



Bleeding Daylight

By Xanateria

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Nothing worth having comes without some kind of fight. Got to kick at the darkness till it bleeds daylight.

-Bruce Cockburn, Lovers In A Dangerous Time

August 17th, 1999
852 Prospect Ave
Cascade, Washington
5:01 pm

Like most arguments, this one started over something small. Jim made some biting little remark about the fact he hadn't had a chance to put away the groceries, and Blair felt what was left of his patience snap.

He'd thought he would be happy to stop walking on egg shells and get down to the business of rebuilding things between them. And things had been better, the last little while, until today. Jim hadn't just woken up on the wrong side of the bed; he'd woken up in the wrong room entirely.

"What is wrong with you today, Jim?" he demanded. "Is there something you want to say to me?"

For just a moment, confusion replaced the low simmer of anger he could see in the other man's eyes, but then it was gone and Jim turned away.

But he wasn't getting out of this that easy. No way.

"Hey, whatever it is, why don't you just spit it out, and we can do something crazy and actually deal with it." Blair managed not to shout, but it was a near thing.

"Not everything can be solved by talking, you know."

"Right, because petty bickering accomplishes so much more." There was no answer to that, not that he really expected one. Blair bit back a sigh, and turned to head back into the living room. At the very least, he figured a little distance might cool things off.

Before he could get more than a step, Jim reached out and grabbed his arm. "Wait. I'm sorry. I shouldn't have been such an ass. It's just everything is different now. You know I'm not the best with change."

Somehow, Blair managed to stop the laugh that threatened to escape. That was an understatement if he ever heard one.

"I know. But, Jim, man, we've already been through the worst. What else is there that could possibly be as bad as the whole fiasco we just went through?"

There was a long pause; they stared at each other, and Blair felt his heartbeat rush in his ears. In all the years they'd known each other, he was pretty sure he'd never seen that expression on his Sentinel's face before.

He reached down to cover the hand that gripped his arm. "Whatever it is, you can tell me. Let me help."

"I can't." His voice was harsh, like he fought to get the words out. "It's not that I don't want to, but the last thing I want is to mess things up between us again."

"I'm right here, and I'm not going anywhere," Blair told him, the weight of the promise heavy in the air.

"But you almost did. I get it, I do, but I don't know if I can take the chance."

"For what?" The breathless question was all he could manage to get out.

Another second, maybe two, and then Jim stepped forward again, crowded him against the counter until there wasn't so much as a sliver of space between them. The heat from his body was a shock against Blair's rain chilled skin, but before he could open his mouth to speak, Jim tangled a hand in his hair and pulled him close, and kissed him. And this was no gentle peck. It felt like he would only have this one kiss, like he had to pour everything into it, so he did.

For another second or so, shock held him still. Then his brain caught up to the rest of him and he kissed back, determined to give as good as he got, and completely ignore the part of him that insisted this

couldn't possibly be happening, that there was no way his oh-so-straight, not to mention male, best friend, was kissing him like his breath was the only source of oxygen in the whole world.

Right then, it didn't matter that he was breaking every rule he'd ever made for himself, that he would probably end up sorrier than he could imagine, that this was probably yet another cruel taunt of a dream. When Jim's tongue pressed against his lips and demanded entry, Blair opened his mouth, let himself be explored, let himself feel every last second of a truly superior kiss.

One kiss slid into another: hot, wet and each one deeper than the last. He slid his hands up, gripped Jim's shoulders and took control of the next one. It was only fair he get to do some exploring of his own. And he learned as he went along, the fact that Jim liked it when he bit his bottom lip, just hard enough, but he liked it even better when he tangled their tongues together, a slow, slick slide that drove them both just a little bit crazy.

"Okay, not objecting here big guy, not at all, but I gotta ask, what brought that on?" he managed to ask when they pulled apart to look at each other. He knew he probably looked as dazed as he felt, and he couldn't have stopped his grin if he tried, but no matter how amazing kissing Jim was – and it was pretty fucking awesome, actually, he definitely needed to catch up, before they kept going.

"I kept having this dream, of you and me, and a really big bed," Jim admitted, "and it was so good, I couldn't get it out of my head and...wait, you're not mad."

The genuine confusion made Blair shake his head. "Why would I be mad when you do something I've wanted for...well pretty much forever?"

Another long silence, and he watched it sink in; saw the exact moment the light bulb clicked on.

Then Jim gave him a long look, and the heat from it made him swallow once, hard.

"Well, clearly, we need to talk. But I think there's something else we need to do first," he observed, his mild tone at odds with his wicked grin.

"I think you're right," Blair agreed. They pulled each other's shirts off right there in the kitchen, and shed more clothes on the way to the couch. It was closer than the bed, and just then Blair was more than willing to sacrifice a little comfort for the sake of getting naked sooner rather than later.

Stripped down to his boxers, he stopped just before he could lay on the couch. Before he could get them down, Jim snagged a finger in the waistband. "Oh please, let me."

"Be my guest," he managed to answer, just before he toppled backward on to the couch.

Slow enough that he had to fight to keep from telling him to just get on with it, Jim slid the soft cotton down, and off, then went to his knees in front of the couch.

Blair fought not to squirm under the scrutiny that came next. It was easier, though, because he could see the want and need he felt reflected back at him in Jim's eyes.

Then, he leaned forward to kiss his way down Blair's body, tracked each and every involuntary motion, every sigh and moan. Just when he thought he'd be reduced to begging, Jim's mouth was on his cock.

It took a second for him to realize those embarrassingly needy sounds were his own, but by then, he didn't care, and had only just enough functional brain cells to keep from thrusting forward too hard.

When he felt the telltale curls of pleasure start to sweep through him, he managed to tug a hand through Jim's hair. Words failed him, but he felt he ought to warn the guy somehow.

Undeterred, Jim kept to the same rhythm, and increased his suction just a bit. With the hand that wasn't wrapped around the base of Blair's cock, he reached down and freed himself from his already unbuttoned jeans.

Already close, Blair took one look, and that was it. The idea that doing this got Jim so worked up was one thing, but to see him, hard and ready, well that was another thing entirely.

He hadn't realized he'd closed his eyes until he had to open them again, warm and overly relaxed, the way a really good turns-your-body-to-Jell-O orgasm always left him.

Jim looked so happy, he slid toward smug, but he was entitled, for a few minutes at least.

"You're overdressed," Blair pointed out. His voice was still a bit wrecked, and his words might have been just a bit slurred, but he made his point.

Jim nodded, and shucked off his pants and underwear, and stood unselfconsciously nude, while Blair looked his fill.

If he was honest, Blair would admit to some sneaked looks now and then, but this was different. And certain portions of Jim's anatomy liked that he was on display, which made it even better.

They ended up tangled together on the couch, while they wrestled for a position they both liked. Sprawled over Jim's lap, where he could wrap one hand around the hard length trapped between their bodies was good, not quite right. In between kisses that made his head spin, he urged Jim onto his back, then straddled his legs, and braced a hand on the back of the couch.

"You know what they say, Jim," he told him just before he leaned forward. "Turnabout is fair play."

They made it to the bed eventually. He'd insisted that when Jim finally did take him, he wanted to be able to enjoy it properly without being worried about falling to the floor. Granted, they'd only managed to move because he'd dangled the idea of a shared shower afterward, but still.

In all the times he'd imagined what it would be like if they were together, he thought he'd covered every variation. He had an excellent imagination, after all. But none of his scenarios had captured how out of control it felt to let himself give in to how much he wanted when it came to this man. As much as he enjoyed sex with men and women in the past, none of his previous partners made him feel even a fraction of the desperation Jim could evoke with a look, the barest of touches.

He didn't do long term relationships, or rather he hadn't until now. But, he already knew he needed Jim; this was just the same thing, taken to the next logical level, or so he tried to convince himself, as he looked up at the ceiling in the dim light of the moon coming in from the window, and wondered what the hell he had gotten himself into. There was a big difference between two people out for a good time, and falling in to bed with the one person you couldn't imagine your life without.

Beside him, Jim made a sleepy little noise of protest, then shifted and opened his eyes. "You're thinking too loud, Blair."

The sound of his first name made him smile, just a little. "Sorry."

"Are you alright?" Jim stroked a hand down his chest, rested it over his heart for a moment, then reached to pull the blankets over both of them better.

"Yeah. I'm okay. I just can't help but wonder, what happens now, ya know?" He shifted on to his side so he could look at Jim, tried not get distracted by the vivid mark on his collarbone that he'd sucked there only a little while ago.

"You know, you're allowed to just enjoy it, when something this good happens," Jim teased gently. Then, the amusement faded to something more serious, his look shifted from amused to intense.

"I know it might seem sudden, but this is something I've thought about for a long time, longer than I'd like to admit. And it hit me that we've wasted so much time when we could have connected like this. And, I thought if I had half your courage, I'd already know whether you wanted me, or not."

Blair nodded, and turned that over in his mind. "So why did you wait so long, then? Why not just ask me?"

"At first, I told myself I couldn't risk our friendship. Then, I didn't want to lose my Guide. Hell, I still don't. But after everything that happened, I couldn't pretend that we have as long as we want to find happiness. I got tired of lying to myself."

Blair knew Jim better than anyone, so he noticed the other man's unnatural stillness, how his breath came faster. But he knew he had to ask. "About what?"

"About the fact I want way more than friendship, or even just sex, with you. The truth is, I..." he trailed off, then cleared his throat, and tried again. "I love you, Blair."

"Good. 'Cause I gotta tell ya, man, the whole unrequited love thing? It really sucks," Blair deadpanned, then laughed quietly, unable to stop a wide grin. "I love you, too." He leaned over to steal a kiss, this one slow and sweet, the earlier urgency replaced with tenderness.

Long moments later, he pulled back so he could speak. "Was it really so hard to say?"

"Maybe," Jim admitted. They were too busy for words then, as they traded more kisses back and forth. Then still later, as he slid into the tight heat of the body below him, he spoke again. "Don't worry; I'm sure I'll get better with practice."

November 21st, 1999
Cascade Police Station – Major Crimes Division
Cascade, Washington
8:30 pm

If they really wanted to scare the new recruits to the police academy, they should warn them about the monotony that numbed the mind when you had to read the same pages over and over.

Blair resisted the urge to reach for more coffee; he wanted to be able to sleep at some point, and he'd already polished off most of a pot on his own.

He had more patience than most for research. Still, not even his skills could find what wasn't there. He'd combed through all the reports, interview transcripts, every scrap of information on all five of the missing girls. If there was a connection between them, he couldn't find it, despite their similarities. All of them between ten and twelve years old, taken from their homes, where they should have been protected and safe, found murdered approximately two days later.

The list of injuries proved it hadn't been an easy two days either; bruises and fractures, concussions, and varying degrees of sexual assault. The thought of what the girls had gone through made his stomach roll even as the headache that had threatened all day stabbed behind his eyes.

They'd compiled lists of all the people in each girl's life, hoping for overlap, for some connection that would tell them why these specific families had been torn apart. More than three weeks in and the case was going nowhere. Whoever the monster was who would do this, he was smart. There was very little trace evidence at any of the crime scenes or dump sites, and what they had found was no help, at least so far. Even worse, the pattern of escalation meant another girl would be taken within two days, unless they caught a break.

After the second girl, Natalee Merano, had been reported missing, Cascade Police had authorized the formation of a task force to apprehend the kidnapper. At last count, nearly thirty officers had been assigned or had volunteered to help on the case. Somehow, the lack of progress still felt like a personal failure.

"Sandburg? Time to take a break before your eyeballs start bleeding, Chief."

Jim stepped into the conference room Blair had appropriated when it was clear his desk was nowhere near big enough for the sheer volume of paper generated by the case. He handed Blair a bottle of his favourite guava juice, and managed to smile though his hands twitched with the desire to straighten papers.

"Thanks, Jim," Blair told him, with a smile of his own in gratitude, as he opened it and sipped. "I have to admit, a break sounds good. But I just don't feel like I can step away."

"There's always another victim to save, another monster to stop," Jim reminded him and stepped back to close and lock the door.

"You have to take time for yourself, or you'll burn out." With a gentle tug, Jim pulled Blair up out of the chair and into his arms. "And I'm selfish enough to admit I need my partner far too much to let that happen," he admitted softly.

"Well, at least we can be selfish together," Blair told him, then tilted his head up for a kiss. It still surprised him sometimes, that someone like Jim could want someone like him, love someone like him. After the disaster with his dissertation, it looked like they wouldn't even be able to save their friendship, never mind end up as more than friends.

Still, he couldn't regret his choice to deny his work. Stacked up against the many very scary ways Jim could have been exploited if the truth came out, his academic credibility simply didn't matter.

Later, once they'd actually started talking again, Jim admitted that the fact Blair would throw away everything he worked for without hesitation was what made him question how good they could be together, if he had the balls to be honest.

That's not to say their relationship didn't have its rough spots. In so many ways they were different enough to be near opposites. And they lived in each other's pockets much more than the average couple. That was a plus and a minus really. No way in hell was Blair comfortable with the idea of Jim facing danger without him, as a cop or a Sentinel. Unfortunately, the fact they faced those dangers together meant there was no way for Jim to spare him the details that liked to parade through his nightmares.

"Hey. You okay? Where did you go?" Jim asked, his brow furrowed in concern.

Blair blinked and reminded his brain now was not the time for wandering. "Sorry. Guess the last few days have gotten to me more than I thought."

"I know what you mean." Jim brushed his lips against Blair's forehead, then moved lower to kiss him again, and took his time, drawing it out until they were both breathless and dizzy.

He couldn't hold back his low hum of appreciation. His conscience reminded him this was the wrong time, and definitely the wrong place.

"I know what we're doing is important. But, you have to take time to remind yourself of the good things in the world, or you get lost in the darkness," he said, low and soft against the shell of Blair's ear.

Blair thought about that for a second, then nodded and reached to pull Jim's T-shirt out of his jeans, ran his hands across the hard planes of the warm, broad chest underneath. "We'll have to be fast," he pointed out, as Jim grinned at him wickedly.

They undressed quickly, caught up in the urgency of the moment. Blair managed to hold on to enough presence of mind to spread their clothes out as a makeshift blanket, and they sank to the floor.

Stripped of his words, weak with how much he wanted to taste and touch, he didn't notice the hard floor, no longer cared that only a thin wall stood between them and the rest of the world.

He reached up for a kiss, but Jim only let their mouths touch for a few heartbeats, then smiled, and pushed him back down, just hard enough to make his point.

"Just lay back and let me take care of you," he instructed, all the different emotions he felt clear on his face: lust, longing, the familiar determination.

He felt his skin heat everywhere Jim touched him, and it was only moments before desire made it all but impossible to lay still. It took every bit of his concentration to be quiet, as Jim explored all the places that made him the most crazy.

The hot swipe of a tongue against his stomach, and the muscles there quivered. Then the wet heat moved lower, engulfed him in one slick slide. He managed to stay quiet, but had to thrust up, had to move.

"Don't move or I'll stop."

The low growl was a command, and he whimpered, but obeyed.

Jim rewarded him with more suction, and he sucked Blair's length down faster, and made the hottest little sounds of greedy contentment while he did it.

All too soon, Blair felt his muscles tense, and his whole body broke out in a sweat. He tried to choke out a warning, but all that came out was a moan, low and quiet. When he came, it crested in a wave that seemed to go on for far longer than he thought he could stand. His muscles went limp, probably because he'd misplaced his spine somewhere. If his neurons were firing at all, he'd have worried.

As it was, he managed a dazed smile, and tugged at the back of Jim's neck until he came back up close enough to hug.

"Feel better?" Jim's voice was a purr of satisfaction, and his eyes practically glowed with happiness.

"You know it," Blair told him. Safe and sated, cradled against his Sentinel, there was no way he could be anything else.

"But what about you?" he asked, a moment later, when he registered the hardness against his hip.

"Believe me, I got plenty out of that too," Jim reassured him. "And you can take care of me later, when we have a bit more privacy and a mattress you can pin me to."

Blair thought about that for a moment, and felt his dick twitch with interest. "Cool."

They stayed like that for a few more minutes; each drew strength from the other, stored it up to face the next horror they knew would come far too soon.

Just a shade under forty hours later, they got the call that another girl had vanished out of her bedroom sometime in the night. Dawn was still hours away and Blair wiped the grit out of his eyes while Jim navigated the rain-washed streets. They didn't speak, but the silence was thick with guilt, and anger.

They'd only managed a few hours sleep. And when they'd fallen into bed, it had been more important they connect physically than sleep. Blair had made good on the suggestion to pin Jim to the mattress, had fucked him with long, deep strokes and but slow, so slow he'd made his normally quiet lover beg before he'd finally let himself stop thinking and pushed them both over the edge.

And it was good, better than good, really. But, they'd only left the station because Simon had ordered them to take four hours off the clock before they fell over. Once they'd slaked their hunger for each other, they hadn't even had the energy to shower. Jim had wiped them clean with a shirt from the floor, and they fell asleep in a tangle of sweaty limbs.

Both of them knew what the sound of the phone meant, and Blair also knew they both blamed themselves because they'd failed to prevent the latest atrocity. It didn't matter that it wasn't logical; he could hardly call Jim on it, when he couldn't stop doing the same thing.

He resisted the urge to sigh, and reached out to take Jim's hand instead. He only let go as they pulled up to the house that was their latest crime scene.

"You good to go, big guy?"

Jim nodded, his face pale, and eyes bleak. "I'm fine."

He wasn't of course. They were both exhausted and there hadn't been time to eat more than a few bites. The pressure of the now high-profile case only added to their stress, and all of that meant extra effort to control his senses, but Blair only nodded, and stroked his hand down Jim's back.

"Alright. Let's go get this over with."

It was sad, but useful, there had been so many of these interviews lately, they had a routine down. Blair went to speak to the distraught parents, while Jim made a circuit of the house that ended with the victim's bedroom.

Jayna's room was typical for an eleven year old girl. Somehow, that made it harder to go into. He'd tracked a heartbeat from downstairs when they came in, so he wasn't surprised when he saw the small boy on the bed, and after a second or two, he realized this must be the victim's little brother, Robbie.

Before he could get so much as a word out, the boy jumped up, in a hurry to get out of the room. Once he uncurled, Jim could see the small, glass bottle clutched in one small hand. Time slowed as Robbie tried to dodge around him and lost his grip on the bottle. It shattered on the hardwood floor, and liquid splashed onto Jim's pant leg.

Robbie froze, and then began to cry with great, gulping sobs that shook his whole body. That brought his mother, and thankfully, Blair.

Mother and son were ushered away quickly. Blair returned and dealt with the glass, while Jim tried not to get distracted by the play of light on the shards. He'd dialed smell way down, as soon as he could, but the sudden spike in input had all his other senses going crazy.

"Stay here with me, okay?" Blair asked, his voice slightly lower, threaded with command, the way it always was when he went into Guide mode. "We'll go back to the station, you can change, and we'll do some grounding exercises. But, you have to not zone on me, in the meantime."

Jim nodded. "I'm alright." He reached out, squeezed Blair's hand in reassurance, and then followed his partner out of the room and down the stairs.

Once they assured the family they weren't upset at such a small mess, especially since it was clearly an accident, they slipped out the front door. As it shut, Jim felt a chill that raised the hair on his arms and the back of his neck. He scanned the area for threats, but everything looked the same as when they pulled up. Still, he knew better than to ignore his instincts, and reached out to put a hand on Blair's arm.

Blair stopped immediately, and looked back in concern. "What's wrong?"

"I don't know," Jim admitted, but didn't move. "Something feels off." He felt his muscles tense, coiled to meet the threat, but they tracked down the steps without incident. Only a few feet from the truck and he stopped again, caught between his instincts and his intellect. Rationally he knew there was nothing to be afraid of; the darkness hid only the same things they would see in the light of day. That didn't stop part of him from screaming at him to protect his Guide. But his body couldn't decide if he wanted to fight, or run far away, as fast as possible.

He felt the tremors in his arms and legs, and distantly, could hear Blair's heartbeat as it sped up. But just then his stomach pitched as he got another wave of too strong floral scent from his pants. For an instant the world spun, then righted again. But, that was enough.

"Maybe you better drive, Chief." He held the keys out to Blair, who stepped around him to take them.

"No problem. I can do that, but let's get you in the truck first."

Jim let himself be led to the passenger side, even let Blair do up his seatbelt. The exhaustion he'd held at bay for days weighed him down, took advantage of how much of his concentration was elsewhere.

Footsteps sounded, overly loud on the gravel, before Blair climbed in.

An instant before he turned the key, the nameless fear and dread coalesced into a warning. "No, don't..."

The force of the blast that rocked the truck stole the rest of his words, his air, his thoughts, everything. There was heat then, and noise, but nothing made sense. Something struck his head then, and he slid toward the darkness before he could grab hold of why that was a bad idea.



The return to consciousness wasn't nearly as easy or as pleasant. He recognized the smell of the hospital, but faded away again even as he tried to recognize the sounds around him. When he came back to himself again, the babble of voices was too much, and then it got worse, because he couldn't hear Blair's among them. And that was wrong. Blair would never leave him while he was injured, not unless he had no choice.

The swell of fear from that helped him swim up through the last of the cobwebs. His whole body hurt - a deep ache that throbbed and probably hid countless smaller, sharper pains. The right side of his head was bandaged, as was his left arm. The skin of the arm felt pulled too tight, and seared with the heat that spelled burn.

But his injuries didn't concern him, for the moment. He couldn't quite remember what happened, how he'd gotten here, but that didn't matter either.

"Where's Blair?"

"Take it easy, Jim. You've had a rough time of it."

Simon uncurled from the chair beside the bed, and stepped up to offer him a cup of water with a straw in it.

"Where is he?" Jim demanded, as loudly as he could manage, since his throat felt like someone had taken sandpaper to it.

Simon reached down and put a hand on his shoulder, and set the cup down. "He's in surgery, Jim. You were both pretty banged up from the explosion, but Blair caught the worst of it because it was

positioned on that side of the truck. Taggart's going over the pieces they found with a fine tooth comb right now," he assured.

As if his boss' words had lifted the fog in his brain, Jim could see pictures, flashes of the truck, the fire, and Blair, his face blackened, clothes torn and scorched, and so still.

Jim squeezed his eyes shut, and took a few deep breaths. Those pictures wouldn't help. Guilt pressed down, wanted to overwhelm him, but he shunted it aside. He deserved it, of course, but there would be time for that later.

He wanted to get up, go to the surgical floor waiting room, anything to be closer to Blair. And, if Simon hadn't been there, he probably would have. As the minutes ticked into hours, his lack of movement ratcheted his anxiety even higher.

At the four hour mark, a younger man in scrubs came to tell them that Blair had held his own, but would likely be in surgery for another six to eight hours.

Jim felt his stomach sink, as he considered how much damage there must have been to take that long to repair.

Just after the update, Simon started to nod in his chair, and it wasn't difficult to persuade him to take a break go get himself coffee.

Alone in the room, Jim listened to the sound of his breath, and tried to quiet his mind. What ifs screamed through his brain, which helpfully showed him images of Blair broken and bleeding, limbs skewed in unnatural positions.

Rapid footsteps sounded in the hall, and his vision went black around the edges when the same doctor came back in.

"Mr. Ellison, I wanted to come back out and let you know that things have taken a turn for the worst. Your friend came in with serious internal bleeding and has lost a lot of blood from numerous contusions and abrasions. He has a skull fracture, and the fragments from one of his broken ribs collapsed his lungs. We had to remove his spleen and his liver was damaged. I'm very sorry, but I thought you should be prepared. It doesn't look good.

The room took a long lazy spin to the left, and his head went light, but Jim managed to nod in acknowledgement. Thankfully, the doctor didn't expect a response, only gripped his shoulder in wordless sympathy and slipped out the door.

Jim only realized he was crying when he felt wetness hit his hand. It was his fault. Blair could die right now, and for what? It had seemed so important that he stay on the force, find justice for those who couldn't get it for themselves.

Now, though, all he could think was that his drive to protect everyone else had put his Guide -the one person he should have put first- in what turned out to be mortal danger. His own low moan was loud in the room. He'd pushed the guilt aside earlier, but now it pressed down with enough weight that he couldn't get enough air.

Distantly, he heard his breath catch, and then speed up. But sounds slid away, then distorted like he was underwater. It occurred to him he might be about to zone, and there was no one here to bring him out of it. No less than he deserved, really.

But no, he could hear Simon's voice, even if he couldn't make out the words, and the lighter tones of a woman. And, he could still hear the harshness of his breath as it rasped in and out of his chest, faster and faster.

"Jim, come on now. Snap out of it. Blair needs you to be strong right now. He's gonna come through this, so you need to calm the hell down, and pull yourself together so you can be strong for him once he does." As he spoke, Simon gripped Jim's shoulders, hard enough that pain sparked down his arms.

"There's no way you could have known this would happen," Simon continued, once he saw he had the other man's attention. "You shouldn't blame yourself."

"I can't lose him, Simon." He forced the admission out, felt himself start to shake at how very true it was. The thought of a life without Blair in it was completely alien, unrecognizable.

"You're not gonna lose him, Jim. He's a hell of a lot tougher than both of us put together, and you know it. Blair's a fighter. He'll come back to you, you'll see."

Something in his boss' tone made Jim glance up sharply.

Simon's smile was the same, but his eyes showed that their attempt to keep the nature of their relationship a secret hadn't exactly been what you call successful.

"It's alright. I haven't said anything yet, and I don't plan to," Simon explained. "Hell, I wouldn't have brought it up now, but I figured I should let you know that I know so you aren't wearing yourself out more trying to hide it."

After everything that had happened, Jim figured he could be forgiven for being a few steps behind at this point, but he nodded and tried to get his brain to catch up to where it should be. "Thanks," he managed.

"You're welcome," Simon smiled down at him. "I'll admit, you surprised me. But, I'm happy for you, really. You deserve to be happy. You both do."

Under normal circumstances, he'd never have made it out of the room unquestioned, but this was not a normal day, and Jim let him go without comment when he claimed he needed to go to the bathroom.

As soon as the door to the hospital room closed behind him, Simon let his pleasant expression slip. To lend credence to his story, he walked toward the men's room. Inside, he scrubbed his hands over his face, then leaned down to splash himself with cold water. He could go for long stretches without sleep, but it always got harder then things were so intense.

He ran into Henri as he came out of the bathroom, unfortunately quite literally.

"No offense, Captain, but you look like shit."

"Not exactly a news flash." Simon retorted, as they disentangled themselves. He made no comment as the other man followed him out the nearest exit. His joints all felt like they needed to be oiled as he walked far enough away from the entrance that he could indulge in a cigar, at least for a few minutes.

"You know the kid is a survivor. If anyone can pull through this, it's him," his subordinate offered.

Simon fumbled in his pocket for his lighter, and shook his head. "I know that. But it's not just Blair we have to worry about."

"But, Jim's okay. You said he was okay." It was more of an accusation than a statement.

Simon shook his head. "As far as I know, physically, he's fine. But I don't think he'll stay that way if Blair doesn't pull through."

That got him a series of slow blinks. "Did they finally stop dancing around each other and get together?"

Long practice made it possible for him not to react. "The exact nature of their relationship is not our business."

"Very nice, Simon. A great non-answer," Henri replied with a knowing look.

"And it's true," he answered. "Whatever connects them, it's different, deeper than most. They need each other in ways I don't think we can understand. As close as they are now, I'm pretty sure Jim would give up, without Blair. Oh, maybe not on the outside, where we could see it, but down where it matters, he wouldn't be the Jim we know anymore."

For a long moment the only sound came was the distant rumble of a bus as it drew closer to the hospital. Then, Henri looked at him, eyes troubled. "This is the first time I've ever thought of how close they are as a bad thing."

"Welcome to the club," Simon told him.

Another pause, this one edged closer to uncomfortable. "Well, you may be right, Simon, but that doesn't mean we can't hold him together. We can all help," he offered without hesitation.

"That's exactly what I was hoping you'd say," Simon agreed with a smile as he stubbed out the cigar so they could go back inside.

Jim was too caught in the sick dread he couldn't control to want to talk, and Simon knew better than to expect conversation. Still, his presence was a comfort as they waited for an update one way or the other.

An hour passed, with no word, but Simon insisted that no news was good news. Another hour slid by and still they waited. A nurse came and checked on him, insisted he take the pills she offered him then left him in peace.

The medication made him feel disconnected from his body, not asleep but not precisely awake either. The more he let himself drift, the louder, more insistent his instincts got. If - no when - Blair made it through this, they needed to talk about some changes to their life. There had to be a way to protect his tribe, whoever that might encompass, and not endanger those he cared about.

He didn't know what that would be, not yet. But, Blair could think of something like he always did. The man lived so far outside the box he couldn't even see it, most of the time.

The door to the room opened and interrupted his thoughts. The same doctor, this time with his cap off his mask pulled down to show a tired smile, stepped into the room and moved to the bedside.

"Mr. Ellison, I'm sorry I didn't come back before now. Things got pretty intense there for a bit, but Mr. Sandburg made it through surgery. The complications are still a problem and the next twenty-four hours will still be critical, but it's a good sign he's come this far. They're moving him into recovery now, and I'll tell the nurses to keep you updated."

Weak with relief, Jim had to blink a few times to get the spots out of his vision before he could speak. "Thank you. Really, I can't thank you enough," he managed, and he didn't care that he sounded so wrecked. Wouldn't be the first time the guy dealt with someone barely coherent anyway.

The doctor didn't stay long, which was good, since he looked dead on his feet. After he was gone, Simon fussed with the pillows and blankets a bit, and ordered Jim to get some real rest.

Jim let his eyes slide shut, but didn't sleep right away. There were always going to be monsters who needed to be caught, but maybe there was more than one way to catch them. Maybe he'd let himself stay with what was familiar and comfortable for too long.

He'd never considered a life outside of police work, it had given him the focus, and the structure he needed in his life after he came out of the jungle. But it had also given him a lot of grief, taken him into far too many dark places, filled with the worst things one person could do to another.

He had a life outside of work now, Blair had seen to that. And that's what really mattered: his Guide's well being and happiness. He couldn't put Blair through what he'd gone through these last few hours; Next time, if there was one, it could just as easily be him the next thing to dead.

The fact Blair had pulled through only strengthened his belief that he needed to make sure this was the last close call for either of them.

Neither one of them were strangers to first night home from the hospital fatigue. But this time was different. Blair was exhausted, but he couldn't settle down and relax into the comforts of home: his own down comforter on the bed, the fresh citrus scent of all natural soap in the bathroom, even the extra soft throw pillows he could sink into on the couch.

Jim insisted he rest there, where he could keep an eye on him.

And truth be told, he hadn't really wanted to be alone in the bedroom. But he hadn't expected the jittery, tense flutters to set up permanent residence in his stomach either.

Jim brought him a glass of juice and his next dose of painkillers, the brush of his fingers chilled and wet from the condensation on the glass. "Alright?" he asked, his voice a low murmur against the rising tide of fatigue that threatened.

Once the pills were down, Blair managed a nod. "Yeah. I'm good. Just tired." But it sounded wrong, even to him, forced and false.

He watched Jim as he walked back to the kitchen. From the rigid set of his shoulders, he felt it too, things felt off somehow, like someone had painted a wide gap between them that neither of them knew how to bridge.

A bit later, Jim came back in and crouched to light the fire. When he finished, he shifted his weight, about to move on to some other chore, but Blair patted the couch beside him. "Come sit with me," he asked.

He scooted his feet out of the way, so Jim could sit in his usual spot and stretch his legs out on the rug. "I was gonna wait, and talk to you later, but this can't wait." He paused, breath caught in his throat, stolen by the sudden surge of anxiety.

"What's going on, Jim? You've been so distant for the last few days. It's like you aren't even here half the time, and when you are here, you're so angry. You try not to show it, but this is me. I know you." He wanted to add that it might have well have been on a billboard, it telegraphed so obviously, seeped into his skin wherever they touched. But, he couldn't go down that road when he knew how uncomfortable the more metaphysical aspects of their connection still made his partner.

There was silence for a long moment, and then Jim sighed. "You're right. I've been so focussed on what's in my head, I was a jerk. I'm sorry." He paused, and his gaze dropped. When he looked up again, he opened his mouth to speak, then stopped, balanced on the edge of another long silence.

When he finally spoke, the words were rushed, like he couldn't quite believe he would get them out otherwise.

"I want to leave."

Blair felt himself freeze, every muscle locked in shock. Then, his heart rate jumped, so fast it hurt, but that was good because it gave him something to focus on. He should have known. No one stayed with him for this long, he'd learned that years ago. Only this time, he wasn't sure he would survive being left behind. But, that wasn't important. He wanted Jim happy, so he would find a way to let go.

He shifted his weight, about to get up. "Alright," he managed, though his throat felt too tight to let the words out.

Jim turned to look at him then, alerted by the blank numbness in his tone. "Whoa. Wait, where are you going?" His arms tightened, held Blair's feet in place while he worked it out.

"Oh no. No. Not you. I didn't mean I want to leave you, I meant, I think I want to leave police work," he explained, as he sat up and scooted down so they were side by side.

"I wouldn't leave you, not now, and not ever again," Jim reiterated. When he moved again, it was slow and careful, and he ran a hand down Blair's arm, then pulled him into an embrace. "You might as well ask me to cut off an arm," he explained, his voice hoarse and rough. "God, how could you even think that?"

Rather than answer, Blair leaned back and kissed him, pressed himself so close, like he would climb inside if he could. There was no easy way to explain how the sum total of his relationships had taught him that loving him meant leaving him; he was so determined not to screw this one up, and make Jim leave.

Tears threatened, he could feel the pressure of them in his throat, but he fought them back, focused on the kiss instead, let it stand as his apology. It was better that than any words he could come up with anyway.

Jim stroked a hand against his hair, shifted their next kiss from desperate to gentle, and touched his lips to the corner of his Guide's mouth, his eye lids, even his nose, before he claimed his mouth again.

Moments later, Blair leaned back, and tried to remember he still needed air. Nothing in the world felt as good as this, swept along by a tide of desire, and longing, letting himself sink into it all until he couldn't tell what came from himself and what came from Jim.

"I need to learn to think before I speak," Jim offered, as he kissed his way down Blair's neck. "I'm sorry I scared you," he continued, before he nipped at a particularly favored spot.

"So make it up to me," Blair demanded. His voice was a little shaky, but there was no mistaking the fact he was hard, or the need in his eyes.

"And how should I do that?" Jim asked, as he pushed the blanket to the floor, and reached up to slide Blair's pants down and off.

Careful to keep his pressure firm enough so he wouldn't tickle, he kissed his way up along with inside of one tanned leg, from ankle to knee, and then higher, pleased when he heard the hitch of breath, and a suppressed sigh.

Another moment, and he moved to settle himself between Blair's legs, careful not to allow too much of his weight to settle below him.

"I'm okay," Blair told him, eyes wide and dark, as his pulse started to climb again, this time from need rather than fear.

Still deliberately slow, Jim moved carefully around the one place Blair most wanted him, and pressed a kiss along the line of his hip, and then lower.

More kisses, interspersed now with sharp bites, that of course he had to soothe with his tongue. It was enough to make a guy crazy.

Impatient, Blair bucked upward as much as he could, and hoped Jim would take a hint and get on with it.

That only made Jim smile, and he shook his head.

"Nothing doing, Chief. You're still recovering. We're taking this slow and easy. Consider it a lesson in living in the moment, like you always tell me to do."

He shifted again, and this time his mouth came down on a nipple, while one hand gripped Blair's shaft, but didn't stroke.

A low whine built in the back of his throat, and Blair fought the urge to beg. It wasn't possible to drown in how much you wanted someone, and he knew it, but he wasn't sure his body had gotten the memo.

A few minutes later, after he had kissed almost every inch of skin he could reach, Jim sat back and surveyed the marks he'd made with clear pride. Then he shifted to stand, and divested himself of his clothes with no wasted movements.

Even the brief separation was too long, and Blair couldn't help but reach out, with a small sound of protest.

"Easy. I'm right here. Another handful of seconds and Jim returned to his earlier position, settled between Blair's legs, this time, with one foot braced on the floor, the bottle of lube they kept under the couch in his hand.

"Hurry. Please."

"Fast isn't what you need," Jim told him, and leaned down to kiss him, deep and wet.

Blair kissed back, and moaned as he felt the first slick finger slide inside him, still torturously slow.

The careful, slow stretch wasn't what he wanted, and Blair clutched at Jim's shoulders, wished he could rake his nails down the broad back, anything to get him closer, and to finally move.

A third finger, while Jim's tongue thrust into his mouth in the same rhythm. He kept up a steady murmur of reassurance, but didn't speed up.

His skin slicked with sweat, Blair felt himself start to tremble as the liquid pulls of pleasure slid through his stomach and lower.

When Jim finally slipped his fingers out, Blair thought there would be more oh so slow progress. Instead, his lover buried himself deep with one steady thrust, and then paused, only to do it again.

The noise Blair made would have embarrassed him, if he could have thought past how much he needed to be claimed so thoroughly there could be no mistaking who he belonged to.

He waited, but the pounding he longed for didn't begin.

Instead, Jim leaned down and kissed him, hard enough to bruise the lips below his. "I want you to watch me. Don't close your eyes, alright?"

When Blair managed to nod, Jim smiled, quick and feral. "Good."

And then, finally, he began to thrust, each movement calculated to go as deep as possible, but still much slower than their usual frantic pace.

It was good though, the depth and the angle, and the pleasure that began to spiral upward through him was just as slow.

The intensity built until it all but overwhelmed him. "Don't stop," he begged, unaware that his hips lifted to meet each thrust.

"Never going to happen," Jim told him in answer, his gaze almost electric.

It took him a second, his synapses weren't exactly all firing. But then he realized Jim had switched back to their earlier line of conversation.

And he could feel the sincerity, that and other feelings: need, lust, love, protectiveness, and other things he – even with all of his vocabulary- didn't have names for.

Through it all, Jim kept up his slow, deep thrusts. He leaned down to put his mouth next to Blair's ear, his ragged breaths the only sign he wasn't as in control as he seemed. "You're mine. And you always will be," he declared before he thrust again and then stilled.

The moment he felt Jim pulse deep inside him, Blair tumbled over the edge after him, uncertain if he actually managed to say yes out loud, but knowing his Sentinel would hear it anyway.

The consulting thing was Blair's idea; He'd been an expert consultant on any number of indigenous tribes, cultural traditions and artifacts over the years. It made sense that with all the skills and

knowledge Jim had to offer, there would be those out there who could afford to pay for his unique viewpoint.

But the whole idea didn't sit well with Jim. Okay, yes, his Sentinel abilities were useful as a cop, but the idea they could really be that much use in the private sector hardly seemed likely.

When they went to Stephen's for dinner on Sunday, they were still bickering about it, albeit good naturedly. Jim was sure his brother would back him up. He'd never been entirely comfortable with the idea of Sentinel abilities, after they'd been forced to explain it to him. He'd witnessed a zone out and nothing short of the truth would convince him to calm down.

Seated on the sofa, where he'd perched while they waited for his fiancé to get home so they could eat, Stephen went quiet for a few minutes, and then shook his head.

"I never thought I'd see the day I agreed with Blair, brother mine, but he's right, you have a very unique skill set that has the potential to solve a great many problems for a lot of people, many of whom are in the position to pay a great deal to assure not only accuracy but discretion."

Of course, that set Sandburg off in a flurry of excitement. "You see, Jim? This can work. I know it can." He nodded so enthusiastically, a lock of hair fell into his face, but he barely noticed.

Jim still had enough doubts for both of them, but he agreed to look into the logistics of forming their own company. That led to a round of meetings with some lawyers Stephen recommended. And, since no one at Major Crimes was particularly unobservant, after the second meeting, Simon demanded to know what was going on.

Jim expected to get yelled at a lot when he and Blair explained, thought maybe there would be some question as to whether or not they were in their right mind. Instead, Simon sat back in his chair and nodded. "I figured this was coming," he explained. "I'll be sad to see you go of course, but we'll figure out how to make it work."

Simon grinned at the matched pair of confused expressions that got him. "What, you don't think the Cascade PD would make an excellent client for this new company of yours?"

It wasn't quite that simple. There were still meetings to sit through, and the paperwork practically made his eyeballs bleed, the stacks of it just never seemed to end. But it turned out that between the two of them, they had managed to amass quite a diverse group of contacts that meant they started a client list before they had even found office space.

Even the start up costs ended up easier to deal with than expected. Stephen offered to help finance the new company, and somehow managed to talk his father into doing the same thing. That still wouldn't have been quite enough, but the Naomi showed up and informed Blair that she wanted to contribute as well. She looked through their business plan, reviewed their proposed budget and climbed firmly on board with the idea.

So on board, in fact, that she wrote them a check with a whole lot of zeroes on it, and refused to take time to think about things before she handed it to Blair. "We both know this is what you're meant to

do, sweetie," she insisted. "Just consider this my way of apologizing for all the chaos I caused. Besides, it's only money. I can get more."

And Blair had to laugh, and agree. His mother's usual methods of acquiring wealth usually involved men with far too much of it, and too little sense, but that wasn't his problem.

After they searched what felt like all of Cascade, they closed the deal for the new office space, a cavernous, repurposed warehouse with an entire wall of windows. The same day they got the keys, they gave their notice at the police department. Jim was too dedicated to his calling to leave the unit short a team, so he agreed to stay on long enough to be sure Simon found a suitable replacement, and whipped into them into shape.

They celebrated their last day as officers of the law at a surprise retirement party the gang threw them. Everyone had far too much cake, and Simon looked the other way when the champagne came out for a toast. Later that night, sprawled in front of the fire with more champagne, they had a much more private celebration that ended with them naked, curled around each other and barely able to summon the energy to keep their eyes open, much less get up and go to bed.

That wasn't their only celebration, others followed: the first opening of a Watchmen Group branch office, the first branch office outside the United States, the first time they helped a Sentinel/Guide pair get a handle things, and still managed to finish the job they'd been hired to do at the same time. Neither of them would ever forget the day Daryl Banks had marched into the main offices in Cascade, and showed them exactly how vulnerable their electronic security measures were. And they certainly hadn't expected him to proceed to explain why they should hire him to run their IT department. But he was only the first of their friends and family to end up on the payroll.

Then, there were first that weren't nearly as enjoyable. Blair knew he would never be able to forget the first time he had to help grieving parents get their daughter involuntarily committed, because she had a breakdown when she went into Guide mode and overloaded on her Sentinel's emotions. That unfortunate event had been the catalyst that began their support network, teams trained in how to prevent such a tragedy from happening again, on call 24/7 to be dispatched almost anywhere in the world. And sometimes, that even chased the guilt away, but only sometimes.

You had to take the bad with the good though. And, most of the time, the good won. Lucrative ongoing projects funded Watchmen initiatives to develop protected natural areas, where working pairs could go to recharge, or hone their skills. And as they began to build a solid professional reputation, Watchmen trained staff turned up as experts on everything from movie sets to museums. And, almost everywhere they went in an official capacity, there was someone they could help, more unofficially, with the Sentinel side of things, as Blair called it.

Their dealings with other Sentinels and Guides might not always have gone as well as they'd hoped, but it taught them about the incredibly diverse group of people with the relevant skills. Those with enhanced senses and those born to help them came from every walk of life. There was no set pattern when it came to race, class, religion, or any other identifying category, at least not that Blair could tell. About the only thing they shared was a common desire to serve and a sense of duty to those they claimed as their tribe, which was all that could be expected, really.

Eventually, the pattern repeated too many times to keep it under wraps. They called together their most trusted senior staff, and consultants, and explained the truth about Sentinels and Guides, and of course, the truth about the dissertation fiasco. It didn't take long for the need for secrecy to become crystal

clear. And, just to back it up, Blair worked with Jim and the legal department for days on the non-disclosure agreements every new hire or freelancer signed.

Someday, they promised Sentinels and Guides alike, they would go public with their knowledge. But, that day wouldn't come until they had the resources, protocols and funding to be sure that those who went public weren't hunted or experimented on, and that meant legal rights and protections to go along with acknowledgement that the abilities so many of them took for granted were real.

Through it all, Blair knew his connection with his Sentinel had only gotten better. Almost as soon as the relationship had turned physical, they'd each had to admit to a deeper sense of awareness of the other. Blair had stumbled through the explanation of how he could feel echoes of what Jim felt, echoes that strengthened the more upset he was.

He worried Jim would shrug him off, stopped himself before he said anything, once, twice and a third time. But, then late one night, the night they realized they would need to track not only the Sentinels they could help, but also those they didn't, Jim went directly to the bedroom when they got home, and all but towed Blair after him.

They lay in the dark, and Blair listened to Jim breathe; the sound soothed him like nothing else. And, between one breath and the next, it all spilled out of him, the feelings, so strong, and vivid and somehow not his own, and his theory about where it all came from.

And Jim smiled, quick and wide before he answered. "Well, at least I don't have to worry I'm the only one feeling things a little differently." He stopped, just long enough to drop a kiss on the end of Blair's nose, and then continued. "It's not emotions for me. It's more like someone intensified my sense of you. I don't just know where you are in general, I get flashes of what you see, or what you taste. And there's no off switch, either." Another pause, another kiss, this time against his mouth, light, but almost unbearably sweet.

"I tell you what. I promise not to mind if you don't, okay?" Jim asked, a hint of pleading hidden underneath his teasing tone.

"Deal," Blair agreed, before he claimed some kisses of his own. Just before he pounced to pin Jim back down on the mattress, it occurred to him. "Maybe we should start writing stuff like this down. No personal stuff, but you know, a field handbook for this kind of stuff."

Jim's laugh was just this side of breathless. "Great idea. Later though, much later."

July 7th, 2010
Quantico, VA
2:15 pm

On the surface, it looked like perfectly normal request. Hotch accepted a speaking engagement at a seminar designed to promote inter-agency cooperation. In other words, Strauss made it clear someone from the unit would attend and their leader had lost the toss with Rossi, since the two of them were the only ones who hadn't taken one for the team recently.

But, as he watched his boss pack files into his briefcase, Reid had to consciously remind himself to relax. He wasn't in any position to make demands, but he wanted to march into the office and forbid him to leave. It was ridiculous, really, but the dread he felt was so strong, he almost stood up, before he caught himself. Goosebumps pricked at his skin, and tension banded his temples. Unfortunately, there was nothing to help him figure out where the anxiety came from, since he had no reason to suspect any threats from a simple symposium, especially one for law enforcement personnel.

The rest of the team had already received their next assignment but they wouldn't be leaving until the next day, due to bad weather at the airport. The paperwork he tried to finish in the meantime blurred in front of him, since he couldn't focus through the mounting anxiety. He'd suffered his last panic attack five hundred and fifty three days ago, and really didn't care for the idea of having another one, especially at work.

After another half hour of fighting with himself, he let the others know he wasn't feeling well and needed to go home to rest then knocked on Hotch's door frame.

"I'd like to take the rest of today as a sick day, if that's alright?" he asked, pleased that his voice was quieter than normal and didn't shake.

"Of course. Do you need a ride home?"

"No. I'll be fine. I just need to head off this headache before it turns into a migraine," he replied. Part of him wanted to say something, warn the older man to be careful. But that made no sense, and the last thing he needed was to draw attention to himself.

"Have a safe trip," he said instead. "I'll see you when you get back."

"Right. Good luck with the new case," Hotch told him. "You'll have to come over and tell me all about it, while I bore you with details of the conference," he finished, with a slight smile.

"Sounds like a plan," Spencer managed to answer, pleased at the thought of doing just that.

At home, he managed to stave off a full blown panic attack, but the effort left him drained and shaky. Too tired to even cook a meal, he stood at the kitchen counter and ate a sandwich, then dragged himself to the bedroom and crawled into bed. When he felt sleep rise to claim him, Spencer told himself things would be better when he woke up and ignored the sense of impending disaster that wanted to steal his breath.

Hours later his cell phone ringtone cut through the darkness and pulled him out of a vague, formless nightmare. It took two tries to get his voice to work.

"What's happened?" Reid asked, dispensing with the pleasantries. There was an odd pressure in his head, almost a headache, but heavier.

Garcia wouldn't call in the middle of the night when they were already on a case unless something was very wrong.

"Hotch's plane crashed. It was a small charter flight, just him and some other delegates, and a two person flight crew, so no one is making a lot of noise about it yet. But, it's bad. You need to come in," Penelope told him. Her voice was steady, but he could hear the tears.

A thousand questions crowded into his mind: the type of plane, the suspected terrain involved, the personnel coordinating the search, and so many more. He had to take a deep breath and push them all down before he could answer.

"I'll be right there." His body knew what to do, even if his mind was otherwise occupied. His brain flashed him the statistics on crashes and survival, but he pushed those thoughts away as best he could.

Oddly enough, now that something terrible had happened, his earlier panic dissipated slightly. With the ease of long practice, he focussed on the practical considerations, rather than his emotional response to the thought of his boss on some mountain top, broken, bleeding, and trapped in the mangled wreck of a plane. They helped locate missing people all the time. They were good at it. It even helped, some. And, if his hands shook when he got into the cab, at least there was no one there to see.

July 8th,2010
Lackawanna State Forest
Near Thornhurst, PA
4:54 am

That first day, optimism was easy. Once everyone was assigned tasks, Rossi followed Spencer as he headed into the dull, grey trailer they had turned into a makeshift kitchen for volunteers and officials in the area. That reminded him of another task on his to do list, and he hurried to catch up to his young co-worker.

"Hey, Spencer, how are you holding up?" he asked quietly, though he knew he wasn't likely to get an honest answer.

"I'm fine. Worried, but fine."

"Good to know," he replied, then paused to give himself a chance to weigh what he would say next. "I know you and Aaron have gotten closer, since Hayley's death. You were a big part of what got him through the worst of that. I hope you know that. You mean a lot to him." David paused, but it needed to be said.

"I also know you haven't told him you have feelings for him, and I respect that, but I know that's not going to make this situation easier, so if you need someone to talk to, I'm here for you, anytime."

Spencer paused to consider his words before he replied.

"I appreciate it. At some point, I would also appreciate it if you tell me how you figured it out," Reid told him, after a long pause to process what he'd been told. "But right now I have other things I need to be doing."

"Fair enough," Rossi replied, before he moved to fill his go cup with hot coffee.

Officials from the charter company assured them that the plane had more than adequate emergency supplies: fully stocked first aid kit, food, water, blankets, tools, even an emergency radio. Even better, almost all the passengers had survival or first aid training, or both. Even the weather seemed determined to cooperate. Though the crash site was thought to be located in a mountainous region, early summer

temperatures in the area were as mild as mountain weather ever got, and there were no storms in the short or long range forecast.

All of them were busy. Morgan and Rossi joined the search directly, paired with two different canine teams. Reid helped develop the search area grid, and then developed a geographical profile of likely crash sites, with Emily's help. JJ oversaw the constant influx of information from the search teams, and external reports: everything from wilderness pilot flight plans, to anecdotal reports from extreme hikers. Anyone who had relevant things to say about everything from weather shifts to possible sightings and all things in between was interviewed by her or someone she briefed personally. Nothing was going to be missed due to carelessness or human error.

Garcia worked tirelessly behind the scenes to make sure all the tech they needed worked the way it should, despite the remote location and all the challenges it presented.

At the end of the second week the other shoe dropped. With no new signs of debris, and an ever growing operational deficit, the call came in that the search had been called off. Rossi stepped out of the main operations tent, and resisted the urge to hit something. The only thing handy was a tree, and that never ended well. Instead, he sighed and reached into his pocket for his earbud.

"Bad news, everyone. We were right. The search is being called off if we don't find anything at the end of next week. The budget just won't stretch any farther when the likelihood of success is so low." Just saying it left a bad taste in his mouth and a knot in his stomach, but the rest of the team deserved to hear it him.

The ride back to the airport was nearly silent. None of them were predisposed to take defeat well. Every single one of them was so sure they would be coming home with their leader that they didn't know how to process his absence, especially in such uncertain circumstances.

Privately, Reid suspected the odds of survival were not great. Even accounting for the relatively forgiving current climate, the impact of even a mild mountain storm would be devastating. The rest of the team clung to the hope that the well stocked emergency supplies upped the odds but failed to account for the fact that statically the areas most often damaged in a crash included the areas the pilot and co-pilot had been known to store supplies. Just because the supplies were on the flight when it began didn't have any real relevance as to whether or not they were intact by the time the plane made it to the ground.

Even though the forces acting on occupants were often less than those applied to the plane itself, it could hardly be discounted that survival rates for plane crashes were less than encouraging, especially given the lack of restraints involved. Even if survival was taken as a given, the likelihood of amputations, major lacerations and crush injuries was high. And, he tried very hard not to consider the odds of the passengers and crew becoming trapped in the aircraft for more than a second or two.

At the very least, he'd learned enough not to share any of the tangents his brain insisted on with his colleagues. Worst case scenarios were not the only option, just the loudest in his head at the moment. Somehow that wasn't exactly comforting.

When they made it back to the office, Strauss pulled Morgan into a conference room for a meeting. As she came out, she told them he'd been appointed their interim leader, on the grounds he'd led the team before. She'd also given them all three days leave.

Morgan summed up the rest of what they'd talked about quickly. "So far as I know, the team will stay intact – for the time being. I'll be getting regular reports about the search, and I am sure we can count on Penelope to monitor all the relevant chatter and reports."

It wasn't a question, but their analyst answered anyway. "Everything is already flagged and the search programs are already running. Kevin helped me set it up before we flew home," she confirmed. "Any information on Hotch's condition or whereabouts will auto send to everybody's phones once we get it."

The if hovered in the air, but no one mentioned it. Eventually they all headed home. As Reid headed for the subway, he wondered if the next three days would feel as long as the previous ones.

The next few weeks were a challenge for Reid but, work helped keep the feelings of loss at bay. Spencer missed his boss, he missed his friend, their time just hanging out. He told himself not to lose hope, that Aaron would be found, but he couldn't get away from the what ifs that chased around his brain. And the answers kept him up at nights, all but destroyed his ability to focus outside of work, and killed his appetite.

Intellectually, he understood the science of nutrition. In practice, he found food tasteless and unappealing. He only ate complete meals when Penelope brought him the results of her latest batch cooking or he went to the suppers with the team.

It was difficult, but they even managed dinner at the Hotchner house. Reid just didn't bother to tell anyone that he had to force himself to go, for Jack's sake. But, he hated being there without Aaron, and counted the minutes until he could leave.

After the latest dinner, when they finished dessert and coffee, Reid went to get his coat from the entry closet. It felt wrong that he wasn't helping Aaron with the cleanup in the kitchen like he always did, but he suppressed the feelings. Now wasn't the time. Coat in hand, he turned to move down the hall and noticed Jack.

His head was down, and his small shoulders drooped as he shuffled his feet in the carpet. "Uncle Spencer, are they really going to find my dad? Or is everyone just saying that?" Jack asked, soft and quiet, fear of the answer in every line of him.

"A lot of people are doing their very best to find your dad, Jack. I know it's a bad situation, but people survive bad things all the time. If anyone can do that, it's your dad. I know it's hard not knowing, and worrying about where he is, or how he's doing, but you just have to do your best to remember that whatever happened, your dad is going to fight to come home to you because he loves you very much and would never leave you alone if he had a choice, okay?"

"That's not a yes," Jack pointed out, as tears shimmered in his eyes.

"No, it's not." With an effort Spencer kept his voice steady. Jack had already been through so much, and now he faced the possibility of being an orphan. Still, no matter how painful the truth, Spencer didn't believe being lied to helped any child. With the best of intentions, all that really did was teach children that adults couldn't be trusted to keep their word.

"That's because I don't think it's fair to lie to someone just because they're young and they might get upset. You already know that sometimes grownups can't keep bad things from happening, no matter how hard they try. And the truth is, I don't know what will happen. But I do know that all of us who work with your dad, everyone who is searching would do anything they could to help bring him home.

And wherever he is, what he wants more than anything is to come home to you so he can tell you how much he loves you."

Jack considered that and gave a shaky nod. He took a deep breath, but the tears spilled over anyway.

Carefully, Spencer bent over so he could scoop the boy into a hug. "You don't have to be strong all the time, Jack. If you're upset or scared or mad, it's okay. But there is one thing you do need to do no matter what, okay?"

Spencer waited until Jack looked up at him before he continued. "You need to keep hoping that your dad is okay. Hold on to that hope so hard that you believe it to be true. The strength of it will flow from you to your dad, wherever he is right now."

"Can that really happen?" Tears ran down his cheeks, but Jack's eye went wide as he thought about it.

"No one really knows everything about how energy is transmitted in this world, and that's all belief is. You take some of your energy and put it into what you believe," Reid assured him. "Anything is possible, so I think it could happen.

Jack managed a small smile. "Me too."

July 24, 2010
Washington, DC
11:06 pm

He couldn't leave until he was sure Jack was as calm as possible under the circumstances. That meant staying for bedtime and the requisite story and monster under the bed and in the closet check. Exhaustion weighted him down as Spencer climbed the steps to his front door. Once he made it inside, he relocked the door, set the alarm, shucked off his coat, and toed off his boots. Not even his usual aversion to clutter gave him the energy to put everything away. Instead, he stumbled into the bedroom and slid under the duvet with a relieved sigh.

As much as he enjoyed the time he spent with Jack, it was extremely difficult to handle the emotions it raised. Initially, the difficulty in spending time with Aaron outside of work had more to do with his imagination's insistence at making more out of their relationship than friendship. Oh how he wished that were the problem now. The reality was infinitely worse. What did it matter if Hotch could never see him romantically, if he died?

In the privacy of his bedroom, with nothing to distract him from the possibility, his breath came short, and he tasted tears in the back of his throat. Emotional pain couldn't cause permanent physical harm, he reminded himself. It just felt like it did. It took longer than it should have to slow his breathing, but then he went through his relaxation exercises, and slid into sleep between one long breath and the next.

The nightmare wasn't new. The bright, airy kitchen was a replica of one of his favourites from growing up. His mother, out of bed and dressed, clear eyed and smiling as she sat at the table waiting for him knotted a sick ball of dread in his stomach. The colors were too bright, and the light glared too harshly, but he sat down anyways. The sooner he let it play out, the sooner he could wake up.

He reached for the cup, and held it, warm in his hands, but didn't bother to taste the coffee.

"For someone so smart, you miss some very obvious connections," his mother remarked, her tone mild, despite the venom he knew was coming.

"You keep wondering why you have to lose people, and the answer is right in front of you, every time you look in the mirror. It's not them, it's you. You get attached to them, and then everything goes wrong. You care about them, but then all sorts of terrible things happen. They would all be so much better off if you stopped being so selfish and chose to be alone."

Reid didn't try to answer. He wasn't here to speak, only to listen. It was easier to get through that way. Besides, he could deny it later, when he was awake and had more control.

Still and silent was never easy, but he squared his shoulders to make the effort, but then everything shifted, and the nightmare slid away like fog in a blaze of sunlight.

Instead of the too bright kitchen, he found himself in a large room with a vaulted ceiling, lined on either side with columns. A closer glance told him the stone blocks were smooth, but worn with age, grey that darkened to black in some places. Sunlight poured in from huge windows cut into the stone, but the golden spill of it was washed blue before it hit the floor. If he had to guess, he would say the building had been a temple of some kind, but his examination of his surroundings was interrupted by the arrival of a man.

He simply appeared, just out of arms reach. Dressed, if you could call it that, in only a loincloth and arm bands that highlighted dark olive skin, painted with tribal markings, he looked to be approximately fifty years old, though age was misleading in most indigenous populations.



They stared at each other for long enough for Spencer to determine he'd never seen him before.

"You should not listen so closely to what your fear tells you," the man told him, in a quiet voice with a slight echo.

"Who are you?" Spencer guessed he wouldn't get an answer, but even here, his curiosity wouldn't be denied.

"It's not who I am that you need to be concerned with, but who you are, and even more important, who you will be. The time is coming when you must choose your fate."

"The concept of fate, in the West at least, is most often portrayed as predetermined. Something that happens to us, rather than something we play an active role in."

"Everything that happens to each of us hinges on our choices. You can choose to be who you are, you may reject it, and run away."

"That's not actually particularly helpful," Spencer told him.

The wide grin the man gave him in response made him look younger. "Words will not make what comes next easier. They comfort you, but they give you distance from what you feel. It is your feelings that will help you, if you allow it.

The man turned then, and walked away to step out a door that hadn't been there before.

After a second or two, Spencer followed behind. They reached the door, which opened on to a clearing in a jungle, lush and alive with sounds of birds and other animals he couldn't quite identify. The sounds receded as he stepped out, and when his feet touched the ground, he felt it: the steady throb of a heartbeat, up from the ground and through all of him. Wherever it came from, it brought warmth and contentment to chase away the last of the guilt and shame from the nightmare. Without stopping to consider how to do it, he concentrated, tried to follow it to the source, but found the way blocked.

"It speaks well of you, that you would try. But you cannot run before you walk." The man stepped closer and touched his hand over Spencer's heart. His touch was so hot it bordered on uncomfortable, but before he could ask why the scene started to dissolve, and shift again

This time, when trees formed around him, they were evergreens, and the profusion of growing things was replaced by a thick carpet of pine needles. For lack of anything better to do, he walked through the trees. He could see his breath as he walked, but couldn't feel the cold, which was probably a good thing, given that he wore only jeans and his favorite sweater.

The trees gave way to a small meadow. From his side, he could see a rocky outcropping on the far end. While he scanned it for possible predators, a man emerged. Even at a distance, there was no mistaking the figure.

"Aaron," he shouted, too excited to wonder how it was possible. There was no sign the other man heard him, so he tried again, and moved closer-or tried to. Somehow, as soon as he moved, the other side of the clearing was farther away. He stopped moving and watched as Aaron kindled a fire a safe distance from the shelter. His clothes were wrong, an odd assortment that hung loose on his frame. His right eye was black and swollen nearly shut, and his left arm was folded in an improvised sling, but he was alive.

Unable to get closer, Spencer focused on the specifics of the scene, in an attempt to catalogue geographic markers, or species of flora and fauna: anything that would tell him where his lost friend

might be. On some level, he knew he was asleep, but that didn't matter. For the first time in a while, he blessed his memory, and drank in even the smallest detail.

"You fight with yourself so often you have forgotten you can stop. It is not the feelings you fear that are the danger. The real danger lies in losing yourself, in walking away from the things you know you need." His guide in the dreamscape was matter of fact about things, but his eyes were sad when he continued.

"There are a great many things you need to know, but if I told them to you, they would be lies. You must begin to understand for yourself."

Spencer nodded. All his degrees had ever taught him was how much he didn't know, so the idea of more to learn didn't bother him.

"Will Aaron be alright? Can you tell me when we find him, or where to look?"

"He is not mine to find or protect. And even here, the future changes with every action." With the last cryptic answer, the man and the jungle faded away.

Spencer awoke with a smile on his face, the memory of the dream strong and clear in his mind. He held the scenes with Aaron close to him as he dressed to face the day. Despite the fact there was a part of him that scoffed at the idea of faith in a dream, the rest of him didn't care where the tiny sliver of hope came from. The jungle scenes were harder to interpret, and he wondered what inspired them. He'd never had any particular affection or affinity for rainforests. He'd read about them of course, but he hadn't thought they made much of an impression. And yet, the whole sequence had felt safe in a way he was at a loss to explain.

In the days before the two month anniversary of the crash, there were signs he wasn't the only one who struggled with the situation. All of them tried to carry on as usual, because that's what they believed Aaron would have wanted, but that didn't make it easy.

The day they were told even the volunteers who searched on their days off had halted the search, JJ shattered a coffee cup against the wall. The day they were told some of them were being considered for reassignment, Morgan nearly got written up for insubordination when he was asked for his opinion.

Comparatively speaking, Spencer managed well enough. It helped to remind himself it could be worse. At least if they were reassigned they could keep in touch. No one was dying. And he held on to the images from his dreams; Aaron may have been alone, injured and underweight, but he was alive.

Garcia asked him about it, the next time they were alone in her office. "Not that I'm not glad to see you doing better, sweet genius boy, but I have to ask: what gives?"

The idea of sharing everything he'd dreamed made his stomach pitch, and he had to clear his throat. But, she deserved some explanation. So, he told her an edited version of the dreams, leaving out the tribal man, and the jungle temple.

She was such a gregarious person; few people understood Penelope was an exceptionally good listener. She didn't interrupt to ask for proof, and when he finished speaking her face lit up with the first grin he'd seen from her in fifty-four days.

"What?" he asked, confused why his dream would make her so happy.

"Well, I don't know as much as the rest of you about how the brain works," she replied. "But in this case, that's a good thing, because I can choose to believe maybe you know something we don't, and that's why you're dreaming about him.

He looked over at her, and closed his mouth. They all needed to take their hope where they could get it.

When he was asleep, Reid's time sense went hazy and imprecise, so he couldn't be sure how long he had slept when he felt his dreams shift until he looked down on the clearing where he saw Aaron most often. It was dusk, the deep shadows edged from purple to grey, but no fire burned within the stones of the fire pit.

As he watched, Spencer noted some changes in the camp: a salvaged bench seat, a large piece of some kind of fabric stretched down off a larger tree branch, a pair of battered buckets set near the fire.

Aaron was seated on one end of the seat, and he clutched a small paper square. The corners were worn, because he kept the picture of Jack in his wallet no matter where they travelled. He ran his fingers over the surface, and murmured something too low to make out.

But the words didn't really matter. His pained expression made Spencer's stomach clench. Caught up in the dream, he could feel the despair and loneliness as it broke over the other man in waves.

"We're going to find you, Hotch. You just have to hold on," Reid told him. He knew Aaron couldn't hear, but the words made him feel a bit better.

Aaron got up and moved across the campsite and headed to the trees. His progress was slowed by a slight limp on his right side. It took only a few minutes for him to gather an armful of smaller branches, and then he headed back to the fire pit.

It might have been the fading light, exhaustion or his previous injuries that caused the limp. It was impossible to tell what caused the fall, but Spencer could only watch as Aaron tripped and fell. He landed hard, arm twisted under his body at an awkward angle, as his head slammed into a half buried rock.

Even though he knew it was impossible, Spencer felt a cold sweat break out on his skin. Pain lanced along the left side of his head, and heat stabbed through his arm. What he saw in a dream couldn't translate into his own body, and yet he felt it, as real to him as the weight of his limbs, or pangs of hunger before bed.

Minutes crawled by. Spencer watched the still figure as darkness gathered, though somehow he could still see clearly. The usual forest sounds faded and all he could hear was a heartbeat, but instead of the strong pulse he'd tried to find in a previous dream, it was weak and erratic.

Then Aaron moved his good arm and gave a weak groan. Forest sounds rushed back in, and the heartbeat faded in the face of a wave of relief.

"You have to get up," Spencer commanded, even though he knew the other man wouldn't hear it. He had to do something to fight back the desperation he could feel inside him.

Spencer cast around for a way to help, even though logic dictated he couldn't. Then the scene blurred, started to fracture. He woke in the dark, hands clenched into fists, tears tracked down into his hairline. He closed his eyes, tried to will himself back into the dream.

Then he heard the low tones of his phone. He tried twice before he picked up the handset, and had to clear his throat before he could speak.

"Reid," he managed, once he could form words properly.

"They found Hotch."

Caught between laughter and tears, Garcia still managed to tell him the team would be flying out as soon as they had confirmation.

"Some military training exercise east of our search area found someone. They aren't releasing names, but the vital statistics match. We're waiting for official word now, but I think they found him. You were right. Hotch is alive."

Later, Reid never remembered much of the ride to the airport. Once he was on the plane he ignored the wash of voices and just tried to remember to breathe. So close, they had come so close to really losing Aaron, forever.

The thought left him cold and shaken. Fear battled with relief, despite the fact that he reminded himself the danger had passed. Adrenaline surged through him, left him wishing he could teleport himself to the hospital and see Aaron with his own eyes, whole and cared for so he could get better.

September 25th, 2010
Geisinger Community Medical Centre
Scranton, PA
10:10 am

Once they had all peeked into the room and seen Hotch asleep in the narrow bed they split up again. Morgan and Rossi went to track down the doctors, JJ and Emily got started on the paperwork for the insurance company. They left Garcia and Reid to keep watch in the room, which was good because Spencer was pretty sure not even the threat of imminent destruction would get him to leave the room. Tears slipped down his cheeks as he stared at his friend, so still, and quiet as his chest rose and fell steadily.

"He's okay," Garcia reminded him, as she plucked a Kleenex from the box, then handed him the next one.

After a minute, he managed to wipe his eyes even though his hands shook. A chair scraped across the floor and he looked up to see the chair slide across the shiny tile towards him.

"Sit down, Spencer, before you fall on your admittedly cute heinie," Penelope instructed. Her face was pensive as she looked from their boss to him and back again.

He took a moment to drop into the chair, which was well timed, because just then, it hit him again how close they'd come to losing him. The room wavered, and dizziness rose up to grey out his vision at the edges. The fact he could see Aaron safe in the bed didn't help. For a minute, he couldn't get enough air.

A hand on his shoulder made him open his eyes and he took several deep breaths until he could trust himself to speak.

"I'm sorry. I don't know what's the matter with me. I should be happy. I am happy," he told her, and it was true, he was. The trouble was, he was also apparently every other possible emotion at the same time.

"Don't be sorry," Penelope replied, and hugged him quickly. "I get it."

A doctor stepped in and motioned them both out before he could respond, so he settled for a smile, and let her hug him before they joined the rest of the team in the hall.

"My name is Dr. Stefford. I'll be Agent Hotchner's primary physician. He's holding his own; I can't give you a lot of details without permission from his next of kin." The doctor went to leaf through the chart, as he looked for who that might be.

Spencer cleared his throat. "Actually, I'm his designated agent in case of emergency. He's not close to the family he has left. So, please. Go ahead."

He ignored the surprised looks from most of the others, except Rossi, who only nodded. Now wasn't the time to explain exactly how much closer they'd gotten over the last year or so.

For his part, the doctor only nodded and continued. "Well, as bad as he looks right now, physically, your boss should be fine. He's malnourished, dehydrated which is to be expected with this type of exposure. He's concussed, and has some extremely deep cuts, likely from bits and pieces of the plane, and he's got some cracked ribs that haven't quite healed yet. There's the hairline fracture in the one arm, but it should heal with any issue. But, there's no signs of internal bleeding or skull fracture. We need to treat the infection that started in one of the cuts, but, barring complications, he should recover."

He paused until the sighs of relief subsided, then continued. "It'll be several days until he is stable enough to be moved, but at that point, we should be able to arrange his transfer closer to home without any problem. The psychological effects of the trauma of the crash and the subsequent isolation might take longer to manifest, but I believe it would be best if he dealt with that in a familiar environment."

"Thank you, Doctor." It was Emily who spoke, but they all echoed it.

They chatted with the doctor for a bit longer, and then Spencer left to reclaim his spot in the chair next to the narrow hospital bed. As he walked away, he heard Emily's confirm hotel rooms for all of them, but didn't bother to correct her assumption. No way in hell was he leaving the hospital room but there was no need to have that argument now.

Besides, he wasn't sure he could explain why he felt so driven to be right there, within sight, where he could be sure Aaron really was alright.

All he knew for sure was that he needed to be exactly where he was, no matter what the rest of the team or the hospital visitors policy had to say about it. He shrugged it off for the moment; it wouldn't be sensible or logical to worry about an argument that hadn't happened yet. Besides, it would hardly be the first time he'd sweet-talked hospital staff into doing what he wanted.

Before he opened his eyes, Aaron knew he was in a hospital. The strong antiseptic smell nearly made him gag, and he opened his eyes carefully, uncertain how much light he could handle. Fortunately, only a

small lamp was on. The rest of the room was dark, but he heard footsteps in the hall, the squeak of a passing cart, even two nurses, talking in hushed voices down the hall.

When he'd seen the military helicopters, known that rescue was imminent, he'd slid gratefully into the darkness to escape the pain. He'd hoped that whatever was wrong would somehow just go away before he woke up. It looked like his luck was about as good as usual.

The sound of someone breathing slowly caught his attention next. Slowly, to avoid aggravating an already impressive headache, he turned his head to look beside the bed, and felt his lips stretch in a smile that felt strange on his face. Slumped in a visitor's chair, sleeping deeply enough to snore lightly, Spencer was such a welcome sight, he couldn't help it.

It took two tries to get his voice to work, and he could only manage just above a whisper. "You don't look so good, Spencer."

A breath's pause, then dark eyes snapped open. "Next to you, I look just fine." Spencer kept his voice quiet.

Even so, Aaron couldn't help a slight wince at the noise. The blend of all the noises he could hear clenched a vise around his temple, and he couldn't decide if the churning nausea came from the pain of the headache, or the unfortunate combination of all the smells in the room.

Spencer asked reached for the water left on the bedside table to pour him a glass, and eyed him in concern. "Do you need anything for pain? Should I get a nurse?"

Even the soft, familiar voice echoed and reverberated so it was another moment before he could answer the question. "No. It's alright." He didn't add that nothing medical people had done so far seemed to help. That would only make the younger man worry. It was normal to have trouble adjusting after severe trauma or prolonged isolation. He'd dealt with both, so extra sensitivity made sense.

To distract himself, Aaron forced his eyes open and looked over. He could see the signs his friend and subordinate hadn't been taking care of himself. He'd lost weight he couldn't afford to lose, there were dark shadows painted around his eyes, and even now, so pleased with their reunion, his muscles were taut with tension, like he braced for bad news. Memories of his time in the mountains faded under a wash of guilt over what the team must have gone through.

He pushed it aside, and sipped at the cool water to soothe his throat.

When he'd had enough, Spencer spoke. "Everyone's out in the waiting room. They didn't want to go to the hotel until you woke up. Let me go tell them the good news. I'll be right back," he reassured, then stood up to leave.

As soon as he was alone, Aaron closed his eyes on a wave of dizziness. The room spun crazily, and his heart pounded, determined he needed to run, but there was nowhere to go. Thankfully, the worst of it passed as footsteps sounded in the hall and Garcia led the rest of the team into the room, except Reid. When she saw Aaron's questioning glance, she smiled with all the reassurance she could muster.

"Reid's fine. He just went to call Jack and share the good news." Her lips trembled, and tears spilled over, but she wiped them away unselfconsciously, and smiled again.

Reid had warned them not to be too loud; as happy as they all were, none of them came close to top volume. Each of them expressed their happiness. JJ and Emily fussed over him a bit, made sure he had

enough pillows and blankets to be as comfortable as possible. Penelope hugged him as best as she could, careful not to jar him. Dave smiled quietly at him, before he spoke. "Good to see you."

Morgan nodded at that, and then looked around pointedly. "Okay, guys, we need to let our fearless leader get some more rest."

Dave was the last to the door, but the older man stopped, and stepped aside to let Reid back in. "You should stay," he suggested. "Someone should be here in case he needs anything. Besides, I don't think he wants to be alone." His gaze flickered down to Aaron's in time to catch the small head shake in agreement.

"Okay then." That settled, he gave Reid a gentle push back into the chair. "One of us will come take a turn after what they call breakfast in places like these. Goodnight," Dave called the last over his shoulder as he walked away, so they couldn't see his wide grin.

When the footsteps receded, Aaron took a careful breath. Even his own voice started the drums in his head, but there were things he needed to know. "Is Jack alright?"

"He is now. I had Jessica wake him up to tell him you're okay, but explained you need rest right now. He says to tell you to get home soon."

As painful as it was to imagine what the last few months had been like for his son, Aaron couldn't help but smile. That was Jack alright. No problem making his wishes known, even if they were more like demands.

"Good. Thank you." Guilt niggled at him again; he should have talked to Jack immediately himself. As much as part of him didn't want to wait another second to talk to him, the rest of him cringed at the effort it would take to deal with the conversation. Tomorrow would have to be soon enough.

"You've been through a lot, you know," Spencer remarked. "Give Jack some credit. He may be young, but he knows that. He'll wait." He reached out and squeezed Aaron's shoulder briefly. "One thing at a time. And right now, the most important thing is you're here and you're safe. Now let yourself rest.

Exhaustion had already started to haze everything over, but sheer stubbornness kept Aaron's eyes open, and his mind tried to focus. For a brief moment when Spencer touched him, he felt a spark of energy race up his arm, and the jumble of sounds and smells, even the headache faded.

A voice broke into the moment, as a young, blonde nurse whose nametag read Reanne peered into the room. "You need rest, Agent Hotchner, and so does your young friend here."

Reanne looked at Reid then, and nodded. "I'll bring you a cot, since I don't think anything I could do right now would make you leave."

She smiled for at both of them, then bustled out, and returned a few moments later with a rickety, but serviceable, rollaway bed.

With his senses calm, at least for the moment, Aaron relaxed back into his own bed as much as he could, but he didn't think sleep was likely. All his assorted injuries throbbed in a symphony of discomfort. Some were sharp, some were dull, but none of them wanted to be ignored. The headache he'd tried so hard to ignore ratcheted up several notches, and spiked gleeful claws into his eyes.

Before he could decide if the discomfort was enough to warrant speaking up, Reid spoke up for the first time since coming back into the room. "He's in a lot of pain. Can he have medication before we try to get some sleep?" He avoided Aaron's gaze, no doubt worried he would refuse the medicine.

"Of course. I'll bring them shortly." The petite nurse pinned Aaron with a direct gaze. "You need to ask for medication when you need it, Agent. The more you let us help you, the faster you will go home."

After a moment, Spencer reached up to turn off the lamp. The room wasn't entirely dark; the orange glow from the streetlights spilled in from the window, but the decrease in light helped the headache.

For the first time in a long time the darkness didn't prompt the rush of fear. "I'm glad you stayed," Aaron murmured. How could he not be glad, when just Spencer's presence made everything more bearable. He had no idea why, but all things considered, he would take what he could get.

"You're welcome." The words hung in the air for a moment, heavy and expectant. "I'm just glad you're here, that you're okay," Spencer managed. His voice trembled, just slightly, but that was all he said.

Exhaustion made everything he felt seem distance and blunted around the edges, but Aaron hated the thought of what it must have been like for Reid, told there was little to no hope. Nothing he could say could make that better, but he wanted to try.

"Me too, Spencer. Me too." Whatever else he might have said was lost in a wave of blessed numbness, as the pain finally receded, and fatigue chased behind it. Just before he gave in, Aaron heard a heartbeat. He assumed it was his own, but the rhythm was off. Still, the steady beat reassured him for some reason, and he let the thump of it overtake everything else so he could drift off to sleep.

When the doctors released him Aaron was thrilled. The trip home was uneventful but still not easy. He couldn't trust what his body told him when all his senses were determined to confuse him. The familiar hum of the jet engine randomly roared in his ears, but no one else even noticed. A sip of coffee triggered a coughing fit when then taste turned so bitter he had to spit it out. Even his clothes were a problem; the jeans and a sweater Reid had brought for him to wear were too big, and slid unpleasantly against his skin when he moved. The slickness of the material reminded him of oil, or perhaps water, but unless he wanted to go naked, there was nothing he could do about it.

He appreciated the teams concern, but couldn't bring himself to explain what was going on with his senses. For one thing, he had absolutely no idea what was causing it, and for another, he knew if he explained the problem, their first stop in finding a solution would be to examine his time on the mountain in exhaustive detail. As grateful as he was to be alive, and on the way back to his life, that wasn't something he was sure he would ever be ready to share. He'd never known a group of people with a greater capacity to empathize and accept, but some things simply couldn't be understood without being experienced.

It was easier once he was in his own house, thankfully alone, once he shoed JJ out. The house wasn't silent, but it was still quieter than the bustle of the hospital. Even better, there was no one here to watch him, and wonder if he was going to break down, or witness a sensory spike. He'd hoped that as he reclaimed his life they would normalize, but so far they seemed to alternate between overwhelming or barely there. There was no happy medium, and the effects were so all over the place, there was no way he could predict them either.

And the memories of his time on the damned mountains liked to slice into him at random times. Sometimes it was the cold, other times it was the faces of those who hadn't made it out. In the worst of

them, he was alone in his campsite, bleeding from his bad arm, the line that tethered him to his body unravelling and there was nothing he could do to stop it. He'd heard near death experiences brought a sense of clarity, but all it brought him was a long list of regrets.

His eyes slid shut and he let himself drift, pleasantly comfortable since his painkillers had kicked in just before they got home. Caught between awake and asleep, he stopped trying to direct his mind, and simply let the impressions and images of the day slide past as they would.

He must have dozed, because the sound of a key in the lock jolted him awake, his eyes snapped open, scanned for threats. Then he caught the sound of his son's voice on the other side of the door. Rather than the usual happy chatter, he was subdued. "You're sure Dad's here, right, Aunt Jess?"

The door swung open before she could reassure the little boy, but that was okay, because Aaron held out his good arm, and shrugged off the blanket he'd covered himself with.

Jack rushed over to the sofa then skidded to a stop just before he reached it, and rocked back on his heels.

"It's okay, buddy. I'm okay. You can hug me, just not too hard, and please don't bump my arm."

As soon as he had permission, Jack moved forward and wrapped himself around his dad. "You came back," he managed, face buried in his dad's shirt, as his tiny body shook with the force of his sobs.

"I did. I'm sorry I left you alone. I love you more than anything. You know I would never leave you if I had a choice, right Jack?"

"I know."

Jessica came in then, and they exchanged pleasantries, and Aaron thanked her for taking such good care of Jack.

"I'll leave you two alone to catch up, unless you need anything?" she asked.

Aaron shook his head no, with a tired smile. "I have everything I need right here."

"Not quite. But Dr. Reid had someone see to it that your fridge and cupboards are stocked. The medicines you need are all on the end table closest to you. He said to tell you he kept things fairly bland. So, I guess typical stuff for when you're sick."

He nodded at that explanation, and wished her a goodnight as she showed herself out. It was easier than trying to explain. Reid had witnessed several instances of when his sense of taste and smell had made meals all but impossible for him. If he didn't keep his food fairly bland, he either gagged at the intensity of the flavor, or had to stop eating because the smells were so intense they actually made him nauseous. Trust Spencer to not only notice, but think up ways to minimize the problem.

"I'd really like it if you could tell me all the things that happened while I was gone, if you're up for it," he told his son, "but first, why don't you put your PJs on and brush your teeth."

Jack shifted to get up then stopped, one arm still clutched in his dad's shirt.

Under the circumstances, he wasn't sure he would want to let go either, and with the painkillers in him, there was no reason he couldn't move, as long as he took it slow. "I'll come with you, okay? Right there, the whole time."

That got a smile and a nod. Rather than his usual scamper down the hall, Jack kept pace with him, and tracked his movement with a serious little frown.

Once they finished the usual bedroom routine, they snuggled down in Aaron's bed, and talked about everything he'd missed. Somewhat surprisingly, Jack even talked about how he'd felt without prompting.

"I got scared, and mad, well more scared, 'cause you were gone. Jack's explanation was punctuated by a yawn, but he continued. "But I just decided to hope as hard as I could, and that made it so I could believe you would come back for sure."

Intrigued at the phrasing, he stroked his hand over Jack's silky, soft hair. "What do you mean?" he asked gently.

"You know, like Spencer says, you hope really hard, until you believe something. You put all your energy into making it true and then you can share it with people. 'Cause belief is energy and energy can go anywhere. So, I believed as hard as I could, and every night, I'd send it all to you. So you'd have enough energy to hang in there, 'til you got found, and so you'd know I was okay, and stuff."

It took two tries to clear his throat, so he could speak, and tears gathered in his eyes, though he tried to blink them back. The last thing he needed was to upset Jack this close to sleep. "I'm really glad you did that. You're right, it made it easier to hang in there. And I'm glad Spencer explained it to you, so you had something you could do for me."

Despite the happiness and relief that coursed through him, Spencer slept poorly. He couldn't settle down and get his mind to shut off. Every tiny sound in his bedroom made him jump, and then he had to find a comfortable position all over again.

Just before dawn, as black lightened to gray, he gave it up as a lost cause and folded back the blankets to face the day. He had nothing on the agenda for a few hours yet at least. Even though JJ had only told him to go to their boss' house sometime this morning, it was way too early. Hotch needed rest to get better. If he needed anything before then, he would call. Reid ignored the twist of distress he felt when the logical voice in his mind reminded him that the call could go to any one of his fellow team members.

Still, there was an undeniable sense of relief when he let himself in the front door of the Hotchner house. It was still rather early, but he justified it as necessary since he wanted to help make breakfast. And he did have a key. Aaron had given it to him a few months after they started spending more time together outside of work.

It made no sense to be so worried, but he couldn't shake the faint sense that something was wrong, and it got stronger as he opened the door.

"Hello?" he asked quietly, in deference to the hour and the fact that he wasn't expected for another ninety-six minutes.

In answer, Jack arrowed down the hall and flung himself at Spencer for a hug. The exchanged greetings, and then he sent the boy to the living room to continue playing while he checked on Aaron.

The bedroom showed no signs of the bright, sunny day outside. The drapes were drawn, and the lights were off, which left the room in cave-like gloom. Even in the dim light, it was evident Aaron was in pain. His face was too pale and sheened with sweat, and he held himself still as if the smallest movement would shatter him.

He was loathe to break the silence but Spencer knew he needed information, despite the lack of outward signs of injury.

He moved close to the bed, and kept his voice down. "What happened?"

At first the only response was a low moan of pain. "Too loud. I thought it was just a headache, but it keeps getting worse," Aaron managed to get out, though he grimaced at the noise.

Spencer didn't bother to answer, as that would just add to the pain. Instead he reviewed the list of medications he knew the doctors had insisted Aaron bring home. Leaving the room took effort, as part of him didn't want to let the suffering man out of his sight, but in short order, he had a glass of water, two painkillers, and a cold washcloth.

Again, rather than speak, he ran his hand down Aaron's arm gently.

Once he opened his eyes, Aaron managed to swallow the pills, and a little water. The cup shook in his grip though, and his eyes slid shut again almost immediately.

Spencer took the opportunity to lay the washcloth across the other man's eyes, and smiled when some of the tension left his friend's face. Once he'd done what he could, he wanted to stay and keep watch, but Jack would probably be in to check on things before too much longer.

With one last look at the bed, Spencer went out to the living room to suggest they make breakfast. Jack proved an able helper in the kitchen. They mixed up a batch of pancakes in fairly short order. While they cooked, his young assistant set the table for three, though Spencer was careful to explain that his dad might need to eat in bed.

As predicted, there was no sign of Aaron once he'd served Jack and set aside a plate for himself, so Spencer fixed a tray and went back down the hall to the bedroom. This time, he was greeted by the sight of his erstwhile boss, as he swung his legs over the edge of the bed to sit up.

"Feeling better, I see," Spencer observed. "I brought you a tray. Why don't you take it easy for a little bit longer?"

There was a pause for the battle between pride and practicality. After a few heartbeats, the older man laid back in the bed with a long sigh. "Thanks. For the pills, and the breakfast. Is Jack okay?"

"He's in better shape than you are, at the moment," Spencer retorted with just a hint of sharpness. The anger was misplaced, but he couldn't help himself. He hated to see anyone in so much pain, and when that person was Aaron, it was just that much worse. Everything inside him wanted to make it stop, or better yet, to prevent it in the first place. The fact that he hadn't tasted like a bitter failure.

Still, just because he was angry with himself was no reason to lash out. "He's fine. We made pancakes; he's in the kitchen, eating them." He stepped closer to the bed and helped rearrange the blankets. "I'm sorry. You just worried me, that's all."

"It's alright. To be honest, I worried myself. I've never had a headache debilitate me that way."

"You don't have a history of migraines?"

"No, none. But since the crash, I've had a headache of varying intensity most of the time. Today started off alright then the damn car alarm went off outside, and it felt like my head was splitting open. I was going to call you, but it hurt too much."

Spencer accepted the explanation with a nod, and filed away the circumstances to the ever expanding file of things that caused problems for his friend. "Eat. You need to put something in your stomach."

"Alright. But I hope you made enough for yourself as well."

"I did. I'll eat soon enough. Maybe at lunch you'll be able to join us at the table."

"Are you planning on staying all day? You must have other things you could be doing."

"Nothing important."

There was a pause, then Aaron smiled. "Good."

It took almost an entire month to get medical clearance to go back to work. Even then, Strauss, in her official capacity as section chief, made it clear that he would be watched closely.

There was an upside though. The time had allowed him a chance to settle back into his personal life. After so long with nothing at all, it took effort to accustom himself to even the smallest luxuries: hot water, food he didn't have to catch himself, a real bed. Despite the fact he'd had them his whole life, even the simplest comforts still felt strange.

The familiar routine comforted him, and helped minimize the effects of the stress involved in the process of getting back to work. It helped that Spencer came over even more regularly than before the crash. He took all the sensory issues in stride, and they had slowly rebuilt their routine back to normal, for outside of work anyway.

He'd held some hope that once he had his routines back, the problems with his senses would settle down. Unfortunately, his body refused to cooperate with his plan. It started with small problems, like the day Morgan came in with a new cologne. The earthy smell started out light, but within minutes seeped into his pores and all but gagged him with its intensity.

Or the press conference where some twit of a reporter snapped a picture and the bright wash of light from the flash stabbed his eyes with enough intensity that his eyes teared. Even worse, no matter how much he blinked, his vision stubbornly whited out off and on for hours.

The others knew something was off; you couldn't work with people trained to observe and get much past them. He wondered how long they would be content to let the incidents pass, but he couldn't bring it up. He couldn't even explain it to himself, so he was almost certain he couldn't come up with reasons for whatever the hell was the problem.

Still, he thought things were relatively controlled, despite the fact that none of the doctor prescribed remedies helped much. The team seemed content to let Reid take the lead in helping deal with the glitches as they happened.

But Aaron hadn't counted on his gift for worst case scenarios. The day started off bad; his alarm didn't go off. And it only went downhill from there. He had a headache, then added dizziness he couldn't shake and his computer decided it hated him. So of course there were two urgent meetings added to his schedule.

When he finally got back to the bullpen, he breathed a sigh of relief and glanced toward his office. He would have headed straight for it but JJ and Emily wanted to know how the meeting went and his bad day was no reason to be short with them.

Before Aaron could break away from them, he heard Derek as he came down the hall, and whistled a snatch of a song.

Emily asked a question but Aaron didn't hear her. He cocked his head and tried to identify the tune; it remained stubbornly just out of reach. The notes stretched out, slower and slower until they were distorted, and he felt his thoughts slide away from him as they followed the sound.

As a rule Spencer didn't have anything against Tuesdays. But any day you had to face on less than three hours sleep was pretty much doomed from the start and this one was no exception. Even worse, he'd lost the rock, paper, scissors match with Morgan, which meant he had to go get the case files from the disaster area the other man called the back seat of his car. You would think his knowledge of probability would allow him to win.

The bright sunshine, warm against his skin, made him smile as he turned to go back in. After a few seconds debate, he veered off and claimed a spot on a bench. With his head tipped up to the sun, he emptied his mind and focused on his breath. There was no reason for the dread that had curled up in his stomach and refused to leave the night before. One bad day could hardly be called impending doom.

A little while later, his conscience reminded him of all the things he needed to accomplish before he left that day. With a sigh, he headed back inside, and promised himself some quality time with a first edition later, if he could make it through his whole to-do list.

Before he even cleared the door, he sped up. Something was wrong; the certainty bored into his brain and had him all but running down the hall. Out of breath more from fear than exertion, he rounded the corner, about to ask what was wrong from the first person he saw.

The words died on his lips when he saw Aaron, too still and quiet near Emily's desk. Emily repeated his name, and touched his arm, but Aaron didn't reply, didn't so much as twitch a muscle. He might have been a statue, except for the slight movement from respiration.

Distantly, Spencer noted that the breaths were shallow and too fast. When he reached the others, he stopped just in front of Aaron and caught his breath before he spoke. "What's happened?"

"I have no idea. He was about to tell us about the meeting, and then it was like someone flipped a switch and he just wasn't here," Emily told him, her voice higher than normal.

Slowly, much more slowly than he would have liked, Spencer stepped into Aaron's space and curled his hands around the other man's upper arms.

"Aaron, you need to come back now," he instructed. The words came out before he thought, but he ignored the odd sensation that gave him. "You need to come back to us, please." He let just a fraction of the fear he felt color the entreaty, then repeated himself.

When Aaron blinked, slowly, like his eyes were weighted, Spencer ignored the relief that made his knees weak, and kept talking. The words came out without his usual deliberation, but he could barely hear them over the sudden beat of his pulse in his ears. Slowly, he moved his hands down and gripped Aaron's hands, squeezed once, then again.

"I'll start taking suggestions from the team on how to wake you up," he threatened.

That got him another blink and a low moan. A few long breaths later, Aaron swayed on his feet, and sense replaced blankness on his face.

Spencer took a deep breath but ruthlessly buried any other signs of reaction. He left the others to speculate, and helped Aaron to his office. He paused only to call over his shoulder that a doctor wasn't necessary. He didn't bother to promise an explanation, since he didn't have one and was willing to bet Aaron didn't either.

It took more effort than it should have to convince Hotch to go home for the day. It helped he was shaken and tired, but even then he argued he needed to finish out the day.

"You were out of it for more than fifteen minutes, with no idea as to the cause, or what exactly brought you out of it again. You were completely unresponsive when I came back into the office, and we don't know how to prevent it. At the very least, you need to take care of yourself, to lower the odds of it happening again."

Spencer breathed a sigh of relief as he watched his boss leave the building, and had to fight not to run after him. He wanted to go so badly, he had to lock his knees and battle his own instincts for a moment. As much as he felt the need to be with Aaron right now, make sure he was alright, there was something he needed to do first.

Decision made, he stopped to fix a to-go cup of Dave's fancy coffee from the break room and headed out of the room.

Spencer tapped on the doorframe as he walked in to her office and Garcia turned to greet him with a wide smile.

"Well, hello there sweet boy. To what do I owe the pleasure of a visit in the middle of the day? And with caffeine, no less." She reached out to accept the cup he offered with one well manicured hand, her nails a deep purple that matched her dress.

"I'm sorry to bother you. I know you're busy. But I need a favor."

"For you? Anything, just name it."

This was the tricky part. He had to skirt the details he'd been told in confidence. "You know about what happened today, the episode that Hotch had?" he began, careful to keep his tone even and calm. Nothing travelled faster in the building than gossip so he knew she would have.

"Yeah. Scary stuff. Emily said she thought it looked like some kind of seizure. Maybe we need to make sure he gets back to the doctor."

"He's been to quite a few actually. They keep giving him a clean bill of health. They have no idea what's causing the problem. At this point, I think it's likely they'll start looking at psychological causes. And the repercussions for Hotch's career could be devastating."

"Right. We don't want that. But if doctors don't know what's wrong, what can we do?"

"That's where you come in. After what happened today, I remembered something I read a number of years ago. It referenced an individual with heightened sensory acuity, a man who experienced many of the problems Hotch is having. I looked it up myself last night, but I can't seem to find it. Originally, I found it online, but when I looked again it was gone. And I think it would be very helpful to speak to the author."

"And who might this mystery author be?"

"Sandburg, Blair Sandburg. It was his dissertation. The title was *The Sentinel*. There was quite a scandal about it actually. Sandburg admitted it was a fraud. But the symptoms he described match our situation a little too well."

"Shouldn't be a problem. People pull things from the 'Net all the time, but they're never really gone. Once you put it out there, it stays out there. It just takes a little finesse. And finesse happens to be a specialty of mine." She smiled at him, as she rolled her chair back over to her main terminal. Her fingers moved rapidly over the keys as she sipped her latte. After a few moments, she pursed her lips and frowned. "This might take a little longer than I thought, sunshine. Whoever wanted this gone had some serious skill."

"Somehow that doesn't surprise me." He resisted the urge to ask her to hurry, but only barely. He had no idea where the urgency that balled in his stomach had come from, but it pushed at him, demanded he do something to solve the problem before it got worse. And somehow, he knew it would get worse.

"Just email me a copy when you find it," he requested. "And I would really appreciate it if you could find contact information for Sandburg while you're at it."

"You got it, my pretty."

Later, as he snagged his messenger bag and said goodbye to JJ, his phone beeped with an incoming email from Garcia. A moment later his phone rang.

"It wasn't easy, but I found the paper you were looking for. I've skimmed it and it seems you're right. I'm not quite sure how that can be, but I'll leave you to solve that mystery. I did manage to track down the latest contact info for Mr. Sandburg, but it isn't much. Apparently, he works for a corporation known as the Watchmen Group. They're a conglomerate that has a number of divisions: technology and weapons research, environmental stewardship. You name it, they have their fingers in it. But their specialties seem to be personal protection and consulting to various and sundry law enforcement agencies."

That raised his eyebrows. "Really? They work with law enforcement, and we've never heard of them? Our unit gets a wider exposure than most. I wonder how they managed such a low profile?"

"That is a question. I'd say ask them yourself. The contact info for the Watchmen Group head office is in the email. And, just to be on the safe side, I made sure they didn't know I looked up the thesis or them. If they're half as paranoid as they seem to be, I'm thinking we don't need them looking at us while Hotch is still having problems."

"Thanks, Garcia. You're amazing, as always."

"I know it, but it's good to be appreciated," she told him just before she hung up.

His plans to leave temporarily abandoned, Spencer dropped into his chair to read the attachment. When he finished, he dropped the phone on his desk and rubbed his temples. The paper was well written: clear, concise and surprisingly engaging for an academic work. But it raised more questions than it answered. But, he couldn't very well call the man up and ask him about it, especially not without Aaron's consent. And somehow, he didn't see asking for it going over very well.

When the door opened, Aaron looked up from his spot on the sofa. "I wasn't sure you were coming over tonight. Thought you might insist I rest," he commented.

"How are you feeling?" Reid asked, as he took off his coat and set his bag down. He looked at his shoes, at the couch, anywhere but at the other man in the room, and when he sat down, the tense line of his spine was readily apparent.

"I'm fine, but you're not. What is it? A case?" Aaron stopped, confused at the conflicting signals from his young friend. He wanted to smile; it peeked out but then fear took over, noticeable in the widened eyes, the slight tremble in his hands.

"No, it's not a case. It's personal. After what happened today, I remembered I read about a man with a problem similar to yours. I had Garcia track down the source, when I couldn't find it."

"You found someone who dealt with this? Who are they? How did they get rid of it?"

"They – he didn't," Spencer began as he seated himself on the couch. "The man, Jim Ellison, learned to control them with the help of someone called his Guide, in this case, a man named Blair Sandburg. It was Sandburg who wrote the paper I recalled reading. I didn't delve completely into it at the time, I was in a hurry and it was the subject of quite a scandal."

"What kind of a scandal, exactly?" Aaron asked, abruptly positive he wasn't going to like the answer.

With a sigh, Spencer tapped some buttons on his phone to forward the file. "Would you please just read it first, before I explain? You don't want a biased first read, not about this. Just trust me."

"Alright," Aaron agreed before he picked up his phone to open the file. He had to resist the urge to gape as he read. The abstract and the section summaries were almost scarily accurate when it came to what he experienced. Oh, the back story was different but it made sense that what activated these senses would be different for each person.

When he felt he'd skimmed enough to have grasped the general idea, he set the phone on the table, and turned to face Spencer. "So, what was the scandal you mentioned? From what I saw, the research methodology was solid and the information is more than relevant."

"Well, just after this was published, Sandburg actually went on record that the whole thing was a fake. But, given what's happened with your senses lately, I think it's more likely he said that to protect the Sentinel, to protect his Sentinel.

Aaron looked over at him without speaking for a long moment. "You know it's possible he really did lie," he said finally.

"I know. But it's just as likely that the real lie was saying his dissertation was fake. Besides, aren't you the one who always tells me that the lie isn't as important as the reason for it?"

"When did you start actually listening to me?" he asked, with a slight smile.

"When I noticed how often you're right. We need to do this, Aaron, please."

The nod he got in answer was reluctant, but there, nonetheless.

They discussed it for another hour or so then adjourned to the kitchen so Hotch could cook dinner for both of them. Over chicken Alfredo, they debated the merits of possible approaches, and worked up a suitable timeline based on the current workload for the team.

Eyes on his dinner, Spencer tried not to fidget. It wasn't his place to ask, but something told him he needed to be there when Aaron finally did track down Sandburg. But, offhand, other than the fact he'd dug up the information, there was no logical reason for him to go. In fact there were several reasons not to, considering he could help smooth things over at work if he stayed behind. That didn't lessen the urgency that pulled at him. It felt as though there wasn't enough oxygen in the room when he thought about Aaron going alone.

"Why do you suddenly look like my Alfredo sauce is the worst thing you ever tasted?" Aaron asked with some concern.

"It's not that. The food's fine. Thank you." But the concern gave him an opening.

"If you don't mind, and if you don't think it will cause too many problems, I would like to come with you on this fact finding mission." It all came out a bit too quickly, and he had to fight to relax; his hands had balled into fists and he hadn't even noticed.

"I was just about to ask," Aaron told him with a small smile.

Whatever he would have said next was interrupted by the quiet ringtone of Reid's cell phone. When he saw the number, he picked up, even though the idea of going back to work held absolutely no appeal right now.

"Hi Garcia. What's going on? Are we being called in?"

"No, actually, I called with some more information about Blair Sandburg. It turns out he doesn't just work for that company I was telling you about, Watchmen Group. He's one of the co-founders. Even more interesting is who the other co-founder is, if that paper you had me read is anything to go by."

She sounded so pleased with herself that Spencer smiled. "How so?" he asked, though given what she'd already said, he was reasonably certain he knew the answer. That was no reason to ruin her fun.

"Well, from what I understand Sandburg only has one other full partner in the company: Mr. James, call me Jim, Ellison. And I did some more discreet digging, and I think I know a way we can get both of them here so that you and Hotch and the others can pick their brains to your heart's content."

"You have?" That would be a much safer alternative, if it was workable, anyway. The lower the risk of accidental discovery the better and discretion was much easier to assure in familiar territory.

"I have indeed. I'm just that good," she assured me, and he could picture her usual pleased smile. "It turns out that the Georgetown is doing a lecture series for its students and the public. They invited us to send someone from the BAU, but it clearly wasn't a priority, since there wasn't so much as a memo sent out. But if Hotch was to mention that he'd heard about it, Strauss would probably take the chance and ask him to go."

"I don't see how that would help us, Garcia."

"Ah, I'm getting to that, my dear. It turns out the seminar series is both hugely popular and quite eclectic, most of the faculties invite guest speakers who are popular in their fields. It wouldn't be difficult to see to it that our two mystery men end up with tickets. I might even be able to swing an invitation to speak. Sandburg's credibility may have taken a hit, but he still has a rep as a solid speaker when it comes to cultural anthropology. I know a lady who's on the planning committee and I happen to know they've had some last minute withdrawals they are looking to fill spaces for."

"If you can pull that off, I will be your willing caffeine slave, you name the drink, I will have it on your desk, first thing, for as long as you want," he promised.

"You don't have to bribe me, Reid. I want to help. But my mama didn't raise no fools, so I accept," she answered gleefully.

When they hung up a few minutes later, Aaron looked at him in question.

"Care to tell me why you just agreed to enable our analyst's caffeine addiction?" he asked, his tone dry with amusement.

It took a few minutes to summarize the call. He ended the explanation with his own support for the idea. "It makes way more sense, on pretty much every level there is, to meet them here, where we can better control what they learn about us."

"I agree. We'll take our advantages where we can."

November 1st, 2010
Georgetown University
Washington DC
9:55 am

"You love this stuff. Why don't you look happier?" With a few quick looks around the room, Jim determined they were safe, as safe as you could be in a major metropolitan area. He may have left police work behind a decade ago, but some habits, you never broke. He was all too aware of the vast array of things that could go wrong.

Blair didn't answer and his eyes had the faraway look that said he wasn't entirely in the here and now. What possible reason he would have to tune in to his shamanic side in the middle of an auditorium remained to be seen, but Jim stepped in front of him automatically and relaxed his controls just slightly.

Immediately, he tensed, and rocked forward on the balls of his feet. One of the people in the auditorium was a Sentinel. There was no way to tell if he was active or latent, but he leaned toward the latter.

After years of effort, the Watchmen Group now had offices around the world, and all those offices offered support to Sentinels and their Guides as they were discovered. That meant they had surprisingly accurate information on those who were actively using their senses. They didn't require a formal registration process; such requirements were contrary to the company's founding principles, but most chose to leave at least basic information with the nearest office, so they could be reached in case of emergency.

Once he finished his degree in computer science, Daryl had singlehandedly taken over the logistics of maintaining and securing their database and all that information. Not satisfied with that, he'd then set up the network that allowed all the offices worldwide to have access to the most up to date facts as they became available.

Just before they'd left for the airport, Blair had checked to see if anyone they knew was in the area and had come up empty. He'd checked again when they landed at Dulles. Best as he could determine there were two Guides and a Sentinel who lived nearby, but the Guides were unpaired and the Sentinel was currently in Africa, of all places, and not due back for several weeks.

Jim resisted the urge to drop his head into his hands. That meant that whoever the Sentinel was, the odds were good they'd only come online recently and they had absolutely no idea what the hell was happening to them. Not that he objected to helping other Sentinels, but this weekend was supposed to be a rare weekend off for both him and Blair, the first they'd managed since camping nearly ten months ago.

And the last pair they'd tried to help hadn't exactly reacted well, which didn't help his morale.

"Jim, look," Blair told him, tone low but urgent.

Habit turned him before he could ask why, and then he stopped, eyes wide.

Two birds had flown into the room to hover near the back, above the two men he'd pegged as federal agents of some flavour or another. The smaller bird looked to be a red-tailed hawk, the other an owl, bigger than most and with tufted ears.

Even long association with his own personal shaman hadn't made him entirely comfortable with spirit animals, other than his own, or Blair's, but the fact that these two were so clearly visible spoke volumes about the strength of the Sentinel and Guide they were bonded to.



"Are you seeing this, man?"

The awe-tinged wonder in Blair's tone made him smile, even as he tried to process the implications. "Oh yeah, Chief, I see them. I just can't figure out if this is going to change things for better or worse."

"Well, it certainly makes things complicated," Blair told him. "So much for vacation, that's for sure. A pair this strong, I don't think we can afford to pass off to someone."

"Yeah, I caught that." Jim paused to reach out toward the two men. Only a cursory look and he knew the hawk belonged to the Sentinel, the older of the pair, whose square jaw was clenched tightly enough to hurt. If his clenched fists and taut shoulder muscles were any indication, he was more than ready for a fight, which was hardly surprising for a new Sentinel in the presence of another of his kind for likely the first time.

"Suddenly, I don't think my being invited to speak here was a happy coincidence," Blair murmured.

Jim nodded his agreement. Anyone in attendance had to wear an ID badge with their name and professional affiliation clearly displayed. Now he knew who they were and had a pretty good idea what they wanted. "Back to the hotel to check them out?" he suggested.

"Good call," Blair agreed, and he gathered his currently shoulder length curls back into a pony tail. "I can email them an invitation to meet us at the room if we like what we find. And if not, well, we can add them to the list with the others to keep an eye on."

November 1st, 2010
Georgetown Inn
Washington DC
1:15 pm

It was easy enough to slip out after the question and answer portion of Blair's session was over, and they reached the hotel without incident where Blair booted up his laptop to connect to the Watchmen network before he started the usual searches. Neither Spencer Reid nor Aaron Hotchner had been flagged by company personnel or independent contractors, which was a good sign. The public information on their work was another. No one could chase monsters for that long unless they were truly dedicated to their calling and the public good. Another working pair at the FBI could only help their long-term goals, so that was another plus.

After about half an hour, he looked up from the laptop and summarized what he'd found for Jim. "Everything I found backs up what my gut is telling me. We want these two on our side. They're strong, both of them. And he's gotta be newly online, which could be a real hazard in his line of work. A zone out at the wrong time could get them both killed."

"Yeah. That's about what I figured," Jim replied, but his eyes were distant and his shoulders drooped.

"You can't take every failure personally," Blair reminded him. He didn't need to use his abilities to know Jim was exhausted and discouraged, and still blamed himself for the most recent Sentinel they'd discovered who had refused their help.

"Pot. Kettle," Jim retorted.

The retort had a slight edge to it, but after this many years, Blair knew better than to let it bother him. His Sentinel might be older and there might be more silver in the hair he had left, but he still wanted to save everybody who needed saving. He was more realistic about his chances these days but that didn't change his basic makeup any.

Rather than comment, he turned back to the laptop. This wasn't the first pair who'd reached out like this, but this was one of the better setups to result. That slotted them into the smart and careful category.

"So, the usual email, then?" Blair kept his tone warm and carefully even.

The weight of Jim's gaze lightened but there was still heat behind it.

"Yeah, I guess." The answer was short, even curt, but then Jim stood and moved to stand behind him. A moment later, Jim's strong arms reached around him and held tight.

"This time will go better," Blair proclaimed. "We're about due for some better luck with new pairs, so I've just now decided these guys are it. Besides, if even half of what'd on the record is true, it looks like we might get along. Never hurts to make new friends."

"Says you," Jim retorted. "I have enough friends, thanks. I'll leave making new ones up to you."

"So, what else is new?"

Spencer wasn't particularly surprised when he got an email that invited him and Aaron to Ellison's hotel for a private meeting. He expected the subsequent argument with Aaron about whether or not meeting them on their turf was the best idea. And, he wasn't even surprised when Aaron wondered at the wisdom of meeting them at all, no matter how much he needed answers.

He didn't so much argue, as he made appropriate sounds in the right places. When Aaron had run out of objections, he finally spoke up.

"We need to know what they know. If there's even the smallest chance they can help you, then it's worth going. They're not criminals after all. We've had more dangerous conversations."

"Maybe not. We don't know what their agenda is."

"It is possible they actually want to help, just like their email said. And that's what we wanted, remember?" He kept his tone mild, aware that the other man must feel very out of control. The last thing he wanted was for him to back out now.

Aaron had already been to every specialist he thought could help, even with how much trouble he had to go to in order to keep it off bureau radar.

Spencer paced across the carpet to stand close to the other man, closer than he would have normally. "I'm worried about you, Aaron. We both know it's getting worse."

"I'm handling it."

Spencer didn't answer at first. The silence stretched while he chose his words. "I know you are. But I don't know how much longer we'll be able to keep the specifics from the rest of the team. They already know something is wrong." He bit his lip and managed to keep the rest of his thoughts to himself. But, if he was honest, he wasn't sure how much more Aaron could take without some sort of breakdown.

Before he could decide exactly what to say, Aaron spoke again. "Alright. We'll go."

It seemed like it should be more complicated, fraught with tension, somehow. But their arrival at the hotel was almost anti-climactic. Ellison let them in and waved them to a table in the sitting area, with a slight smile.

Sandburg was already seated, his smile wider. "Glad you could make it. Please call me Blair," he told both of them, his body language open and relaxed. His sprawl in the chair spoke of long habit, though it didn't look particularly comfortable.

They made small talk for a few moments while Blair popped out of his seat to get coffee for everyone.

The silence in the room turned heavy as they sat around the table. Aaron watched Spencer, who fiddled with his coffee spoon. Jim and Blair sat close enough that their knees touched, both calm but serious. Gone were the earlier smiles but it seemed they wanted someone else to make the first move.

Problem was, he couldn't figure out how to start the conversation he wasn't sure he wanted to have anyway.

"I read your thesis," Spencer started, his gaze on Blair. "And I understand that you had good reasons to claim it was a lie, but I think everyone here knows it wasn't. I know you don't know us, so you don't have reasons to trust us, but I'm hoping you do, since you asked us here. I'll admit, we should have been honest about wanting to meet you, which obviously you've realized was the goal to begin with."

"Yeah, we got that," Blair answered, his eyes intent, shoulders taut.

"Reid," Aaron called out in warning.

"They already know," Spencer repeated. "And we can't keep doing this," he insisted.

"I think Hotch is a Sentinel. I'm not sure at what level, or however that's measured, but his senses have been malfunctioning for months now. He needs to learn control so that it stops causing problems. You need to help him find this Guide person, so he can get his life back."

"Well, you're half right," Blair answered, calm, but still serious.

"What does that mean?"

"Well, Agent Hotchner, you're definitely a Sentinel," he explained. "But we don't need to find your Guide."

"Why not? He needs help," Reid insisted.

For the first time since they sat down, Blair smiled widely. "I'm not saying he doesn't need help, I'm saying I don't need to find him, because he already has one."

Startled, Aaron glanced over at Spencer, and watched as realization dawned and the younger man's eyes filled with sheer panic. Then, they shuttered, and his face went blank.

"That's not possible."

The denial hurt: a sharp ache in the chest that speared outward. Aaron told himself it wasn't personal, that Spencer was his friend by choice and he needed to respect that choice. But that didn't really help.

"I'm sorry, but you must be mistaken," he began, careful to keep his tone neutral.

"No, I'm not. I'm sorry this is difficult for both of you, but I've been a Guide for a long time, and in this case, it really does take one to know one."

Blair shifted in his chair so he could look at Jim for a moment, then quirked his chin ever so slightly.

Though his face showed his reluctance, Jim rose and turned to Aaron. "Why don't we let your Dr Reid talk to Blair alone for a few minutes? We can step into the other room and I'll give you the cliff notes version of what a Sentinel is and how I've learned to cope."

"Absolutely not," Aaron answered.

Before they could debate further, Spencer spoke up. "It's alright. I'll talk to him."

When the other two men had moved into the living room, Blair moved so he sat much closer to Spencer and laid a hand on his arm. "Do you even understand what a Guide does?"

"The anchor, responsible for the health and well being of his sentinel above all things," quoted Spencer, even as his hands twisted anxiously in his lap. "I could keep going if you want."

Blair's eyes widened and his face lit with curiosity. "Eidetic memory?"

Spencer nodded but kept on his original point. "I read the paper. I know what the Guide is, at least as you set it out. But I can't be that for him."

"Why not?" Still curious, Blair's tone gentled now, in the face of the pain in Spencer's eyes.

"You don't understand. I'm damaged." He forced the words out. No matter how much he hated to say them, they were true.

"Somehow, I doubt that," Blair ventured. "Whatever's happened that makes you say so, I'm sorry for it, but you're still here, you survived. That trumps everything else. And right here, right now, you have a chance to do something more important than anything that's come before. No matter how many lives you've touched or how many people you've saved, they don't compare to this. If you can accept what you are, it will change everything, but for the better."

Spencer laughed, but it was bitter and dark. "And how do you know that?"

"Not so very long ago, I was where you are right now. And I liked my life, mostly, but it got so much better there's no comparison. But I had to accept, had to take it on, take him on really. We've been through a lot but I've never regretted it, not for one second."

Eyes closed, near tears, Spencer forced himself to breathe normally. To give himself a chance to find composure, he catalogued what he'd seen of their interaction in his mind's eye. "Not that I'm agreeing with you, but what exactly does this entail? I mean, you weren't exactly forthcoming with the practical details."

Blair smiled and nodded. "Jim and I met when he was still a cop. It's a long story but we ended up partners on the force, after I confessed about the dissertation. I wasn't exactly welcome in academia, so I had to find a new path. Even back then, I happen to think the fact we're a Sentinel and Guide pair made us better partners, in a lot of ways."

Despite the surreal nature of the conversation, Spencer couldn't help but question. "But you left law enforcement. Did the Sentinel thing eventually get in the way?"

"No. It was a part of the equation, but not because either of us couldn't cope. We left the Cascade PD because Jim had no interest in riding a desk and because both of us had too many close calls that were way too close. And, we realized we weren't the only Sentinel/Guide pair, but we were the only pair with current information on how to deal with it without losing our minds or our jobs, friends, and families.

"That's where the idea for the Watchmen Group was born. Private security was the logical niche but that was only the beginning. We needed jobs that gave us reasons to travel, so we don't draw undue attention to the new pairs as they're discovered. That's not what it says in the annual report, but the biggest reason we started the company was because we needed a reason to travel the world so we could find the other Sentinel/Guide pairs and help them form stable, working partnerships. Help them

connect with others who understand who and what they are so it can become a part of their life instead of the thing that keeps them from living.”

“It wasn’t easy and we made mistakes,” Blair admitted. “The point is, when we left the department, it was because we were ready for our new challenge, not because Jim’s senses, or my duty as his Guide somehow meant we had to abandon our life. You’re a smart man, Dr. Reid. Surely after you finished my dissertation you considered the huge advantage enhanced senses could be. With some training and practice, Agent Hotchner has the potential to be his own mobile crime lab.

“But just because we eventually worked out all the bugs, that doesn’t mean we had an easy time of it back when we figured all this stuff out. I was petrified I’d let Jim down somehow, that he would get hurt, even die and it would be my fault. And Jim had his own demons to deal with. For one thing, he was terrified right down to the bone he was going crazy. And it’s not easy to be so different than everyone else.”

“I’m sure it isn’t,” Spencer agreed, without bothering to hide the irony. That someone else could sit across from him and tell him that would have been hilarious, if he could find any scrap of humour in the situation.

Blair quirked a smile. “I know, I know, I have a gift for the obvious but don’t you see? You’re doing the same thing now. I don’t what you’re so afraid of, but whatever it is, you can’t see past it.”

“It’s not any one thing. There are a million reasons why I don’t think I could possibly be a Guide, be his Guide. He needs someone better, someone stronger.”

“There are many different types of strength, man. And strength isn’t the only consideration here. Every Guide I’ve talked to, no matter what the circumstances surrounding their activation has described a feeling that this is what they were born to do. I know I was. How do you know it’s not the same for you? Why do you deny so strongly?”

“I can’t be that for him,” Spencer muttered. “I told you. I’ve read the paper. So much of it is instinct and guesswork, based on feelings. I need more information than that. I don’t work that way. I can’t work that way. Facts, science, these are the cornerstones of my world. You don’t understand what you’re asking.”

“I think you probably work off of your instincts more than you know. You just happen to have a vast amount of knowledge to back up your intuition.”

“In fact, I bet you’re already doing it, when it comes to your Sentinel. You can’t help yourself. You do what you can to minimize the things you know he has problems with. Maybe you’ve even brought him out of a zone out.”

Blair paused to note Reid’s slight flinch, and nodded and leaned back in his chair. “I’m a go-with-your-gut kind of guy and I was still terrified out of my mind for months after we realized what my role in the whole Sentinel deal was. That much responsibility for another human being, much less a human being who could overload and die if I screw it up, it scared me on levels I didn’t even know I had.”

Caught off guard by the honesty, Spencer worked to hold on to his calm. “Are you always so forthcoming with near strangers?”

“It varies. When the stranger happens to be one of the strongest potential Guides I’ve met in a long time, yes.”

"We only just started building our friendship. In the grand scheme of things, we don't even know each other all that well." Not nearly as well as he wanted them to, anyways, but he managed to keep that to himself.

"No matter what I can accept, I don't know if he would even want to be so involved with me, especially not if sleeping together is required."

Spencer arched an eyebrow in question, and then waited. It was evident if you knew what to look for that Jim and Blair had been partners for more than just work for a long time, and he was interested to see what the other man would admit.

When he spoke, Blair's tone was hesitant like he wasn't sure the answer would help or make things worse.

"Every bond is different because what each pair needs is different. Some are purely platonic, others less so. Jim and I are romantically involved, but that is a part of the whole. I believe I would love Jim no matter what I was, who I was, or where I was. It's a constant of my universe, I guess you could say.

"But, if you're asking if you have to sleep with him to Guide him, then the answer is no, though I believe it helps. Jim and I were connected long before we ever slept together. Eventually I learned to use that connection to help figure out what he needed. All Guides are tuned to their Sentinels in some way; some just know get vague impressions and occasional flashes of awareness. Others pick up a wider range of emotions with a much wider scope."

Part of him was fascinated at the idea. The rest of him scoffed at even the possibility. "There has never been any evidence that what you're talking about exists in any facet of our society. Empathy is something you have, not something you do," Spencer retorted. He firmly closed the door on the part of his brain that couldn't decide if he was relieved or disappointed at the answer.

"Not for a Guide, it's not. Think about it. A Sentinel gets so much sensory information, he or she, risks getting lost in their own body. Especially if they're working to protect to their tribe, they all share a fierce dedication to duty that overrides their basic needs. It makes sense that there would be a way to be sure they are cared for and protected, that their needs don't get completely forgotten."

Spencer opened his mouth to deny it, but memories of the previous days stole the words away. In the hospital, the pain he'd felt when he'd known Aaron needed medication, when food or drink tasted wrong. The urgency that had prodded him to go to the Hotchner house the morning he'd found Aaron all but incapacitated with a migraine. That day in the office he'd known Aaron needed him, even before he'd made it back to the bullpen. It made no sense, but his own recall was undeniable, he had reason to know; he'd tried.

And then there were the dreams. At the time, he'd dismissed them as wishful thinking, brought on by how worried he was. For that matter, how worried he'd been was another factor. Friends or not, there were times he'd barely functioned. Even he couldn't explain where the desperation to see Aaron and know he was okay had come from.

He shook his head, not sure whether he wanted to deny it or explore it further. "Alright, for the moment, let's table the question of possible or not. Assuming what you say is even possible, it isn't even remotely ethical for me to just help myself to someone else's feelings, no matter how noble the motive. He didn't choose to be a Sentinel. Shouldn't he at least get a say in who guides him?"

"When have you ever known me not to make my opinions known, either as your boss or your friend?" Aaron's voice was calm, but threaded with something that went beyond stubbornness. He moved more

comfortably in his own skin despite the surreal nature of the conversation he'd obviously heard the last of, and he glanced at Spencer in reassurance as he came back into the room. "If I had to go through a catalogue of all the people in my life, and pick one of them to Guide me through what promises to be a very challenging process, I would pick you," Aaron told him, voice low.

"Some of the aspects of this came as a shock, I'll admit, but it's okay, Spencer. You didn't know what you were doing, and even what you did never crossed any lines I wasn't comfortable with you crossing. Honestly, I was a bit annoyed at times, but only because I thought you were basing your actions on profiling me. Knowing that isn't the case may take some getting used to but I'm not angry with you."

He stopped abruptly, and Spencer was certain there was more, but he didn't press. He had more important concerns. "I would never knowingly invade your privacy, Aaron."

"I know that. Besides, you can't have invaded, not if I wanted you there." Aaron sat down in one of the vacant chairs and leaned over a bit so he could put a hand on his arm. "I've never lied to you before, not even when it would have been safer or easier. I'm not about to start now."

"I know," Spencer replied. There were so many thoughts rushing through his mind that it was too hard to pick just one. Even though he felt certain Jim and Blair could be trusted, part of him balked at having anything more personal out in the open.

"Clearly, I'll need to develop control of each sense and its input. I'm wondering if you've developed a method for learning all of this or if each pair has to learn by trial and error."

The change of subject was smooth and easy, and Aaron managed it without any indication he knew the distress Spencer was feeling, but Aaron was grateful when Jim picked up the conversational thread.

"Actually, some of each. Back in the day, Blair pestered me with tests for my senses every time I turned around. Even once I got used to it, it could get to be a bit much. Lucky for you, you get to reap the fruits of my labours. Based on his notes from all the original tests, we were able to put together a sort of a study guide, a Sentinel handbook, I guess you could say."

The idea that he could sort even some of this out from a book had Spencer hard pressed to hold back a relieved sigh.

Blair smiled a little, but he was kind enough not to say anything, as he continued the explanation. "We can give you a solid foundation to work from, especially if you're willing to practice. But, some things will be a matter of trial and error, for both of you."

That made sense. Spencer nodded. "Approximately how long does it take to master the basics then?"

"I can't tell you that. I understand why you want to know," Blair replied and held up a hand to forestall any interruption. "The time frame depends on a variety of factors. Each pair we've seen walked their own path, and so will you."

There was no trace of a smile on Blair's face now, and his eyes were darker when he looked at them. "I meant it when I said this can make your lives better but you should understand, we can't tell you the specifics of how things will change. We know that the stronger the pair the greater the depth of communication after activation but what that will mean, I can't say."

"We don't live in each other's heads all the time," Jim added. "But, we're definitely closer than most people. I always have a general sense of where Blair is, and how he's doing, and he pretty much always

knows how I'm feeling. Hell, when he needs to, the man can read my emotions like most people read a library book." He smiled and continued. "But, the benefits outweigh the drawbacks, trust me."

Jim looked like he would continue, but Blair cut in. "Actually, I think you two should think about going to one of our retreat properties. Each one is maintained by the Watchmen Group, a safe place for new pairs to get away from it all and figure out what works for them and what doesn't. We have sanctuaries all over the world, most of them pretty remote. Cities are difficult for Sentinels to handle at first, so much input, twenty four seven."

Blair's eyes darkened with sympathy, but he continued in the same calm tone. "On top of that, until you know what you react badly to, everything from your food to your toothpaste to the scent of your fabric softener, to the hairspray someone two blocks down marinated in can set you off. Better to minimize those triggers for a while."

He paused, and made an effort to lighten his tone. "In fact, if we time it right, Jim and I may even be able to join you at one of the retreats, give you some hands on help with mastering all this stuff."

"I'm not sure it would be prudent for Aaron and I to request time off at the same time," Spencer objected.

"If I haven't learned ways to finesse paperwork by now, I don't deserve my job." Aaron tried to keep his tone matter of fact, but didn't quite make it. "If the experts think this is the best way to handle this, then we can make it work."

It all sounded reasonable and logical, but Spencer locked eyes with Aaron and saw his own indecision reflected back at him.

The trip to Aaron's house felt twice as long as it should have, and too fast, all at the same time. Both of them were silent, as they processed what they'd been told. Once they were inside and seated, Spencer took a deep breath and struggled to hold on to his own calm. This close to Aaron he could see the signs of exhaustion and stress. More than that, he could almost feel the threads of fear that wrapped around the other man.

"You don't have to handle this on your own. I want to help." He shifted forward, gripped Aaron's arms.

It was impossible to say who moved first, but the next thing he knew, Aaron's arms were around him, and he forgot all the reasons he shouldn't, why this was a terrible idea, even what he was risking, and let himself be drawn into the embrace. Their lips met once, just a light brush, then again, deeper this time.

The sense of unease he'd carried around for days vanished, washed away in a flood of heat and longing. Eventually, he forced himself to break the kiss, and pulled back, if only slightly.

He expected anger or disappointment. Instead, Aaron looked stunned, and his eyes went shuttered in the way he had when he tried to hide what he felt.

"I'm sorry." Spencer's apology came unbidden. He had no right ask for more while things were still up in the air, it was clear his attention wasn't welcome. He should have known better than to let his guard down enough that he got lost in his own feelings like that.

"Spencer." Just his name, but it was enough to stop the loop of his own thoughts.

"It's alright." A smile, small and hesitant, but a smile nonetheless. "You surprised me, that's all. I hoped...well, actually, pretty much for this, but I wasn't certain you felt that way.

"I wasn't going to tell you," Spencer admitted, voice low. "There's a million reasons why it's a bad idea. And I'm no one's idea of a catch, I know."

The laugh surprised him, and he fell silent.

"If anyone should be saying that, it's me. I can't even control my own body at the moment," Aaron reminded him. His fists clenched and unclenched and he glanced down at his feet, then back up again.

"To be perfectly honest, there's still a part of me that wants to call all of this insane and go back to my life."

Spencer nodded. "That's understandable." A breath of silence, then another, and he shifted his weight to move back.

Before he could, Aaron tightened his arms. "No. Don't go. That's my fear talking. I meant what I said before. There's no one else I'd want as my Guide, especially not after everything you've done for me, these last few months."

In spite of himself, Spencer tensed. As much as he wanted this change in their relationship, he wanted it to be for the right reason, on his own merit. Not as the result of some connection neither of them had asked for. "Is that the only reason you want to be with me?" He hated how small his voice sounded, but he needed to know.

"Well, it's definitely a part of it, the catalyst, maybe. But it's not the only reason. It couldn't be; I've wanted you for far longer than I've had problems with my senses."

His breath caught and he couldn't contain the smile if he tried. "Really?"

"Oh yes. I tried to ignore how I felt about you, but even my self control has limits." A pause, just long enough to brace himself, and then Aaron continued. "After Hailey was killed, I told myself it was better that I focus my energy on Jack and work. So that was the only context I let myself consider you in. But, every time I had too much time to think, or started to get lonely, or felt like I could get lost in the pain, there you were.

"And after the crash, I realized how much I'd come to depend on you, on the fact that you were always there when I needed you."

There was a tight band around his chest, and it squeezed tighter when he thought of those days, but Spencer managed to nod.

"I was a mess. I couldn't eat, barely slept. I missed you so much, I'm pretty sure it wasn't rational. If it wasn't for..." Spencer trailed off, and felt the blush as it climbed higher on his skin. Typical, his mouth had to run away with him about the one thing he should keep to himself.

"If it wasn't for what?"

The question was soft and so gentle he could barely stand it. But, if anyone deserved to know, it was Aaron.

Spencer dropped his eyes but forced himself to answer. "I had these dreams, like I was there with you, on the mountain." He waited for the expected explanation about projection and subconscious desires, but there was only silence.

"I saw the campsite, all the ways you tried to fix it up, and... I saw the day you fell," he explained, and would have kept going but his voice cracked.

He kept his eyes down, tried not to squirm. When he said it out loud, it sounded worse than crazy.

"It makes sense," Aaron pointed out. "Once you were told what happened to me, your mind filled in the blanks."

"I had the dreams while you were still missing."

More silence. He waited for it to get uncomfortable. Instead, Aaron reached down and tipped his chin up until their eyes met.

Eyes wide with something that looked a lot like wonder, he leaned closer, brushed their lips together, then smiled.

"I would say that's insane, and hell, maybe it is. But I heard you; when I most wanted to give up, you told me to hold on."

Spencer jerked and felt his mouth gape, as warmth spread through him. He'd wanted so much to help, and it turned out he had.

There were so many different ways this could all go horribly wrong, and he knew it. But in that moment, he didn't care. Just this once, Spencer wanted to take something for himself. He'd always felt drawn to Aaron, the pull of attraction had become almost familiar. Now, with everything that happened, the connection between them had only strengthened.

"If we're admitting things, I should tell you, I heard your entire conversation with Blair, not just the end of it."

Spencer sighed, and nodded. "I thought as much." He felt his face heat with embarrassment, despite his matter of fact tone.

"I'm not trying to bring up the same painful subject, but I want to understand. You kept saying you can't do the Guide thing, but from where I'm sitting, you already are. Without your support, there's no way I'd have made it through the last months, and I'm including the time I was missing."

Spencer tried to smile, but Aaron felt him shudder.

"Hey, it's okay. I'm here. I'm fine." He ran his hand up and down Spencer's spine.

"Logically, I know that. But what could have happened won't stop playing out in my head."

"Believe me, I understand that," Aaron told him. "But I stand by what I said before. In all the ways that count, you're already my Guide, no matter how determined you are it won't work. The dreams, the fact I heard you talking to me on the mountain, it only underscores that."

"And I know you've been through a lot, in the last few years. But you're not the only one. We both have. And I don't consider you damaged anymore than you would think that about me."

There was a part of him that wanted to point out how fast that could change as they got closer, but he didn't comment, because Aaron was still talking.

"I already had one relationship where I had to hold back pieces of myself to make it work. I can't do it again."

"I don't want you to hold back. I want to know whatever you want to tell me," Spencer objected. "But you deserve better, someone who is good at relationships at least."

Aaron didn't bother to answer that. He couldn't not with his temper so close to the breaking point. Before he could stop to think about it, he pushed back into Spencer's space, and kissed him, licked into his mouth like he'd imagined so many times, let himself take and take, and then take just a little bit more. He swallowed the tiny, helpless moan Spencer made, felt his hands clutch and grab, but didn't break the kiss until they were both breathless, and it actually hurt to move away, he wanted so much to keep going until they were both naked and he could taste a hell of a lot more.

"You're already good at relationships. We already have one; what do you think we've been building over the last little while? And let me tell you something, I've never wanted anyone the way I want you. There are times it's all I can think about. Right now, no matter how much I know we need to talk, there's still a part of me that wants to pin you to the couch and rip off all your clothes, consequences be damned. Now think about how much I must want you, for it to shred my control like that."

One heartbeat, then another, and another and Spencer didn't move, didn't blink, didn't even breathe. He tried to reach for logic, and reason, but reasonable had nothing to do with how right it felt to be here, how flushed his skin felt when he heard his normally straight-laced boss talk that way, because of him.

"You're trying to distract me," he pointed out, after he took a deep breath.

"Maybe a little, but it's still true," Aaron admitted.

"Before we get sidetracked, we should decide if we want to go to the retreat Jim and Blair told us about."

"If I say yes, will you kiss me some more?"

November 29th, 2010
Tarandahlia Rejuvenation Sanctuary
Near Chilliwack, BC
8:00 am

By the time they parked in front of the sprawling log cabin, a man with shoulder length salt and pepper hair had come out on to the porch.

Dressed in faded jeans and a black T-shirt, he looked about a decade older than Aaron and smiled widely in greeting.

"Right on time, you two. Welcome to Tarandahlia. I'm Bear. I run the place, and appointed myself the welcoming committee not long after we opened."

Spencer let Aaron do the introductions, and moved to get his bag while the other two chatted.

"When Watchmen bought the property, they kept the original name, after the family who settled here. Changed just about everything else though, to accommodate folks such as yourself," Bear explained as they went into a spacious entryway, where butter yellow sunshine spilled in from a skylight.

"You two are on the second floor. Can't miss the door to your rooms, it's the first one on the left. We've got room for fourteen people total, though it's most often pairs, of course. The main cabin sleeps eight, the bunk house another four, and the cabin you passed by on your way in another two. There's only six guests right now, though, so not to worry if you're not much for people."

"Kitchen's down at the end of this hall," Bear told them. "I do most of the cooking here, breakfast and supper, in any case. Meal times are posted in your room. You can help yourself to whatever you might want, any time you like. Just stay out of my deep freeze and the marked pantry. All the suites have their own bathroom, so you don't have to worry about seeing someone in the altogether, that you'd rather not."

Bear paused then, and Spencer watched him tick off his mental list. "That's about all I've got to tell you. Oh, except the relevant info about the Sentinel and Guide stuff is already in your rooms and if you want more, the library is down past your rooms on the second floor. We may look like we're the back end of nowhere but there's a decent reference collection and computers. The internet can be temperamental but it works, and if you've been cleared, you can access the Watchmen database and network too."

Once he'd unpacked, Spencer sat on the edge of the king sized bed and tried to remember he'd wanted to come here. Somehow, it all felt so much more real now and he wasn't sure what to do with that, or how to regain his mental balance.

Aaron came out of the bathroom, where he'd stored his toiletries, and joined him on the bed.

"Penny for your thoughts?"

"I was just wondering what exactly we're doing here." Spencer didn't add that he felt lost without his routine, but it showed anyway he was sure.

"Well, I don't know about you, but right now, I plan on having lunch. As for the rest, it's okay that you don't know, because that's what we're here to find out."

He tilted his chin toward the desk in the corner, which held several leather-bound books, and what looked to be a handwritten letter.

Since they were alone, Spencer allowed the other man to pull him close, tucked himself under his chin and breathed in and out deeply. Twined together so close, he relaxed, almost in spite of himself. After several moments, he turned his head, and was rewarded with a gentle kiss.

"Come on," Aaron told him, as he stood up. "You'll feel better if you eat."

Voices, bright and happy, echoed up the stairs as they made their way to the kitchen. Bear greeted them, and immediately asked if they liked the room.

"It's beautiful," Spencer assured him.

Bear busied himself at the stove then, but grinned at them.

The long table set on the other end of the room had only two other occupants, both women. The way Aaron tensed when he saw them told him at least one of them was a Sentinel. Carefully, he laid a hand on Aaron's arm, and murmured to him. "It's okay."

He could feel the effort it took, the tightly wound control, But Aaron continued over to the table after only a brief pause.

The woman closest to them turned to watch them come, and smiled, though her eyes were wary, as she looked up at Aaron from her perch on the bench seat. "I'm Alex. That's Olivia," she pointed to her companion across the table on the other bench. "And you can relax, she's a Sentinel, but she's mine, so she's no threat to you."

Aaron blew out a breath, and looked a bit embarrassed until he controlled his expression. "I'm sorry. I can assure you, it's nothing personal. I'm Aaron, and this is Spencer," he explained. Taking his cue from the ladies, he used only first names.

Alex shrugged and tucked a lock of her shoulder length blonde hair behind her ear. "Don't worry about it. It happens, especially while you're still adjusting."

Spencer pegged both women for New Yorkers, which was interesting. The nearest decent size city was Vancouver, and that was a long way from New York. There had to have been retreat locations closer, but it wouldn't be polite to ask, and he certainly didn't feel like answering their questions in return.

If anyone had told him even a few weeks ago that he would end up here, he would have recommended they have a psych eval as soon as possible. So he knew better than most that it was easy to end up far from where you expected to be.

"Nice to meet both of you," Olivia offered. "You picked a good spot for your first time out."

"It shows, does it?" Aaron asked, his voice dry, and amused.

"Just a bit," she assured him.

They sat down to eat then, and Bear brought several dishes to the table, and then offered them drinks before he could be convinced to join them. Conversation stayed on neutral topics: everyone's drive out from the city, the expected weather, the amenities available on the property.

That was a surprise. The place may have looked rustic, but it had a five star hotel beat with its offerings: pool, sauna, hot tub, steam room that apparently doubled as a sweat lodge, though Spencer couldn't see needing one of those any time soon, a full gym, a home theatre, a well stocked library, and numerous hiking trails.

Later that night, Aaron went for a swim in the pool and Spencer tried to start one of the books left on the desk, but he couldn't focus, even though the book detailed accounts of other Guides, though the identifying details were conspicuously absent. It was a fascinating read, but his mind drifted to images of Aaron, wet and nearly naked, and the last thing he wanted to be doing was reading.

He lectured himself on self control, sternly reminded himself they had agreed to take things slow. Then he gave up, and headed for the pool house.

Aaron cut through the water with no wasted effort and every evidence of fierce enjoyment.

He settled in to watch as the other man swam up to tap the wall, then shifted to tread water and looked up at him. "I thought you were reading."

Spencer meant to say he couldn't concentrate, but what came out was, "I got lonely. I don't like it when we're apart." It was true, but he felt the blush stain his skin anyway.

But Aaron didn't so much as chuckle. He only nodded and moved to climb up the closest ladder. Then, he grabbed a towel, and dried off. "You're not the only one," he admitted, as he walked over and crowded into Spencer's space.

"That's a relief." He might have said more, but then they were kissing, deep and wet, and more than a little desperate.

Aaron cupped him through his pants, squeezed gently and made a noise of disapproval. "Aren't you a little overdressed for the pool?" he asked, his mouth still so close their lips almost still touched.

"I figured it was more likely I'd behave myself," Spencer admitted, "since we're still taking things slow, I mean."

"Ah, I see. Well, I admire your dedication, if not your methods. And, I still think we need to go slow, but I never said anything about not taking the time to enjoy each other in the meantime."

Whatever answer he might have made was lost as Aaron claimed his mouth again, apparently determined to map every inch of his mouth.

Heat surged through him, and want chased after it gleefully, pooled in his stomach and lower until he couldn't help but moan. He managed not to beg for more, anything that meant more, harder, now, but only barely.

Aaron's hand slid from his back to his chest, then lower only to stop, then start again, maddeningly slow, until he reached the waistband of his pants, then slipped inside to grab, then stroke, still slow and easy, until his hips bucked forward and he moaned again.

"I've thought about this so many times," Aaron told him, with a breathless little laugh. As he stroked, he kept his eyes on Spencer's, his gaze dark, almost predatory.

His hand kept the same rhythm, but he leaned up, buried his nose in Spencer's neck and inhaled deeply, and a fine tremble swept through him. "God, you smell amazing, and you feel even better."

"Don't stop, please." Spencer forgot that someone could come in at any moment, forgot he was determined not to beg. He couldn't keep still, ignored how lightheaded he was and rocked his hips forward, just a little. There, the angle got better, the pressure just about perfect and he caught his lip in his teeth to hold back another noise.

"Don't worry, I won't."

Aaron's voice had gone lower, with just a hint of a rasp, and somehow that made it even better.

Spencer's back arched and his breath caught, but he fought the electric tingle as it gathered at the base of his spine. He didn't want this to end yet, he wanted to hold on to the way it felt just a little longer.

"The next time I do this, I'm going to taste you," Aaron promised in an absolutely filthy tone while he tightened his grip just a little.

And that just wasn't playing fair, Spencer decided. But it was too late, his orgasm crashed through him, and obliterated everything except the pleasure that swamped him, and left him weak kneed and gasping.

His smile more than a little smug, Aaron lifted his hand and tasted the come on it, before he wiped them both clean with his towel, and moved to drop it in the hamper.

He'd just had what was arguably one of the most intense orgasms of his life, but his cock twitched at that anyway.

"I never would have guessed you were so uninhibited," Spencer mused, pleased with the revelation, on a level he didn't really understand, but happy nonetheless.

"I could say the same about you. Besides, I wasn't, until recently," Aaron admitted, and came back over to kiss him deeply again.

The second day, by mutual consent, they started on the practical exercises from the handbook in their room. He'd never had problems with focus before but as he tried to immerse himself in the meditation, Aaron just couldn't clear his mind.

His sense of hearing was in overdrive and the outdoor sounds interrupted his concentration again and again. His frustrated sigh got Spencer's attention.

"What's the problem?" He stretched before Aaron could answer, the collar of his sweater slid down to reveal his shoulder.

That distracted him for an entirely different reason, and he had to take a minute before he could explain his noise issue.

"Aren't the dials we talked about helping?" Spencer joined him on the bed as he asked and his face radiated concern.

"Not really." He sighed and tried not to be angry at how hard it was to find the words for concepts he could only understand the edges of.

"Alright," Spencer acknowledged. "Then we need to find a visualization that works for you. All the literature I've read so far says that each pair is unique. It's only logical their methods be unique too," he theorized, his voice tinged with his usual enthusiasm for problem solving.

"What about something like the dials, but more familiar to you from everyday use, like the sliders you use to adjust contrast on your computer or TV? They allow for more precise increments, that should appeal to you, if nothing else."

"Oh, thank you so much," Aaron told him, in mock hurt. Then he took a deep breath and tried again. This time the background noise receded, and with a bit of adjustment, sank to normal levels.

"Well done," Spencer told him, before he said anything.

"I should be telling you that. You had more to do with it than I did."

When the meditations got repetitive, they tried something else, a Guide related exercise this time.

"You need to think of something you know will evoke a strong reaction, but don't say anything and try not to react outwardly. Just put yourself in the memory. Then, I'll try and see if I can get an impression of what you're feeling."

"Alright," he agreed.

Only a few seconds later, the memory grabbed him, like it had waited just out of reach for this moment. It was close to dark, and cold enough that he could see his breath. The sounds of the forest came in waves, and he knew there was no one around for miles. The fire had nearly burned out, but the pain made him dizzy and sick, he couldn't move to build it up.

For the first time in days, he allowed himself to consider it, really think about it. He might not be found, could die out here, and no one would ever know for sure what happened to him. He thought of Jack, all the milestones he'd reach without his father.

Then, he let himself build a picture of Reid – Spencer – in his mind's eye, let himself feel just how scared he was that he would never get the chance to tell him how he felt, that now, there could be more than friendship between them.

Tears pricked the back of his eyes, tried to clog his throat, but he held them back, kept still, and evened his breathing as best he could.

Warm hands framed his face just before he felt the wave of reassurance.

"I felt..." Spencer's voice cracked, and he tried again. "You were so sad, so sad and so afraid."

Distantly, Aaron felt himself start to shake, and managed a nod. "On the mountain, when I thought I wouldn't be found, I hated that Jack would grow up without me after all, but I knew he would be okay. I felt horribly guilty, because part of me wished you were there with me, even though I was so glad you were safe. But I hated the thought I'd never get the chance to tell you how I felt about you, that I would never see you again."

He fell silent then, and he knew his eyes were wet when he looked up, and it should have bothered him, but it didn't.

The silence snapped taut, and Spencer went still, his eyes wide but he said nothing, only stared back and waited, like he knew there was more.

"So many times I wanted to tell you, and I couldn't." It was close to a whisper, and he had to fight to get the words out past the racing of his heart. "I'm in love with you, Spencer. I have been for a long time."

Anything else he might have said cut off abruptly, when Spencer plastered himself as close as he could get while they had clothes on, and kissed him, slow and sweet, like they had all the time in the world to devote to this kiss, but it might just be their last one.

Since he was exactly where he wanted to be, Aaron let himself get swept along on the tide of heat and want that rose so quickly in both of them, at least if their ragged breathing was anything to go by.

Spencer broke away first and shook his head a bit, like he needed to clear it. "I love you, too," he said, voice firm, but quiet. He reached down and laced their hands together, and when he continued, his eyes were shadowed. "I love you," he repeated, "but that scares me, because historically, I don't have very good luck at holding on to those I love." His voice wavered at the end, and his grip tightened almost to the point of pain.

"I'm not going anywhere," Aaron promised. "I understand how hard this is for you, believe me. But, now that I have you, the last thing I'm going to do is let you go."

This time, when they were interrupted, it was by Spencer's stomach as it rumbled, loud and insistent, and they let the conversation drift to easier topics as they made their way to the kitchen for supper.

Bear was there in his already usual position at the stove. Alex and Olivia were seated next to each other on the far bench. An unfamiliar blond stood in front of the open fridge, and muttered to himself about easily portable choices. A tray set on the counter near him already carried a bowl of soup, a covered plate, and an assortment of fruit and cheese.

When Olivia spotted them and called out a hello, the man turned to watch them come in, smiled rather vaguely, and turned back to peruse the food.

Uncertain if his question would be welcome, Aaron kept quiet, but Alex answered anyway. "Don't mind Ray. His Sentinel isn't feeling very well, and isn't exactly cooperating with the recovery plan."

"I know the feeling," Spencer muttered, not quite under his breath.

That got him another smile from Ray, who looked at him again, this time with amused sympathy in his eyes. "Yeah, sorry. I'm not usually this anti-social but I need to get these back to Ben, before he decides to get up and find something to fix, or clean. He really doesn't handle inactivity very well."

"You could always tie him down," Alex suggested innocently, though her smile was wicked.

"Nah, wouldn't want him to get ideas in that direction either," Ray retorted, amidst the laughter that resulted.

The third day dawned clear and bright. As soon as he checked the forecast, Spencer suggested they stick with outdoor activities. He wasn't much for communing with nature, but he recognized the signs of too much inactivity in Aaron: the restlessness, lack of focus, and slight irritability.

A change of scene would do them both good, since he needed regular fresh air whether he liked it or not. Besides it would give them a chance to see how Aaron's senses functioned in a new environment, and more data was always a plus, in his book, no matter what-or in this case -who, he studied.

When they mentioned they wanted to go out, Bear packed them a picnic lunch and recommended several routes. Spencer thanked him and tried not to think about any of the statistics on wildlife attacks his brain wanted to review.

"You're the second pair to go out today," Bear commented, with a glance at the cloudless, pale blue sky out the window. "Seems like you'll have a good day for it."

"Let's hope so," Spencer agreed, while he watched Aaron, already out on the deck, and how nice the view of his backside was, as he leaned down to tie his shoes.

About an hour later, they stopped for a short break and he perched on a large rocky outcropping and tipped his face up to the sun.

"Are you alright?" Aaron ran a hand down Spencer's spine as he asked, and looked pleased when that made him shiver.

"I'm fine. I'm not totally out of shape you know." And it was true, he wasn't. But he was still glad for a chance to catch his breath and rest his feet.

"I know," Aaron told him, with a slight smile, then stopped, head tilted in a way that made it clear he heard something.

After a few moments, the sound of footsteps and laughter floated by on the wind and even Spencer could hear it.

Both of them looked in the direction it came from, but neither of them were prepared for the redhead who bounded into the clearing they were stopped in a few seconds after that.

Oblivious to their presence, she ran full tilt across the field, and called back gleefully over her shoulder, "Shouldn't have given me a head start then, Mulder." Then she caught sight of them and skidded to a stop.

"Hi. I didn't realize anyone else was out here. I'm Dana." She was still laughing as she tried to catch her breath.

Just as she said that, a tall, lanky man rushed into view, then adjusted so he ended up just behind her.

"And this", she continued, as she shook her long red hair behind her, "is Mulder. We seem to have accidentally put you in the middle of our race. Sorry about that."

"No problem," Spencer assured them. "I'm Spencer. That's Aaron," he gestured.

They exchanged pleasantries for a few minutes then Dana glanced at her watch and then broke into the conversation. "Not to greet and run but we have a video conference in less than an hour. We need to head back now if we want to make it."

When they were alone again, Spencer started to walk down the path and waited. Aaron would know better when they could talk without being overheard by Sentinel ears.

"You recognized them, I assume?" The quiet question held none of the surprise he expected but Spencer nodded.

"Yes. But if I hadn't seen it with my own eyes, I don't think I would have believed it. I wonder how many other Sentinels and Guides work for the FBI?"

"Technically, they don't. They retired a few years ago. Granted it was for the second time, but it stuck," Aaron pointed out.

"Right. From what I hear, their solve rate was amazing, even though they worked such unusual cases."

Aaron grinned at him and couldn't contain a quiet chuckle. "More unusual than five enhanced senses that almost no one would believe?"

"Good point."

They spent another few hours out on the trails then headed back to the main house to get cleaned up and have something to eat.

While Aaron showered, Spencer took care of his email. Even on what was at least supposed to be a vacation, he couldn't resist the urge to check in, though usually he only glanced at his inbox.

The email from Blair made him smile. The two of them had struck up quite a lively correspondence, once they got over the initial awkwardness. Blair answered all his questions about how to be a Guide and then invariably added a few of his own for them to discuss next time. The fact he had someone to go to with questions made Spencer feel much more in control of all the changes they were caught in.

It helped that they were both academics at heart, and liked to geek out over the same things. As it turned out they also had a similar sense of humour and shared the same taste in obscure foreign films.

Aaron had taken to reading over his shoulder and liked to tease him about it but he only smiled and adopted his best superior tone in response.

He knew perfectly well that Jim and Aaron emailed regularly too. Apparently Jim had no qualms about picking just about anyone's brain when it came to how to eventually ensure legal protection for Sentinels and Guides, and that opened the door to all sorts of discussions. Just because the two Sentinels only discussed the latest trends in law enforcement or sports or something else suitably manly that didn't mean their Guides were so restricted. Or so he managed to claim before he'd been tackled to the bed and kissed into breathless laughter anyway.

The idea that a relationship could be so playful was another new thing for him. As he opened a new email window so he could compose a reply, Spencer decided he rather liked it.

It was inevitable. Even in such a beautiful setting, there had to be a bad day eventually. The sky was dark gray and rain fell in sheets. Spencer woke up with a bad headache, and by the time lunch was done, they went back to their room so he could rest.

He didn't remember when he fell asleep, but the sense that someone watched him sleep woke him. Curled on his side, one hand stretched toward him on the bed, Aaron slept on.

Pain seared through his head, brought tears to his eyes and he squeezed them shut. When he opened them again, the man from the temple in his dream stood at the far end of the room. He looked the same, right down to the arm bands and the tribal marking on his skin.

They stared at each other for a long moment, and then the man grinned at him, the kind of grin that lit up his eyes with happiness.

He looked up then and Spencer followed his gaze, and felt a drum beat pulse through him.

Then he wanted to pinch himself, to prove he was awake, because above the other man, high up near the roof, two birds swooped and ducked in a complicated but joyous dance. One looked like a red-tailed hawk, if he wasn't mistaken. The other was some type of owl. Not exactly a pair that would get along and yet these two clearly did. They mock chased each other in a loop then flew close enough to each other they should have been tangled together.

The man nodded once before he spoke. "All choices come with pain. Yours brings awareness. It is good. You've have chosen well. Take care of yourself, and your Sentinel."

Then, he and the birds, faded away.

The drumbeat quieted and was gone a heartbeat later.

Spencer took a deep breath, held it then let it out in a sigh.

He'd read the section on Sentinel and Guides and spirituality, but in truth it had been more of a skim. Clearly, he should have paid more attention.

He didn't consider himself a particularly spiritual person. It was difficult to reconcile such things with the bedrock of his personal foundation in science.

Before he could consider it further, the bed shifted as Aaron stretched and opened his eyes. When he saw Spencer, he smiled then looked him over carefully. "How are you feeling?"

"Better, thanks. You?"

"I'm good. I had the strangest dream though. There was a man. I've never seen him before but I feel like I know him."

He paused then because Spencer interrupted. "And he was here, right? With birds?"

"How did you know?" Aaron asked, brow furrowed.

"I'll explain if you promise to suspend your disbelief," Spencer started cautiously. "To be perfectly honest, if it hadn't happened to me, I'm not even sure I would believe it."

December 5th, 2010
852 Prospect Ave
Cascade, Washington
4:58 am

It was late, far too late to still be awake, never mind working, but Blair couldn't close the laptop and go to bed, no matter how much he wanted to. Grant application deadlines were set in stone unless you were hospitalized and could prove it, and it was his own fault he was behind. Well to be fair, it was Decker Feland's fault. Strictly small time, Feland didn't let that stop him from adding to an already impressive rap sheet. The bulk of his skills landed solidly in armed robbery and assault, but most recently, he'd escalated to kidnapping and rape. His latest victim had escaped before he managed the worst, and explained that he was high on some designer drug combination.

It was supposed to be a fairly easy case, Feland wasn't a mastermind by any stretch. But drugs made him unpredictable and paranoid, and that made him hard to find, and even harder to predict. Bad came to worse when a virulent flu knocked out almost half the precinct. Jim felt obligated to help those who were left on duty, even though these days they only helped as consultants. And where Jim went, his Guide was determined to be a step behind.

But, the long hours meant no time for any of his commitments at the University these days, hence the all nighter. Jim stayed up to keep him company for the first few hours, mocked the worst of the usual academic bullshit. When his yawns wouldn't stop, Blair ordered him to bed, and chased the finish line on his own. Next time, he would say no, no matter which department head told him they were sunk without his help. Just his luck one of his areas of expertise was bureaucracy.

A few hours before dawn, he saved the file and hit print. As the machine powered up, he leaned back in his chair, and rubbed a hand over his face. All the forms were properly filled out, all of the additional pages would be printed in a few minutes, and he could sack out. Just then, his bed sounded like a slice of heaven. He'd only be able to enjoy it for a few hours but, but right then, he'd take what he could get.

But, before he stood up, he opened his browser to check his email. When he saw Spencer's name, he rubbed his eyes, and clicked to open the message. One read through made his eyebrows draw together, a second made him frown.

Spencer had emailed a few days ago to let him know that he and Aaron had arrived safely at Tarandahlia. That email had been upbeat, despite the nerves he'd been able to read between the lines. This one was

most definitely not. Even a short acquaintance with Dr. Reid had shown how grounded in the concrete rules of science. He was not a man who was even remotely comfortable with the metaphysical aspects of his role as a Guide. But like it or not, he was firmly stuck with them. And if the email was anything to go by, he was not happy about it, and even less likely to adjust well, since this wasn't exactly a hands on subject matter.

Even worse, without an understanding of his capabilities, Spencer had no idea of the risks he could be taking. The information in the handbook was designed for those who were not only more inclined to accept it, but also had access to much less significant abilities than those Spencer and Aaron had at their disposal.

Blair turned the problem over in his head, as he shut the laptop and went to brush his teeth. He'd learned to trust his own instincts when it came to his duties as a Guide years ago. And right now, they let him know he needed to talk to Spencer, face to face, the sooner the better. He couldn't quite determine the exact nature of the problem, but there was no doubt in his mind that there was something wrong.

Already on autopilot, he slid between the sheets on his side of the bed and shifted until he was tucked into his usual spot behind his Sentinel.

"Took you long enough," Jim complained, his voice was a sleepy mumble, even as he reached for his partner.

"Tell me about it." The warm, familiar position tempted him even closer to sleep, and Blair decided morning would be soon enough to explain the road trip they would need to take as soon as possible.



December 5th, 2010
Tarandahlia Rejuvenation Sanctuary
Near Chilliwack, BC
9:30 pm

There were many things Blair knew had changed about himself as he got older. These days, that definitely included travelling. Despite the frequent travel required for their work with Watchmen, he liked it best when they could relax at home, and when they were away, his body liked to make him pay. Didn't matter that these days they travelled on the company jet, with all the amenities a Sentinel and Guide pair could need, including a king size bed, he still managed to feel out of synch by the time they landed.

Lucky for him, they turned down the drive to the main house at a relatively decent hour. Only Bear came out to greet them, which was an added bonus. And even better, once they unpacked and grabbed a snack, they found Spencer and Aaron in their room. They had no objection to some quiet conversation in a different suite, though clearly neither of them believed the experienced pair just happened to be in the neighborhood.

"So let me get this straight," Spencer began, as they walked into the surprisingly spacious attic room. "You came all this way because you didn't like the sound of my email? And this is the sort of thing you do on a regular basis. That sounds like a bit of a stretch."

"Not once you've known Blair a little longer it isn't," Jim commented, almost under his breath.

"We had business in the area, and I thought we'd drop in and give you a chance for some of the hands on help you wished for," Blair explained.

"I know we haven't known each other all that long, but Jim's right, I would do this for almost any of the new Guides. Besides, I thought we were friends," he added, for the first time with a trace of hesitancy.

It took a second, but Spencer nodded. "I thought so too, or at least I hoped so."

"Then, just think of it as a friend helping a friend," Blair instructed with a triumphant smile.

"We normally do this sort of exercise outside, but given the time of year, we'll make an exception," he explained to Spencer and Aaron as they sat down.

"Seems sensible, given the average night time temperature here in December," Spencer observed, the muscles of his shoulders set in a tight line.

"Relax," Blair told him. "It'll work just as well for you inside."

"How could you possibly know that?"

"This isn't exactly our first rodeo, Spencer. If Blair says it will work, you can believe him," Jim agreed, his voice pitched low and quiet.

Spencer nodded, but didn't look convinced and Jim could hear his heart rate as it accelerated.

Blair spoke again, this time he explained the meditation the two Guides would do together, to help the younger man see his spirit animal, this time on purpose.

For his part, Jim had heard it all before, hell he could probably recite the theories himself, though not nearly so eloquently. He was more concerned with the barely controlled anger he could see in the newer Sentinel in the room.

"What's the problem?" he asked. The direct approach worked best, and besides, it wasn't like the other man could deny it, not to someone with the same abilities.

Aaron exhaled slowly, his eyes still on Spencer, as he spoke. "I don't like him being pushed in to this. In my experience, something that is supposed to be for your own good usually isn't."

"Fair point. But, in this case, it's for your own good too. You won't be able to function as a team until you can both accept the more, let's call them New Age, aspects to all of this. Spencer needs to be able to See them before he can help you deal with the input."

Relaxed back into the couch, Jim dialed up vision and hearing for a moment, and shook his head. "But, I get the impression you don't have as much of a problem with this side of things as he does. Mind if I ask why? You don't seem the type."

"Just because I wear a suit most of the time doesn't mean I've become one," Aaron replied, after a long pause to consider his words.

"Besides, this isn't exactly completely new to me. When I was a lot younger, I used to see some pretty strange things. My father took exception to me talking about it, so I trained myself not to, but I've never completely forgotten about them."

Well that explained the controlled fear responses alright, and he should know after all. "Sounds like my dad and your dad would have gotten along," Jim admitted. They spoke so quietly, they were probably barely audible to the others by now, one advantage to talking to another Sentinel that he liked.

"It's good you've already had some exposure to this kind of thing. But, trust me, Spencer needs to get to a point where he can at least be okay, if not comfortable with it. We've seen what happens when people don't; it doesn't end well for the pair."

Aaron didn't answer, but he used the pause to make a concerted effort to relax his jaw, and sit more comfortably on the couch.

Jim nodded his approval and tuned back into the other conversation.

"Based on what you told me, you're already much more in touch with your spiritual side than you know. All you have to do now, is give yourself permission to go back to that space inside you. The reason it hurt you when you saw it before is because you tried so hard to deny that it existed. You need to stop saying no. At least ask why, or how. As a scientist, those are perfectly valid questions, and they are much less damaging to you and to your connection with your Sentinel. You may not be able to see it, or touch it, but you know the bond is there, so start there. Build off that certainty."

It wasn't even directed at him, But Jim could feel himself reacting to the calm certainty in his Guide's tone: his breathing evened out, and he let himself stretch into the sound of that familiar, well-loved voice.

It took an effort to pull his awareness back to what they were trying to accomplish. When he managed it, he looked up into a smile from Blair, who never stopped his instructions, but as usual, still knew exactly what was going on with his Sentinel. The man was a genius at multitasking, even when it might be better if he wasn't.

It didn't take a shift into Guide mode to sense the anger Aaron felt as he preceded Spencer into the room. It rolled off of him in waves even a non sensitive would have had a hard time ignoring.

With an effort, Blair blocked out as much of it as he could and focused on what he was there to accomplish. Aaron would have to learn to cope with his temper in this entirely new context. And Jim was much better equipped to help him learn how to do that, so he left him to it. After this long together, it wasn't something they needed to discuss, which was handy. If they talked about it, they would only put him on the defensive, and that was hardly helpful.

Once everyone was comfortable, he explained exactly what they would be doing, in more depth than he normally would have, since he knew Spencer appreciated the details at least as much as he did. It was a nice change from the bullet point version a lot of their novices preferred.

"I understand the concept and methodology of meditation," Spencer said. ""But, you're asking me to learn something I don't even believe in."

Blair opened his mouth to answer, then stopped to consider his words. This was one of those times he would need to get a bit personal.

"This is one of those cases where something doesn't have to be believed in to be true, Spencer. I have seen a lot of things I never expected since I became a Guide, Hell even before that, and I still struggled to accept it. But this mystical crap, as my oh-so-eloquent Sentinel likes to call it, has saved both of our lives, more than once. Well, mine more than his; I had a bad habit of dying for a while there."

Spencer looked up, like he couldn't help but wonder if there was a punch line coming.

"It's a lot, I know," Blair told him, his calm tone not quite a match for the sympathy in his eyes. "And just to add an extra dash of unfairness, it's harder to get the hang of even being able to See any of it while you still deny. Even if you have good reason to, if you can't accept this part of it, you can't learn it."

"Everything I've read, everyone I've talked to, even in my dreams, people make a point of telling me to accept, but no one will tell me how I am supposed to do that," Spencer retorted.

"It's different for every person," Blair told him, careful to keep his tone gentle. "Just this once, you need to take a leap of faith. If it helps, I See it too, and so does Jim." He waited for the nod of agreement from his Sentinel before he continued.

"There are good reasons for the animals you both have, reasons I think you'll be able to relate to, if you set aside your fear."

"The hawk emphasizes the ability to lead and influence others, and the ability to perceive what others do not, and trust ones powers of observation," Aaron explained.

He shrugged when everyone looked at him. "I've always had an affinity for them, I looked it up when I was younger."

"You know what they say, no knowledge is ever wasted," Blair told him with a smile.

"I read that owls are emblematic of a deep connection with wisdom and intuitive knowledge," Spencer offered, somewhat reluctantly. "But that doesn't resonate with me."

"Maybe not," Blair acknowledged. "But the owl is also all about the ability to see what's usually hidden to most, or seeing through illusion to what is real. And those with owl totems are fascinated with all the mysteries of life. I may not be an expert on what makes you tick, Spencer, but that sounds like you to me."

Spencer nodded, and closed his eyes.

The energy in the room changed the second he got the hang of it. It felt like a wind blew through the room, charged and heated like the air right before a thunderstorm on a summer day. Jim tensed beside him, though he hid it well. The pause was uncomfortable, the anticipation that should have been joyful threaded through with fear that rolled off of Spencer.

"You need to remember to stay grounded," Blair reminded Spencer, and motioned Aaron to move closer, and help calm his Guide.

"What's about to happen is as much a part of you as your intelligence or your hair colour," he continued. "If you can find a way to just let it happen, you'll probably find you're more comfortable with it than you expect."

Poised on the edge of his seat, as if he would bolt any second, Spencer's eyes snapped open, and he stared upward.

The hawk came first, circled over Aaron and then perched on one of the exposed beams above him. He looked tired, but curious, and tilted his head to look down on them with evident curiosity. After a short pause to groom his already immaculate feathers, he looked down at Aaron, and made a soft noise, then shifted back to look the way he had come from.

By contrast, the owl didn't look nearly as good. His feathers were dirty and he looked as though he might have started a molt recently. He didn't approach Spencer, but settled on the beam beside his counterpart, his body drooped with exhaustion.

It made his chest hurt to see any Spirit animal in such distress, but Blair knew it wasn't his problem to fix. But, he had to tread carefully, or he would make things worse instead of better.

"I don't understand," Spencer said, almost too quietly to be heard. "I'm not sick."

"But he's a part of you, an important part, and you've pretty much pretended he doesn't exist. Not exactly great for his health."

Spencer didn't seem to notice the small distressed noise he made then, but Aaron certainly did. "Why exactly is this so important right now?" he asked, clearly determined to give the younger man a chance to calm down.

This time, it was Jim who answered. "This spiritual stuff may not be my favourite, but I've learned that it's a big part of what drives our abilities, the inspiration, you could call it. And, it is much easier if you can accept that now, to handle the rest of the package. Whatever form your connection takes, it's going to allow you to know each other on a level few people will ever experience, and the basis for that knowledge is sitting up there, right now."

With a smile for his Sentinel's tact, Blair nodded his agreement. As usual, Jim managed to skirt neatly around the parts of the explanation that might freak people out. For some reason they got nervous if people tossed around words like soulmates, destiny, or eternity. But that was alright. No need to dump it on them all at once after all.

Heedless of their audience, Aaron leaned over and put his arms around Spencer, pulled him closer, and murmured something, too low for Blair, at least to hear it. There was another pause, and the almost wind from earlier came back, but the fear was gone. In its place was a feeling of gentle regret, almost apology.



As they watched, the owl stood up straighter and hooted at them quiet, and tentative, then louder when Spencer smiled. The light around the birds turned blue, and then brightened. The wash of light healed the owl's hurts, and he launched himself in the air, and winged his way to circle over Spencer. The eagle joined him for a few moments, then the light flared and when it cleared, the birds were gone.

Just before the last of the light vanished, Blair heard his wolf howl in triumph, and hid a smile. All in all, he wholeheartedly agreed.

On their last night at Tarandahlia, Spencer and Aaron went to bed not too long after supper. Both of them had already packed their bags but they would need to be up early to make the drive to Vancouver in time to check in for their flight.

Or at least that's what Aaron told everyone when they left the table before Bear served his famous peach cobbler for dessert.

They walked to their rooms in silence but Aaron was hyper aware of the heat of the body next to him, the smell of his shampoo. He'd been on edge all night, probably because it took far too much effort to keep his hands off Spencer and his mind on the conversation.

When the door closed behind them, his control snapped and he pushed Spencer up against the wall and kissed him. The kiss lacked his usual finesse but he didn't care.

Luckily Spencer didn't seem to mind. In fact he grabbed his shirt and pulled him closer, then made quick work of the buttons so he could slide his hands on the warm skin underneath. "I've been thinking about your hands on me all night," he murmured.

"That's funny. I've been having the exact same problem," Aaron admitted.

They paused for another kiss, and then Spencer had to clear his throat before he could speak. "Maybe you could help me with another problem I seem to be having," he asked, before he took Aaron's hand and guided it over his erection.

"I just might," Aaron breathed, voice hot in his ear before he thrust his hips forward, a slow roll that made them both moan.

They made it to the bed, though it took a while since there were frequent pauses for kisses, which led to licks and the occasional nip.

When he sucked at Spencer's collarbone, the other man arched toward him, then tumbled them both down to the mattress.

To torture both of them, he stripped the other man out of his clothes slowly and stopped at his boxer shorts. He'd already stripped down to just his jeans, unbuttoned and low on his hips, and that would do for now.

He made himself comfortable on his side, propped up so he could enjoy the view. Then he indulged himself, learned all the things he wondered about: the shape of his collarbone, the colour of his nipples, the choked sound he made when they were licked.

Eventually his jeans were too tight so he slid them down and off and enjoyed the heated approval in Spencer's gaze as he did.

"See something you like?"

Spencer bit back a moan and nodded his head. "You know I do."

Aaron pressed their mouths together then pulled back. "I know I said we needed to go slow," he began. "But, I want to make love to you before we have to leave here." He couldn't find the words to explain why it seemed right, now.

But Spencer's answer, while not verbal, was a definite affirmative.

It took an effort to hang on to his control so he pulled back just a little and closed his eyes in concentration.

"Are you alright?"

"Yeah, it's just a lot of input."

"We can stop if you need."

"No." His voice went sharp, then gentled. "No. I'm okay, it just takes more to keep things down where they need to be."

"We've done enough work that I can keep you from zoning."

Spencer's calm confidence sent a shiver through him. "I know."

"Then stop worrying so much about control. You can let go. I'll catch you. Trust me."

Aaron's voice went thick. "I do."

Need coiled, hot and low, and the next time he gripped Spencer's hips his fingers pressed hard enough he knew there would be marks but Spencer only pushed against him, wordlessly asked for more.

He started his explorations again, this time with his mouth, lips, and tongue and teeth. Only this time he let himself fully experience the taste of skin and sweat, the texture of hair against his hands. Then he let himself sink a little deeper, felt the rush of blood beneath the skin.

"Hey," Spencer breathed. "Not that far." His voice took on the intensity that said he was in Guide mode. "Stay here with me."

He nodded and took another kiss, used the heat of his mouth and his taste to bring him away from his sense of touch.

Long moments later, he urged Spencer up so he could get the boxer shorts off then urged him to drape their legs together.

Naked, twined together, it was impossible to tell who groaned first and they wrestled for position for a moment but Aaron had the better vantage and kept Spencer against the bed. He moved down slowly and then paused when he was eye level with Spencer's hard cock.

"Do you remember what I promised you by the pool?" he asked, the heat in his tone echoed in his eyes. "About what would happen next time?"

The surge of lust that question provoked was so strong Spencer could only nod.

"Good," Aaron told him. "Lucky for you, I always keep my promises."

Spencer felt like a completely different person, like someone had taken him apart, and put the pieces back together in an entirely different way. For someone so self aware, that should have been terrifying, but his heart didn't race with fear. Rather he felt sure he was on the edge of something more important than he'd ever done, something even more important than sex.

Not that the sex hadn't been spectacular. Though no one on the team would have believed it, Spencer actually had a wide variety of sexual experience, with both women and men, to draw from. But, none of it had prepared him for the reality of making love with Aaron.

As good as it had been, he still couldn't settle himself, quiet his mind so it could drift off to sleep. Part of it was the natural desire for round two, maybe to have Aaron take him, the next time. But not all of what hummed through his mind was anticipation.

Aaron shifted so he could run a hand down his arm, and Spencer could feel his concern.

"It's stupid, but I'm half afraid if I go to sleep, I'll wake up and everything will be how it was," he admitted.

"Neither what you feel, nor you, could ever be stupid. But I promise I'm not going anywhere, except to sleep right beside you. So let yourself rest."

"Alright. Thank you."

There was silence, and they lay there, in the comfortable darkness.

Then Aaron's voice came out of the dark, close enough to his ear to shiver goose bumps across his skin. "Should I tell you a bedtime story? Perhaps all the things I still want to do to you?"

Spencer's moan was hushed, and ragged. "Not helping."

He could hear the smirk.

More silence. Then Spencer turned his head so their lips almost touched.

"I love you."

"I know," came the reply. "That's why you put up with me. I love you too."

Tucked comfortably against the solid warmth of his Sentinel, Blair tried very hard not to pout. "It's not funny, you know."

The only outward response from Jim was a quiet hum of placating agreement.

But, Blair could feel the laughter he held in. "Oh sure, mock my pain," he exclaimed, in mock hurt. "I could have been brained by the soap dish when it fell off."

That made Jim smile, but he managed not to laugh outright. "Given what we were trying to do at the time, your brain wasn't exactly the portion of your anatomy that was in danger, Chief."

He couldn't really argue with that. "You know, the soap dish ruined our fun. What do you say we make up for it now? We've got this nice warm bed, and we don't have to be up early in the morning."

"Well, I suppose, I could try and distract you from that pain you mentioned," Jim murmured as he stroked a hand down his Guide's chest, then paused to pinch lightly at first one nipple and then the other.

If he was honest, Blair had to admit, he'd been on edge for most of the day. Metaphysical work always left him with an excess of energy, but when it was good, it was hard to let go of the connection to the spiritual side of things, and regroup himself in his own body.

As he felt his mouth go dry on a surge of desire that flowed through all of his limbs, left him just a bit shaky, he had take a second to find words. "That's a great idea," he managed to answer.

Jim urged him to roll over so they lay face to face, and kissed him while they rearranged themselves so they got the maximum amount of skin on skin.

For awhile, that was enough, wrapped around each other, they breathed each other's air and traded kisses, the kind that got hotter and messier the longer they went on, but you couldn't care, because you just needed more.

And it was good, warm and real, and all for him, but Blair felt his body yearn for something he couldn't quite place. He couldn't quite settle in his own skin, the heat just a bit too much, the edge he trembled on just a bit too sharp.

He would have rolled over again, and used his body to beg to be taken, for Jim to take him to a place where there was no room for thoughts, or vague discomforts, or anything but the pleasure his body and his lover could give him, but Jim leaned back and laid a finger against his lips.

"No."

Only that one word, but Blair felt himself shudder, his whole body caught between anticipation and denial.

Wide eyed, his breath shallow, he waited to see what would come next.

He didn't think he could get any harder, but then Jim grabbed the lube and slicked him with it, then rolled over and spread his legs in obvious invitation.

When it came to sex, Jim never took him farther than he was willing to go. Sure, sometimes they tried unexpected things, but it turned out, he liked being tied up, and thoroughly enjoyed a bit of role playing now and again. Still, no matter what they got up to, most of the time, Jim topped, and he was more than okay with that. But, of course he enjoyed it when the tables were turned.

He took a deep breath and let it out, and felt himself tremble, this time in relief that he had a partner who understood what he needed, even before he did.

To show his appreciation, Blair took his time, made sure to lick and suck all the places he knew would drive Jim the most crazy.

When he sucked a mark on one firm shoulder, and got a near growl in response, he couldn't hide the smirk.

Later, when he can't resist anymore, he thrust into Jim in one smooth motion that made both of them moan.

The urge to take, and to take, and take still more cut at him, but now the sharpness was good. He used it to focus his attention, on the sounds his Sentinel made, the groans, the sighs, the almost words, and his name, so long and drawn out it is almost unrecognisable.

Another thrust, and his pace turned erratic, but he didn't care. The heat, the pressure, it was almost too perfect, but now, at last he felt like he'd found his way back to where he was supposed to be. His body was his own again, because it allowed him to connect with Jim this way.

Blair took a moment to reach for some of the energy that still thrummed inside him, and grabbed hold of it. Might as well use it for something useful. With a bit of effort, he held off the orgasm that he sensed was coiled just out of reach.

He changed the angle then, and went deeper and faster, and that was it; Jim started to shake, then went still, and gave a little choked off moan as he came.

The sound snapped Blair's hold on control, and he gave in to the part of him that needed to claim what was his. Distantly, he noted that his hands pushed down hard enough to leave bruises on Jim's hip and shoulder, but he couldn't stop, and if the way he pushed back was any indication Jim didn't mind.

Blair wanted to draw it out, prolong the sensations, but his body had other ideas. When he could think again, he realized he'd sprawled on top of Jim like a warm, pliant blanket.

Slowly, uncertain if his brain could get the messages to his body yet, he managed to make himself roll off, and rearrange things so they were spooned together under the blankets. He even remembered to shift them to the dry side of the bed, and clean them both up a bit before they got too comfortable to move.

He thought they might sleep then, but after a few more minutes, Jim stretched, settled back again, and opened his mouth to speak. "Feel better?" he asked, lazy satisfaction written in all the lines of his body, even in the dark.

"Jim, my man, if I was any better, I'd need a doctor," Blair told him.

"If I had any energy left, I'd say that was a great idea, but we'll have to play doctor some other time." Jim's sly observation was spoiled by his yawn.

"So, not grumpy I dragged you out here anymore then," Blair asked, now that he was much more confident of the answer.

There was a pause, while Jim nuzzled his neck and kissed it. "Not even one little bit."

September 17th, 2011
Washington, DC
6:05 pm

He heard Aaron and Jack in the kitchen and almost joined them, but it was too far. Instead, he toed off his shoes and collapsed in an untidy heap on the couch.

After a few long, blissful seconds, he looked up at the TV that had been left on. Another second and he raised his voice to call out. "Hey, you need to see this. Come here."

He'd changed into jeans and a button down, and his feet were bare when Aaron stepped into the room.

That meant he'd been home longer and likely started dinner, but Spencer didn't ask what was on the menu like he normally would have, only gestured to the TV and beamed happily.

"We're joined in the studio today by Dr. Blair Sandburg, co-founder and Chief Operating Officer of the Watchmen Centres for Sentinels and Guides, or WCSG. As many of you already know, the President signed off on the Sentinel and Guide Protection Act earlier today. The United States, and indeed the world, is only just getting used to the idea that Sentinels and Guides exist, but they are here and they now have legal rights protecting them from abuse or exploitation. And that is largely a result of the efforts of the man in front of me."

The anchor paused, her smile just a shade too perfect, and the camera panned to Blair, who all but vibrated with excited energy despite his pleased expression.

"Actually, Mae, there were a great many people who helped make this happen. I'm just one of many people who had a vested interest in creating these laws," Blair explained. "The initiative began almost two decades ago."

"But you had a vested personal interest in all of this. You are a Guide yourself, are you not?"

"Yes," Blair admitted, his voice quiet but intense with satisfaction.

"From what I understand, our researchers uncovered a doctoral dissertation you wrote some years ago, about your Sentinel, James Ellison. At the time it was written, you denounced it as a lie," she went on.

"Again, yes. That was a long time ago, long before the laws we are talking about today would have protected Jim from the fall out. I had to claim it was all a lie so he could keep his life as it was. The dissertation was released without my consent and we weren't ready to deal with the ramifications at that time."

"It must feel good to clear your name, even after all this time." The anchor aimed another toothy smile at the camera and cocked an eyebrow in question.

"It does. Of course it does. I'm as human as the next guy. It's nice to know my work can be appreciated now. But, I'm more proud of everything the Centres have managed to accomplish. When we started all of this, those who had Sentinel abilities often went without any training or help. They thought they were crazy, often lost jobs, friends, even family. We work hard to make sure that doesn't happen now. And with our help, over ninety percent of Sentinels find their Guide."

There was no mistaking the glow of pride on Blair's face as he said that, but Aaron ignored the TV and walked forward to wrap his arms around Spencer.

"I know. I saw most of it before I left the office. It's been looped for a few hours. You need to stop trying to become one with the couch and come and eat."

At the mention of food, Spencer stirred again, stole another kiss, and then stood to pace down the hall. "Alright. If I must."

They walked through to the kitchen, and Aaron slid close behind him, trapped him against the counter and trailed kisses down his neck, felt Spencer shiver. "Yes, you must," he murmured. "Later we can watch the whole news conference and then I'll show you just how grateful I am that I found my Guide."

Spencer grinned, despite his fatigue. "I can hardly wait."

September 17th, 2011
852 Prospect Ave
Cascade, Washington
10:10 pm

Jim hung up the phone and smiled at Blair. "Spencer said to tell you congratulations. He also says you should start forcing me to appear on camera with you, so you don't get all the recognition."

Sprawled on the couch, with his head rested comfortably on his Sentinel's lap, Blair smirked. "Spoken like a man who has never tried to get you to do something you didn't want to do, man. Besides, this is only the beginning of the process as far as getting the idea of getting the general public comfortable with Sentinels and Guides. They'll be lots of time for some of the other pairs to get their fifteen minutes of fame if they want it. And, you too, if you suffer a hard enough knock on the head to make you want to."

Flushed from the wine they'd had with dinner, as much as the warm weight of his Guide so close, Jim grinned. Life had a way of working out for the better, at least if his own was any indication. He couldn't think of anywhere he'd rather be just then.

He pressed a kiss to Blair's hair and settled back a bit more comfortably. "Speaking of plans, that reminds me, Aaron and I were talking a few days ago about how it might be good to run some group classes out at one of the retreats. You know, hands on clinics on how to master each sense. If they go well, we could even start a school. And just think, we already know you're great at teaching."

More importantly, Jim knew they both needed new challenges to tackle, and that they both wanted to build on what they had already managed to accomplish, but he kept quiet, and waited to see what his partner thought of the idea.

"That could be good," Blair agreed, after a moment to think it through. "I wanted to get more of us together to start thinking about how we can assess a pair's strengths and weaknesses better anyways," he mused.

"Well, good. Then we're on the same page." He shifted their position until he could trail kisses down Blair's neck. "But for right now, what do you say we see if we can focus on the more immediate future?"

Rather than answer right away, Blair scrambled up and over so that he straddled Jim's lap and gripped his shoulders for balance. "That's a great idea," he murmured, just before he claimed a kiss. "How about if the near future includes more wine and less clothes?"

Jim set his hands on Blair's hips and shifted him forward. When they kissed again it was slow, and sweet, but he kept his grip tight, and enjoyed the way he could feel both of their pulses speed up.

"I like the way you think," he agreed.

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