prone on the ground. His stomach felt like it was full of knives. But he couldn't stop. He took a deep breath and began pushing forward, using his elbows and knees like a soldier crawling under barbed wire.

It felt like an eternity later when his head bumped against the stark white wood of the door. He managed to push himself up on one hand; with the other, sweaty and trembling, he grasped the knob and turned it. The latch clicked, the door swung open, and with his last reserve of strength he pushed himself through the opening.

And tumbled onto the floor of a forest.

He lay there for several moments, inhaling the cool, pine-scented air. Sunlight danced through the leaves overhead. His head was resting on a soft cushion of leaves and pine needles and he realized that he could hear birds singing. He also realized that his stomach didn't hurt anymore. His ribs were sore, but only mildly so, and the pain in his leg had subsided to a dull throb.

He carefully rolled into a sitting position. No nausea. So that was better. Gingerly, he reached up and ran a hand over his head.

He was completely bald.

"I did tell you would have to give up something." Tephra was perched on a rock a few feet ahead of him on the path.

"You did," he replied, fighting down a swell of grief. Jim really liked his hair. "I just figured I'd have a little more choice in the matter." He got to his feet slowly, testing his leg. It ached, but he could put weight on it. "Will it grow back?"

"That depends on whether you successfully return."

Blair bit back a retort. He had six more of these things to go through, and if he started losing his temper now, he'd never make it. In any event, it wasn't like Tephra and Roy hadn't tried as hard as they could to dissuade him. He couldn't blame anyone else for what happened here – the choice to come had been his and his alone.

He squared his shoulders and faced the cherub defiantly. "What's next?"

Tephra pointed up the path.

A few moments later he was standing on the edge of a cliff overlooking a roaring river. Far below him, he could see a semi-circular door made of stone set into the bottom of the cliff on the other side of the river. "Oh, you have got to be kidding me," he muttered. "It wasn't enough that I got shot again, you have to remind me about this, too?"

Tephra stood impassively at the edge of the cliff, watching him, while he searched for another way down. "Fine," he grumbled, when the search proved fruitless. He tightened the straps of his pack, backed away from the edge, then took a hobbling leap and launched himself into the air.

The plunge into the cold water struck the breath from his lungs. The current was ferociously strong, pulling him along the bottom. Then his outstretched foot struck a rock. Pain flashed through his good leg and he gasped, taking in a lungful of water. And then he was tumbling, battered and tossed about by the surging rapids.

He managed to grab one of the larger boulders and right himself, then pulled himself out of the water, arms shaking with the effort. His ribs ached again, this time from coughing up water, and now both his legs hurt. He was soaked to the skin, and his pack was gone. Dismayed, he searched the waters around the boulder, but between the roiling rapids and the swift current, he couldn't see anything.

From his perch on the boulder, he mapped out a path to the other side, where Tephra was standing next to the stone door. Cautiously he made his way over there, thankful that he'd had the foresight to wear hiking boots, something that gave him some traction on the wet, slippery rocks.

The door was framed with a semi-circle of square stones; made of polished black granite, it had a ring of iron set into its middle.

"This is the gate of Objects," Tephra said as he limped up the bank towards her. "To pass through here, you must let go of your possessions, the objects you have collected throughout your life that are dear to you."

"Yeah, thanks, I think I've taken care of that already," Blair snapped at her as he grabbed the ring and pulled the door open.

Beyond was a dark, square corridor made of metal. An icy breeze streamed out and flowed over Blair, making him shiver as it plastered his wet clothes to his body. He grit his teeth to prevent them from chattering, and strode through the portal.

At first it was so dark that he couldn't see his hand in front of his face. Then Tephra appeared next to him, her gossamer wings humming as she floated a few inches above the floor. She gave off a soft golden light, enough so that Blair could see a few feet ahead down the corridor. He limped off in that direction.

The air was colder here than it had been when he was standing outside the stone door. There was a breeze, somehow, and it wrapped itself around his bare head, making the tips of his ears and the back of his neck numb. He turned the collar of his flannel shirt up, trying to keep as much of his exposed skin warm as he could. His breath plumed out in front of him.

They traveled through the passage in silence. Blair's earlier irritation had evaporated, and instead he felt gratitude for Tephra's companionship, and, right now, her light. He couldn't imagine how frightening it would have been to navigate this realm by himself. "Thank you for guiding me, Tephra," he said. "I know you think I'm foolish for doing this, but... I appreciate your faith in me."

Tephra stopped and fixed him with a serious gaze. "Understand, Blair Sandburg – I do not have faith in you. You will not succeed in this undertaking. I am merely here to try and preserve your soul, and to witness what happens if I cannot."

Blair's gratitude ebbed at the cherub's blunt response. "Fine," he said, as he turned away and continued walking down the corridor. "I'm not going to argue with you about it." She doesn't know me, he reminded himself silently. She doesn't know what I'm capable of.

But he could feel doubt rising, like a hot wire under his sternum. The gates were harder than he had anticipated, and he'd only gotten through two. Maybe Tephra was right. Maybe he wasn't going to be able to do this.

"The gate of Comfort." Tephra's voice shook him out of his thoughts. They were standing in front of a massive pair of double metal doors, with a heavy metal bar across each one. They reminded him of huge versions of the exit doors at Rainier.

"So what do I have to lose for this one?"

"Here you must give up those things that give you ease, that satisfy your bodily wants and needs."

He looked at her blankly. "I don't need to eat or drink down here, and I don't need to sleep... and all I really have left are my clothes..."

Tephra gazed at him expectantly.

“Seriously?”

“I did warn – ”

“Yeah, yeah, you warned me, I know,” he grumbled. It wasn’t enough that he was soaking wet and cold, now he was going to have to be naked as well. He closed his eyes and took a few deep breaths to center himself. Remember why you’re doing this, he told himself. This is for Jim. You have to get him out of this awful place. He doesn’t deserve to be here. You have to be strong for him.

He exhaled a long breath and unbuttoned his flannel shirt, folding it neatly and placing it on the ground. His Henley followed, then his boots, jeans, and underwear. The thick wool socks came off last. Shivering, he stood in front of the doors, the icy metal floor numbing the soles of his bare feet. With a glance at Tephra, he reached out and pushed one of the metal bars and walked through.

A vast dark plain stretched out ahead of him. The sky was overcast with thick, lowering clouds. He heard thunder roll in the distance, and here and there he could see a flash of lightning. It was still cold, although not as biting arctic as the metal corridor had been.

At his feet he could see a dark grey ribbon that wound lazily across the plain. This was undoubtedly the way to the next gate. Tucking his hands under his armpits for warmth, he started limping down the path.

After a few moments Tephra appeared, floating alongside him. He didn’t speak to her, though, just kept making his way slowly across the flat expanse, his eyes fixed on where his feet were going. A fine, cold rain began to fall.

“Blair.” A woman’s voice broke his concentration and he stopped and looked up. Janet Myers stood in front of him.

“Janet!” He grinned, pleased to see her. Then his smile faded as he remembered that he was the one responsible for her death. If she hadn’t been digging into what Cyclops Oil had been doing in Peru, on his request, she wouldn’t have been killed. “I’m... I’m sorry...” Why hadn’t he looked her up before this?

“Blair, you have to stop.”

He frowned at her. “Huh?”

“If you continue, if you go through this gate, you won’t be able to talk to me or see me anymore.”

He glanced over at Tephra, and the cherub nodded solemnly. “We are approaching the gate of Community. To pass through, you must surrender all of your relationships; your friends, your family, your lovers, your co-workers.”

“All of them? Forever?”

“Some may grow stronger, but many will be sundered. Forever.”

"Including Jim?"

Tephra eyed him with a sidelong glance. "It is the risk you must take if you wish to advance."

A chill of apprehension danced up his spine. What should he do? He was faced with an impossible choice. If he continued, he might still lose Jim, even if he made his way through all seven gates. Yet if he went back he would never see Jim again.

He couldn't give up. He had to have faith, he had to keep going, no matter how difficult the obstacles, no matter how slight the chance. To return to paradise meant to give up on Jim, give up on their being together. He couldn't do that.

"I'm sorry, Janet," he said, meeting her eyes. "I have to go on."

"I'm sorry, too, Blair," she said, her expression sad. Before his eyes she faded away.

He thought about asking Tephra where she had gone, but decided he didn't want to know. It wouldn't make his decision any easier. And he needed to focus on saving Jim.

As he started back down the path, he realized that he could see something in the distance. "Is that the next gate?" he asked.

"Yes."

As they got closer, he could see that it was a glass-paneled door, like something that might lead out to a porch or a patio. The other side of it was completely dark though; he couldn't see what was on the other side at all.

He was still studying it when Roy appeared next to him. "You have to turn back, Blair."

He shook his head, not even sparing Roy a glance. "I've already been through this. I'm not turning back."

"Did Tephra explain? You could lose everyone, everyone who's ever been important to you."

"She did. And it doesn't make any difference. I have to do this." He inhaled, and felt a deep calm spread out from the center of his being. "It's the right thing to do. No matter what the cost."

Roy vanished, and Blair reached out for the handle of the door. A woman's voice stopped him.

"Blair?"

"Mom?" He turned, startled. Naomi was standing behind him on the path.

"Please don't do this, sweetheart." There were tears in her eyes.

He felt his throat close, felt a prickle behind his eyes. "Mom, I have to. I have to save Jim. I can't let him stay there forever. It's not fair."

"But I won't get to see you anymore. Ever."

"I know, Mom. I'm sorry." He reached out and drew her into a hug. "I love you, but I love Jim, too, and I can't let him suffer like that."

She didn't reply, just sobbed, and he hugged her tightly, rubbing her back. "You'll be okay," he forced out through his tight throat, willing his voice to not crack. "You'll be fine. Paradise is great! Get Roy to show you around. He's a good guide." He pulled away, still holding her shoulders. "I've got to go now. Wish me luck."

As he turned back to the door she spoke again. "If you come back with me, I'll... I'll introduce you to your father."

He whirled to face her again. "What?"

Her face was tear-stained but resolute. "I'll introduce you to your father. He's there, in paradise."

"You... you knew...." A burning anger was climbing its way up his chest. "You knew all along who he was and you didn't – you wouldn't tell me?"

"I'm sorry, Blair, it's just... he died a long time ago and it's still hard and I didn't think that telling you would serve any purpose... but now that we can all be together... I can't let you do this."

He closed his eyes and rubbed his hands over his face. "Christ, Naomi." Focus, he thought. You have to focus. This is about Jim, saving Jim. Nothing else. He rubbed his hand over his shorn head and then exhaled and looked her straight in the eyes. "No. I'm sorry, it's too late. If you wanted me to care about him you should have told me about him before. I'm going through this gate and I'm going to get Jim back."

He turned his back on her, only to find Tephra between him and the gate. Anger flared in his heart. "Get out of my way," he growled at the cherub. If he had to deal with any more obstacles, he felt like he might fly apart with rage.

"I need to tell you some things." Tephra spoke quickly and quietly. "Because if you go through this gate, you will lose me as well, and I need to tell you about the last three gates."

He drew a shuddering breath and nodded.

"After this will be the gate of Control. To pass you must give up your ability to plan, your ability to manage the situation, to manipulate events to serve your ends. Then will come the gate of Identity – to pass here you must give up your work, your face, even your very name. And finally you will come to the gate of Madness. To pass you must relinquish your sanity – the knowledge of cause and effect, the certainty of why you are. And if you can survive all that, and pass through that final gate, you will be in the place where Jim is."

His anger had faded, leaving a steely determination in its place. "Thank you. I'm ready now."

Tephra stood aside, and he reached out and drew the glass door aside and stepped over the threshold.

And fell into space.

He landed on his rear with a hard jolt that made his teeth click together. His wrists and ankles had something heavy and cold wrapped around them. He could smell beeswax, and through his lids he could see a flickering, faint light. He opened his eyes.

David Lash was grinning at him.

They were in Lash's lair, candles everywhere, the room hung about with swathes of fabric, the faint outlines of bodies behind them. He jerked back, terror flashing cold through his body, and opened his mouth in an involuntary scream.

But no sound came out.

"This time you can't distract me," Lash said. "None of that confusing me about who you are and who I am. This time I'm going to finish what I started." He grabbed the chain that bound Blair's wrists and yanked him off the chair and onto the ground.

"It's great down here, you know?" Lash continued. "I can do what I want, no one bothers me. I can have as many friends as I want and no one cares." He started to drag Blair across the floor.

Blair fought wildly, struggling to get to his feet and stop or at least delay their progress. But it was as if he wasn't even moving. Lash was pulling him across the floor as if he was a sack of potatoes.

"I'm a lot stronger down here, too. I don't need that chloral hydrate anymore."

His skin was scraped raw from the rough concrete, bringing tears of pain to his eyes. They blurred his vision, but he could see that Lash was dragging him towards a dark pool at the back of the room. A bright yellow plastic duck bobbed serenely on the water's surface.

He opened his mouth, struggling to say something, to fight back, to challenge Lash, confuse him, disorient him. Words had always been his primary weapon in life. But he had no voice. He could breathe without difficulty, but he couldn't speak a word.

Lash jerked him up to his knees at the edge of the pool. He frowned at Blair. "You're the one that got away, you know that, man?" Then his frown cleared and he bared his teeth in another terrifying smile. "That's gonna make this really good. It's too bad about the hair, though. It helps me to have something to hang on to. Oh, well." He grabbed the back of Blair's head and thrust him under the water.

Blair flailed, twisting his body back and forth, trying to dislodge Lash's hand. He tried to brace his bound hands underneath him, but they were pinned at an awkward angle by his body, and he couldn't get leverage. And the pool was lined with sand that shifted under him, giving him nothing to thrust against.

Bubbles filled the space around his head as his air leaked out, despite his best efforts. His lungs were starting to burn and he fought the impulse to exhale. White noise filled his ears.

He couldn't die here. Somehow he knew that, if Lash succeeded, he'd be trapped here with him forever, going through the same scenario for eternity. And Jim would never be free. He redoubled his efforts, calling on every last bit of strength left in his body, fighting to get his face above the water. He just needed a breath of air, just a scrap, just enough to give him a fighting chance.

But Lash's hand was like granite against the back of his head, solid and heavy. He could feel his strength waning, feel his muscles going slack. He could hear Lash giggling, the sound eerily distorted by the water. Lights flashed in front of his eyes and the coppery taste of fear filled his mouth. He was going to lose.

...manipulate events to serve your ends...

Tephra's words floated through his mind, reminding him of where he was. The gate of Control. Maybe... maybe he shouldn't fight. Maybe the thing he needed to give up was his backbone, his impulse to change the situation, to talk his way out of danger. Maybe that was why he hadn't been able to speak.

He closed his eyes and willed his body to go limp. His heart thudded madly against his ribs. If he was wrong, well, then, he wouldn't be any worse off. His end at Lash's hands, his eternal damnation, would just get here faster. But if he was right...

He let go and plunged head first into the pool.

He was standing on a stage at a podium, the microphone tilted to his mouth. A crowd of people were seated in chairs in front of him in what looked like a hotel ballroom or something. The room was expansive, although he could make out a door at the very back. He had the feeling that he had just stopped speaking, although there were no notes in front of him to give him a clue as to what he had been talking about. Was this a class? Had he been teaching?

The audience looked pretty angry, though. And they had cameras, and notepads. Not students, then. Looked like some kind of journalists. Although he had no idea of what he might have said to make them look so pissed off.

He looked around the podium for a clue, but there was nothing. No notecards, no papers, nothing to jog his memory about why he was here and what he was doing. Or why he was doing it without clothes on.

Or who he was.

He swallowed in a dry throat as he realized that he didn't know his name. He didn't know anything about himself – where he was from, how old he was, who his friends were, what work he did. Nothing.

These people in the audience sure weren't his friends, though. Glares of anger had given way to a low rumble of muttering.

"Um...." He cast about for something appropriate to say. "Thank you all for coming. That's all I have to say on the matter." Whatever that had been.

No one in the audience moved, although the discontented grumbling grew louder.

"If there are no questions, then we're done." He left the podium and climbed down the short staircase from the stage to the floor, then started up the center aisle towards the back of the room. He just wanted to get out of here, get somewhere quiet by himself so he could figure out what the hell was going on.

The muttering grew even louder, forming into occasional words. "Liar," someone spat. A rock flew out of the crowd and struck him on the shoulder.

"Ow!" he complained, turning around to see if he could see who had thrown that. "Hey, look, I..." But he couldn't finish that thought. He had no idea what to say. He had no idea what he thought or what he had said. He had no idea what he had done to make these people so mad. He didn't even know who he was.

One by one, the people in the audience were turning to face him, and it seemed as though he could see animal faces under their human faces, bared teeth and slavering jowls and eyes filled with cruelty and bloodlust. "Fraud," another voice snarled.

Others in the crowd took up the cry. "Fraud.Liar. Fake."

Another rock soared out and struck him square in the chest. He staggered backwards, the breath knocked out of him. His heart started to thump and panic prickled down his spine. People in the audience began to move towards him.

He turned and sprinted for the back of the room.

The others gave chase, following at his heels like a pack of baying hounds. He ran as fast as he could, catching, in his peripheral vision, a kaleidoscope of images of himself and his pursuers reflected in the mirrors that lined the room. Sometimes it was a group of people that chased him, and sometimes he saw creatures, red and black and green, fanged and horned, with sharp spears in their hands, and he knew if they caught him it would be the end of him.

At the end of the room was a pair of shoji screens, panels of white translucent paper neatly framed in squares of dark-stained wood.

He could feel the breath of the ones who chased him hot on the back of his neck. If he stumbled, if he slowed, even just enough to open the door, they would have him and he would be lost.

Without slacking his pace he muttered a quick prayer to whatever deities existed in this place, then closed his eyes and launched himself at the doors. He felt paper tear and wood splinter as he crashed through.

When he opened his eyes all he could see was gray. He was huddled against a great gray boulder, knees drawn to his chest. The wind whipped around him, lifting clouds of fine gray material that spun briefly in circles, then fell back to the ground.

He peered around the boulder. Ahead of him spread a long expanse of flat ground, as far as the eye could see, covered with the fine gray stuff. Here and there the wind had shaped it into low dunes.

Movement caught his eye. A rectangle of white fabric, suspended from the top of a pale wooden frame, fluttered in the blowing wind. A curtain; a doorway into another place. But very far away from him, far across the flat ground.

He wanted to go there. He didn't know why, but the desire to go to the doorway was the strongest thing in his heart. It was all he wanted. All he had ever wanted.

Except for the fear. To get to the doorway, he would have to cross the gray plain. The thought made his knees turn to water and a whimper rise to the back of his throat.

Why? Why was he afraid? He couldn't remember.

Trembling, he crept out from around the boulder and started across the plain towards the doorway. His right leg throbbed with pain and he had to drag it. But he kept his eyes fixed on the white fabric ahead.

Shapes rose out of the dunes around him – no, from the dunes around him. Shapes formed out of the fine gray powder, shapes with blackened, burnt skin. Where the skin was cracked, bright molten flame shone underneath. Flames shone in their eyes and in their smiles, and flame flickered from the ends of their fingers.

Fire people.

He flinched away as they converged on the plain in front of him, blocking his way to the door. He backed up one step, and then another, going back where he had come from, back to the protection of the boulder.

One of the fire people grabbed his arm and he screamed in pain as the flames seared his flesh. He pulled away, stumbling backwards, and scrambled for the security of the rocks. Once there he huddled against the cold stone, shivering with terror, cramming his fist in his mouth so the fire people wouldn't hear him whimpering.

The red marks on his arm were bright and hot; they stood out next to the white scars of older burns. The pain was sharp. He rocked a while, taking deep breaths and waiting for his heart to stop beating so fast.

Then the desire for the doorway took hold of him again, and tears sprang to his eyes. It was like a physical pull, as though something at the doorway was connected to his chest, tugging him forward. He couldn't resist it. He could wait as long as he could stand it, but eventually he would have to get up and try again.

Tears trickled down his cheeks and he rocked himself harder. He would have to try again and then the fire people would attack him again. Eventually they would make him one of them. How many times had he tried to get to the doorway? He couldn't remember. He had always been here, always been

struggling against his desire for the doorway, always overcome by the fire people. He would always be here. There was no way out.

If only he could stay here, against this rock, in peace and safety. But he couldn't. He had to get to the doorway. He had to.

Gasping, sobbing, he flung himself to his feet and turned to face the doorway, then closed his eyes and started walking forward. Maybe if he couldn't see...

But he could hear them, the hiss as they rose from the ashes, the crackle and pop of their flames. He could smell them, smell burnt flesh and the sharp bite of sulfur. He could feel their heat as they surrounded him.

Hands latched onto both his arms and he howled in anguish, but he kept his eyes tightly closed and his feet moving forward. He could feel their fire as it burned through his skin and raced through his body. He was in agony, burning alive. His steps dragged as they piled on top of him, weighing him down.

But he did not stop. He could not stop.

He squinted one eye open and looked ahead. He was nearly halfway there, and the sight gave strength to his legs, helped him to surge forward.

But the fire people would not give up. He could feel their molten blood racing over him and through him. He could feel his skin blackening, tightening, cracking as they turned him into one of them. He could see flames rising in his sight, hear them roaring in his ears. He could feel the hunger for fire growing in him.

Step by step he plodded forward as the fire people swarmed over him and inside him. When he reached the curtain he raised his hands and clutched it, seeing his blackened cracked skin, watching as the flames shooting from his fingers set the fabric ablaze.

With a final scream, part pain, part defiance, he pitched forward into the burning doorway.

Blair collapsed on to the ground, then rolled over to his back, gulping in breaths of cool air. Once he had his wind, he sat up, bracing himself on his straightened arms, and looked around.

He had made it through the gates.

A laugh – partly relief, partly nervousness – bubbled up from his chest, but he quickly squelched it. He'd completed the hardest part of the journey, but his quest wasn't over yet. He still had to find Jim. And then – were they going to have to go back through all those gates again?

He pushed the thought away. He couldn't think about that now. First things first – find Jim and get him moving.

He clambered to his feet, surveying the landscape before him. Another flat plane – clearly the underworld wasn't known for its topographical variation – but this was broken, at irregular intervals, by

what looked like people. Most of them were sitting, but some were lying down, prone or on one side, and a few were standing.

The closest one was a woman. She was naked, seated in front of a dark pool, her legs to one side, eyes fixed on the water. Her lips were moving slowly, but he couldn't hear what she was saying.

He crouched down and touched her shoulder. "Excuse me," he said, "can you help me?"

She didn't respond. She didn't even turn her head to look at him, or give any indication that she knew that he was there.

He looked over at the pool, his hand still on her shoulder. What had been a dark flat expanse of water was now filled with light and images, like a movie screen. Blair felt a tugging sensation under his sternum, and then all at once he was surrounded by the images, as if he had been pulled into a three-dimensional projection of the scene.

A young boy, tow-headed, in bright blue shorts and a yellow shirt, ran around a yard, smiling. A woman with light blond hair was chasing him; when she caught him, she started to tickle him. The child's laughter burst out like sunlight, filling Blair with joy.

Then the woman's head turned, as if someone had called her name, and she stood, turning away from the boy, as if to answer someone. The boy got up and headed for the edge of the yard, continuing the game, heedless of the road on the other side.

Heedless of the truck barreling down the road towards him, going too fast to stop...

Blair jerked away in horror, and the vision faded. He was back in the underworld, sitting on the ground, his hands braced on either side of him. He realized that the woman sitting in front of him was a grayer, thinner, sadder version of the cheerful, laughing mother he'd seen in the vision. Somehow, when he'd touched her, he'd been able to share the visions she saw in the pool. Her lips were still moving, and he leaned in to see if he could hear what she was saying.

And caught the faintest of whispers. My fault. My fault. My fault.

He lurched to his feet, stomach twisting as he put things together. This was a place for suicides. This woman's child had died in a horrible accident, during a brief moment when her attention was diverted. She blamed herself. And she had taken her own life over it.

As he hurried over the plain, scanning over numerous people, looking for Jim, a thread of despair crept into his thoughts. There were so many people here. How would he find Jim? It would take him years to cover just what he could see, let alone if the plain extended farther.

He was about to stop and try to come up with some kind of systematic way of searching when a familiar form caught his eye. Against all odds, he had done it. He had found Jim.

Jim was also naked, sitting with his knees up, ankles crossed, staring down into a pool, lips moving slowly. Exactly like the woman he had seen. With trepidation in his heart he stood behind Jim and placed his hands on Jim's shoulders. Although he had a pretty good idea what he was going to see.

He watched the released hostage stumble uncertainly out into the yard, watched her freeze in terror as a stray shot from one of the Federal agents ringing the house precipitated a barrage of gunfire. He heard Jim's shout, watched himself run out to the woman and tackle her to the ground, watched Jim flinch as he got hit. He watched himself roll over, watched Jim run to his side. He saw Jim kiss him, then saw Jim lift his limp body in an sorrowful embrace.

It wasn't any easier to watch when you knew what was going to happen.

The scene shifted. Jim was sitting on their bed, his shoulders slumped, his hands between his knees. His white shirt was stained with blood. The lines of grief etched in his face made him look ten years older.

"Jim, don't," he whispered, throat tight. He knew Jim couldn't hear him, but he couldn't help himself.



Then Jim raised the gun and put it in his mouth.

"No!" he shouted, but not before Jim pulled the trigger.

Blair staggered backwards and the vision broke. Shuddering, he turned away, taking deep breaths and grinding his palms into his eyes, trying to erase that last horrible sight from his memory. When he had regained some of his equilibrium, he turned back and leaned over Jim to hear what he was whispering.

I'm sorry. I'm sorry. I'm sorry.

He straightened, wiping his tears away with the back of his hand. "It's okay," he said aloud. "I'm okay, Jim. It's all right. You don't have to do this anymore."

He crouched in front of Jim, his back to the pool, and put both hands on his shoulders, looking directly into his face. "Come on, buddy. Jim, listen to me. It's okay. I'm here. This was not your fault."

But Jim gave no sign that he had seen or heard Blair. His eyes slid past Blair's to focus on the pool, lips moving in constant repetition.

"Come on, Jim!" A little harder, and a little sharper, and with a shake of Jim's shoulders.

Nothing.

"Hey, this is just like a zone, right? You're locked in on this vision, you can't pay attention to anything else. But you've got to get out of that. So listen to my voice, come on back, and we'll get out of here."

No response.

Maybe Jim needed something more... tangible. He cupped Jim's face in his hands and kissed him gently. Jim stopped whispering, but his mouth was cool and slack against Blair's.

Blair stroked his thumbs lightly over Jim's cheekbones and kissed him harder, teasing Jim's lips open with his tongue. Jim had always loved kissing him. They'd spend hours on the couch on Sundays, drinking beer and watching football and necking. Next to his hair, he thought that his mouth might be Jim's favorite part of him.

Still nothing.

He pulled away, grabbing Jim's chin and turning his face away from the pool. Jim didn't resist him, but when Blair took his hand away, Jim's face slowly turned back to the pool, lips moving in his constant mantra.

Frustrated, he straightened up and paced in a circle, trying to think of ways to get Jim to respond to him. He snapped his fingers in front of Jim's face, clapped his hands next to his ears, pinched his arm, and shouted at him. He slapped Jim's cheek lightly, and then not so lightly. The blow snapped Jim's face to the side, the imprint of Blair's hand red against his pale skin. After a moment he turned back to watching the pool.

"Damn it!" He pushed Jim down on his back; Jim's eyes focused on the gray sky high above them, and when Blair let go, he slowly tilted up back into his original posture, gaze unmoved. Blair threw a handful of stones into the pool, trying to disrupt the vision, but they disappeared with hardly a ripple. He stuck

his foot in, but when he'd gotten thigh deep without touching the bottom, he decided getting in the pool himself might not be such a good idea. He grabbed Jim's arm and started to drag him away; Jim's upper body leaned towards him, but his legs remained firmly on the ground as if rooted. Pushing didn't work, either. No amount of strength that Blair could bring to bear could move Jim away from the pool.

He took a few steps away, trying to tamp down his fear, trying to think of other approaches. If only he had thought to bring something like smelling salts. Although he'd have just lost them at the gate of Objects.

When he turned back to Jim, Tephra was standing on the other side of the pool. "You must say your goodbyes, Blair Sandburg," she said. Her voice chimed in the space around them. "It is time to go."

"No!" he shouted. "Just give me a little more time. I just need – I need to find something to break through this. Give me another chance or two."



"The chances are not mine to give, nor is the time for them. A million chances will make no difference. And the clock is fixed. If you stay here too long, you will not be able to return."

He guessed that was the cherub version of "I don't make the rules," but he didn't care. "You didn't think I could even get here, how do you know I can't wake him up?"

"You showed extraordinary resolve and strength to come this far. I do not at all mean to diminish the nature of your achievement. But you cannot awaken Jim Ellison."

Frustration and exhaustion and grief boiled over within him. "Why?" he screamed. "I got all the way down here, I risked my limbs and my soul, don't you think I could get a freaking break? Tell me what I have to do to release him! There has to be a way! There's always a way!"

Tephra's look was the most sorrowful he had ever seen, and then she disappeared.

Great. He slumped to the ground, head in his hands. Not that the cherub was going to be any help anyway; she wasn't going to do anything but make solemn pronouncements. He blew out his breath and scrubbed his hands over his scalp. Okay, Sandburg, back to work, he thought. Vision didn't work, and neither did hearing. Touch and taste, he'd tried; no go. Smell. How could he do something with smell....

When he raised his head, there was a woman standing to one side of the pool. She was dressed in a long-sleeved dark robe and her hair was arranged in an elaborate crown-like design on the top of her head. Diamonds glinted at her ears and wrists.

"Tephra is most annoyed with you," the woman said, smiling. Her voice was low and smooth and reminded Blair of dark honey.

"Yeah, well, I'm most annoyed with Tephra. Who are you?"

"I am Ereshkigal. I am Queen of this realm."

He scrambled to his feet, hope blooming in his chest. "Then you... you know what I can do to get Jim out of here."

"I do. Nothing."

Blair wanted to fling something at her. "That's NOT FAIR," he shouted. "All these people, they've just made one simple mistake in their life. They gave into despair ONCE. Yes, it's wrong; yes, they should have had more faith; yes, it's a sin to take a life, even your own... but is it really fair that they should have to suffer for all of eternity? For one mistake?" He swallowed, fighting to keep his voice even. "Hell, I could be here – I can think of several times in my life I contemplated killing myself. Yet I'm in paradise. Are these people really so different from me that they deserve having you punish them until the end of time?"

Ereshkigal regarded him calmly. "What makes you think I am punishing them?"

"Are you kidding? I mean, look at this," he said, gesturing at the pool. "Being forced to relive the thing that brought them to despair, over and over? You think that's not punishment?"

"What makes you think that I am the one that forces them to do that?"

He took a step back. "You – you don't? Then... then who..."

Ereshkigal said nothing, but turned and looked at Jim.

An awful realization swept over him, and he slumped to the ground as if he was a puppet with his strings cut. "No," he whispered. "No, it... it can't... not..."

"People end up here because they cannot forgive themselves. I do not wish them here, but if they come I try to care for them as best I can."

He had not thought his heart could hurt this much and still beat. "But... but I forgive him."

"Sadly, yours is not the forgiveness that matters."

Despair swept over him like a tide. He put his face in his hands and cried, then, hopeless, because he could feel the truth of what she was telling him in the center of his being. His journey had been for nothing. Jim hadn't been banished to Hell by some severe, patriarchal system of sin and redemption that Blair could fight against. Jim had been banished to Hell by Jim Ellison. And he couldn't fight that.

When he raised his head, Ereshkigal was still standing there, her face radiating compassion. "I am sorry," she said. "You risked much to get here, I know. I wish things had turned out better."

"So do I," he said dully. He rose and went to crouch in front of Jim again, and drew him forward into a kiss. "I forgive you," he told Jim. "And I love you."

"Shall I summon Tephra to return you to paradise?"

"No." He pushed Jim's legs aside and settled himself in between them, legs crossed, his back against Jim's front. Jim's arms curved loosely around his shoulders. Jim accommodated him, shifting slightly so he could still see the pool over Blair's shoulder. "I'm staying."

He felt a moment of grim satisfaction at the surprise on Ereshkigal's face. "But you... you cannot... if you stay here too long, you will be unable to return."

"I don't want to return."

Surprise gave way to admonition. "If you remain like that, eventually you will be drawn into his vision. You will not be able to resist. You will remain trapped inside what he sees for eternity."

"That's fine." He locked eyes with her. "If Jim can't come back with me, then I'm going to stay with him. A life in Hell with Jim is better than a life in paradise without him."

She frowned, and then vanished in a clap of sound.

Blair sighed, and settled into a comfortable position. Jim's skin was cool against his, and he could hear Jim's whispered I'm sorry like dry leaves rustling in his ear. "For better or for worse, huh?" he muttered, even though Jim couldn't hear him. "I guess I really do love you."

Although what he'd told Ereshkigal was true, he couldn't help but feel a chill of fear, like a cold hand between his shoulder blades, at the thought of having to watch Jim shoot himself over and over. The first time had been bad enough.

He averted his eyes from the pool, resolved to avoid Jim's vision for as long as possible. Ereshkigal had been right, though – he could feel the pool tugging at him, a constant subliminal urge to look into its depths. Eventually he would grow tired of resisting. Eventually he would give in.

Well. This was his choice, after all.

There was a flash of light and a sound like a bell tolling, and Ereshkigal reappeared in front of them. Her feet rested lightly on the surface of the pool, disrupting the images within. The pool went dark. "You are an extraordinary human, Blair Sandburg," she said. Did he imagine it or was there a hint of irritation in her voice? "I will be pleased to have you depart my realm, however."

"No, wait—" he started, but there was another flash of light and another burst of sound.

He was crouching with his back to a police car. Someone was talking over a bullhorn; the sound was so distorted he could barely make out the words, but he thought he caught something about "hostages" and "release". There was a light breeze blowing; something tickled his cheeks. He reached up and ran a hand over his head and felt hair.

And there was a Kevlar vest in his other hand.

"God damn Feds," Jim snarled beside him. "How is it they can fuck up something this simple?"

He turned his head so fast his neck muscles spasmed. Jim was crouched down next to him, loading bullets in the clip of his SIG Sauer. Alive and moving and very much not locked into an infinite loop of guilt and self-punishment. He looked up at Blair and frowned. "What the hell is up with you, Sandburg?"

He realized he was grinning from ear to ear. "Uh, nothing, just... I never get tired of hearing you bitch about the Feds."

Jim gave him a trenchant look, then turned and aimed his gun over the hood of the car. "Come on, let's get ready for action. You going to put that on or what?"

He looked down at the vest. "This! Yeah, sure," he said, as he slipped it over his head and fastened the side buckles. Then he joined Jim in peering over the top of their makeshift cover.

The door to the trailer opened and a woman crept out cautiously, hands raised in the air. "Hostage coming out!" the guy with the bullhorn bellowed. "Hold fire!"



But from somewhere a shot rang out, and then there were guns firing on both sides, and Blair stood up and was running towards the woman, Jim's shout of "Sandburg, get down!" ringing in his ears.

He grabbed her around the hips and pulled her to the ground as he felt something slam into his chest with the force of a two-by-four. The impact threw him onto his back and drove the breath from his lungs. He lay there blinking for a moment, assessing if he hurt and how bad.

His hands scrabbled at the front of the vest, finding the divot in the material where the slug had hit him. With some difficulty, he worked a hand underneath and drew it out again, turning it this way and that in front of his eyes. No blood. No burning sensation. The vest had worked.

Laughter bubbled up from deep inside him. He was alive. He was alive and Jim was alive and everything was going to be okay.

He heard footsteps pounding on the ground, and then Jim skidded to his knees beside him. "Blair, are you okay?" he gasped.

He sat up, putting his hand out to touch Jim's chest. "I'm okay, yeah. I'm okay. I'm alive." He was grinning so widely his jaw hurt.

"Thank God you were wearing a vest," Jim said.

Another bubble of manic laughter rose and escaped. "Thank someone, anyway." On impulse, he grabbed Jim's head and kissed him soundly.

And then realized what he'd done. They hadn't exactly been out at the station about their relationship. "Oh, crap, Jim," he whispered, "I'm sorry."

But Jim was smiling that sweet half-smile that made Blair's heart turn over in his chest. "Forget it. It was bound to come out sooner or later. We can chalk it up to extreme circumstances and maybe we won't get too much of a lecture from Simon." He cupped his hand around the back of Blair's head and returned the kiss, then stood and helped Blair to his feet.

Jim insisted that Blair get checked out by the paramedics while he went to talk to Simon. As Blair was sitting on the back of the ambulance, waiting for someone to come look at him, he caught a gold shimmer out of the corner of his eye.

"Tephra!" The cherub had perched next to him in the vehicle. She was insubstantial, flickering like an old movie on an analog projector.

"It is good to see you, Blair Sandburg." It never failed to amaze him how she managed to communicate emotion with such alien features. The dominant one right now was amusement.

"It's good to see you, too."

"Jim Ellison is well?"

"Yeah, very well, thanks," he said, grinning. "Please convey my deepest gratitude to Queen Ereshkigal for her gift."

"She will be pleased to hear that you made good use of it."

"Am I going to remember what happened?"

"No. Tomorrow when you wake this will be a strange dream, if you remember anything at all."

"Okay." As much as he wanted to remember being in paradise and traveling through the seven gates, he couldn't imagine what it would be like living life when you knew what was waiting for you on the other side. He turned his head to look at the cherub. "Goodbye, Tephra. Thank you for all your help."

"Goodbye, Blair Sandburg. We will meet again, but hopefully not for a long time." And she was gone, dispersed like morning mist in sunlight.

The paramedics pronounced him fit, but warned him that he'd likely be sore in the morning. He thought privately to himself that the things he had planned for tonight were far more likely to leave him sore than a slug to the chest.

When they got home Blair dragged Jim upstairs and proceeded to erase the memory of a cold and unresponsive Jim Ellison by proving to his – and Jim's – satisfaction that Jim was, in fact, quite responsive. Twice.

Now they lay sprawled on their bed, sleepy and sated. Blair had his head on Jim's chest, listening to rain patter on the skylight, letting himself luxuriate in the feeling of Jim's warm skin against his own.

Jim was running his fingers slowly through Blair's hair, but he seemed detached and remote. "What's up?" Blair asked.

"Thinking."

"About what?"

Jim shook his head. "I don't know. I just feel like I dodged a bullet today, somehow."

You have no idea, Blair thought, suppressing the urge to giggle hysterically. "So... what do you want to do about it?"

Jim shifted, tugging on Blair's hair until he raised his head and met Jim's eyes. "I don't know," Jim said. "I guess we ought to talk about... things."

Blair raised an eyebrow. "Things?"

"Yeah, you know... like what happens if one of us gets shot..."

He reached up and cut Jim off with a kiss, because he couldn't bear to start that vision loop playing in his head again. "Okay," he said when he pulled away, "but let's do it tomorrow."

"Tomorrow?"

"Yeah, tomorrow. Tonight I just want to get some sleep."

"Okay, tomorrow," Jim replied, settling Blair against him.

As he drifted off to sleep, he felt Jim kiss the top of his head and whisper, "...love you, Blair."

"Love you, too," he muttered as he slid away.