



Another Chance

byBluewolf

From the road it was impossible to see any part of the big, quiet house. The trees and shrubs in its huge garden hid it so completely that anyone who didn't know the house was there would pass by without realizing that someone lived behind the high wall and the trees.

Many of the rooms were thick with dust, having remained unused for years; always introverted, Aaron Sandburg had turned into something of a recluse after the death of his wife ten years previously. Rachel was the extrovert, the one who organized family parties on the slightest pretext, who kept the various family members in touch with each other, and with her death the family had pretty well drifted apart.

While Rachel was alive he had tolerated the... yes, the invasion of the house he had inherited from his parents, knowing how much she enjoyed being surrounded by her husband's family - she herself had no known relatives, courtesy of the concentration camp of Auschwitz. She had survived - just - arriving in America as a refugee in 1946. But much though he loved his daughter, Aaron wasn't prepared to give her the same freedom to turn his life upside down, even if it was only for two or three days at a time a handful of times in a year.

He and Rachel only had the one child - Naomi, born in 1952. A brilliant child, her hopes for an academic career were destroyed when, in her first week at university, she was ambushed on campus by a group of older students, taken to a room that she recognized as university accommodation, and subjected to hours of sexual abuse. At some point she lost consciousness, and came to her senses to find herself lying in a secluded part of the campus. But one bedroom/study looks much like another, and no matter how hard she tried to remember even one face, she was never able to identify her attackers. All she could really remember were muttered anti-Semitic insults, and she knew she had been targeted because of her perceived religion.

The irony, of course, was that despite their Jewish origins, her family was non-practising, agnostic verging on atheistic. Rachel had been unable to believe any longer in a god who had permitted the amount of suffering she had seen in Auschwitz. And although she had never gone into explicit detail about her years there, Aaron had lost faith in a god who had permitted a place like Auschwitz to exist.

Within a month Naomi knew she was pregnant. She left the university, went home, and in May of 1969 gave birth to a healthy boy she named Blair. Rachel lived long enough to hold her grandson, and died a few days after his birth, her heart - strained by her days in Auschwitz - finally failing.

Naomi stayed at home for the next three years, but on her twenty-first birthday the generous trust fund her father had set up for her became available to her, and a month later she left home, the quiet life that suited Aaron so well depressing her beyond bearing.

"No reflection on you, Dad," she'd said, "but I'm too like Mom; I'm sociable, which you're not. I love you, but we're really not compatible. I think we'll both be happier this way."

She never settled anywhere. Ever so slightly homesick but with no wish to live at home, she traveled extensively, home-schooling Blair who, she was pleased to see, absorbed knowledge even more avidly than she had.

She phoned home at least once a week, so when, in late July of 1979, Aaron became ill, she knew about it almost immediately, packed their few belongings and went straight home.

Aaron had terminal cancer. He had gone to the doctor as soon as he became aware of a lump, but even so he was far too late; wherever it had originated, the cancer had metastasized, spread through his body, and he had been given - at most - three months.

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Blair instantly found the big house fascinating.

Naomi had always encouraged his inquisitiveness, and he knew that as long as he was careful, he could explore the house and its grounds and she would have no objection. In any case, she was too busy caring for her father to pay much attention to what her son was doing, although she did set aside the mornings - once she had given Aaron his breakfast, medication for the increasing pain, and seen him safely settled in his study - for Blair's schooling, even though it was the summer and if he had actually been attending school, he would have been on holiday. But the rest of the time was his own.

Most days it was dry and sunny and he explored outdoors, learning the paths that meandered through what was basically a totally wildlife garden, going back after two or three hours to his grandfather's big, eclectic library to search the nature books in order to identify the plants, insects, birds and sometimes animals that he saw. After a few days, however, he no longer needed to refer to the books except very occasionally.

The evenings and the few wet days he spent in the library, reading, but one particularly wet day, about a month into their stay, he decided to explore the house.

He found little of interest there; in room after room dust sheets covered the furniture and when he tried to lift the covers to see what was underneath, the cloud of dust that he raised set him coughing. The cleaner who came in one morning a week didn't have time to do more than the rooms that were actually being used - and since Naomi had come home, that was two more than she had previously had to do. Naomi herself was too busy, between teaching Blair, caring for Aaron and cooking, to have time to tackle any basic cleaning of these rooms that had stood unused since Rachel died.

However, in one sparsely-furnished upstairs room Blair found a door that led into an attic, and in the attic - which someone at some point had provided with electric light - he found treasure. It was still dusty, but not particularly so; he suspected that this attic space had been entered very seldom in recent years, and, windowless, it was enclosed enough that no dust could enter from outside. At the far end there were several part rolls of carpeting - he recognized the pattern of one of these from his bedroom - and under-felt, some rolls of wallpaper, as well as one or two tins holding the dried remnants of paint. There were three boxes full of books - strange, when there was still some space on the library shelves - and five more of old magazines. Another box held ornaments, carefully wrapped in paper - he unwrapped one of the lumpy shapes to see what was inside it, and was unimpressed by the revealed porcelain. Twee, he thought. The word he had heard in Britain suited this sugar-sweet design perfectly. But he carefully re-wrapped it and put it back in its box. There was a box of plates of different sizes, saucers, cups... and again he wondered why, because many of the shelves in the kitchen cupboards were empty. Several boxes contained women's clothes, carefully folded. Nearest the door was a box containing sewing threads, wool and a small box full of knitting needles, and a big black plastic bag that, on inspection, proved to be full of stuffed animals.

And in one corner he found a free-standing mirror.

At least he thought it was a mirror. It seemed to have glass in it - but when he stood in front of it he didn't see his own reflection, and what appeared to be the reflection of the things behind him somehow didn't seem quite right. This attic was lit. The attic in the mirror was, as far as he could see, unlit except by the light that shone through the mirror frame, but it seemed to be somehow tidier, less cluttered, less of a place where items that were unwanted but kept by a - yes, a hoarder - were stored. And yet, he asked himself, were these things just hoarded... or were they things that had belonged to his dead grandmother?

Puzzled by the differences, by the lack of his own reflection, he reached forward... and his hand went through where the glass should have been. Intrigued, he stepped into the frame, and found himself inside this other attic. He glanced back, and saw the brightly-lit one he had just left.

Not a mirror - a doorway! But a doorway to where?

Although he was just ten, his reading and interest levels were much older, and he had come across the theory of parallel/alternate universes some months previously. Was this a universe somehow split off from his own by something important, possibly in his family's history?

He could think of one incident that might qualify as 'important'. Was this a world where World War Two never happened, therefore there had never been an Auschwitz - so his grandmother hadn't died before she was forty? Another possibility was that it was a world where his mother hadn't been raped, so that he himself had never been born. Though even as he thought of it he realized that important though his birth had been to his family, it hardly counted as important enough to create a new universe, unless he was to assume the existence of millions of alternate universes.

And in this alternate universe, did this house even belong to his family?

Well, there was one possible way of discovering that. He moved silently to the nearest of the boxes and opened it.

In the dim light he could see that it was full of books. He peered at them, leaning close to read the titles.

He recognized none of them.

He pulled one out of the box and opened it at the title page. 'The Two-Spirit Path'. He tried to read it, quickly deciding that it was a little too advanced for him. He had read about shamans and was interested enough in them, in what it was claimed they could do, but this seemed to go into quite a lot of detail; it was, he decided, not for casual reading but a book for a budding shaman to study. He put it back, and took out another. 'Shamanism: Archaic Techniques of Ecstasy'. This too had the look of a book written for a serious scholar of shamanism. He put it back. 'The Sentinels of Paraguay'. Odd title... but it sounded more interesting, more like a history or travel book.

He was just starting to read when he heard a noise outside the door of this attic. Quickly, silently, he closed the box, moved to the mirror frame and stepped through. As he did, he heard the door of the attic behind him opening. He swung around - and saw only his own reflection.

That was when he realized he was still carrying The Sentinels of Paraguay.

He looked guiltily at the mirror. He hadn't meant to steal the book - he'd just forgotten to put it back when he closed the box. And that in itself was odd, because the book was quite heavy.

Oh, well - he had it now. He could read it, and then take it back to the attic, see if the doorway into that other world was open again, and if it was, he could go through and replace the book. Chances were that the occupants of that other house would never miss it, never realize that it had been borrowed. Probably nobody was particularly interested in it, otherwise why was it stored in a box in the attic?

And were those same books packed away here, but arranged differently so that there, in that other attic, they were on the top of a box, while here they were buried under other books? Well, he could perhaps check on that some other time.

He gave the mirror one last look, then left the attic, carefully remembering to switch the light off, and took the book to his bedroom.

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He had spent longer in the attic than he had realized; it was late afternoon, and as he went along the passageway to his room he could hear his mother downstairs in the kitchen.

He put the book under his pillow, where it would be hidden from casual view. If asked, he could say that he found it in the attic which, although true, was really only technically true. His grandfather would surely know what books were in the boxes, and know...

Did his grandfather know about the mirror, that it was possible to step through it into a different attic?

He sat on his bed and thought about it.

If he asked, might he be forbidden to go back into the attic in case the doorway was open again, tempting him to go through? He was well aware that if he had moved a little more slowly he could easily have been trapped in that other attic; he had barely made it back through the mirror. One step, he had taken just one step once he got through; he had turned and the 'doorway' was closed.

Undecided, Blair sighed unhappily.

Though there was one thing - no, two things - he should do, must do, right away; wash, and change his T-shirt. Although the attic hadn't been all that dusty, it had been dusty enough that there were a couple of dirty marks on his T-shirt, and his mother insisted that he always wash before dinner. "Whatever you've been doing, Sweetie," she said, "even if it's just been sitting reading, you need to freshen up before you sit down to eat."

So he washed and changed his T-shirt, dropping the dirty one into the laundry hamper in the bathroom, and went downstairs to the kitchen.

"Have a good day, Sweetie?" Naomi asked.

"Mmm. I found an attic opening out of a room upstairs - "

"Oh, yes. When I was six, Dad got a stair put in and turned part of the attic into a playroom for me, but when I was about your age I started using it as... you could call it a hobby room. That's why it doesn't have much furniture. I used part of the attic for storage... "

"Were those stuffed animals yours?"

"They're still there? I was sure Dad would have thrown them out or given them away years ago, because I stopped collecting them when I decided to go to university... and when I came home again, I had more to think about than adding to a collection that I'd basically outgrown - most of them were toys I had before I was ten.

"We also used the attic to store a lot of Mom's things. Dad... well... "

"Didn't want to get rid of Grandma's things but didn't want them where he could see them? Because having them around him hurt too much?"

Naomi nodded. "His heart broke when she died. He was never suicidal, but I think... I think he's glad he's dying. So that he won't have to live without her much longer."

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Still feeling guilty about the book, Blair was careful to follow his usual evening routine, writing up his journal but - for the first time in the two years since he started keeping one - carefully not mentioning something that had happened, though he did add 'I look forward to exploring more of what's in the attic some other day. There seem to be some books that could be interesting' to remind himself, later, of the exact day that he found his way into that other attic. He didn't think Naomi ever read his journals, but how could he know for sure? She always seemed to be very interested in what he did.

The library was the family's chosen sitting room in the evenings, and he settled down with one of Aaron's books about the Maya that he'd been working his way through for the past four days. It wasn't easy reading for a ten-year-old, and sometimes he had to appeal to Aaron for an explanation of something, but he was finding it very interesting.

When he closed the book and said goodnight it was perhaps five minutes earlier than usual, but not early enough that Naomi and Aaron would think it strange. He moved quickly to his room, got ready for bed and settled under the covers with *The Sentinels of Paraguay* and a flashlight.

The first pages were simply introduction, covering Richard Burton's journey to Paraguay and his preparations for travel into the interior. And then, between pages 20 and 21, he found a folded sheet of paper. It was not there as a bookmark; a bookmark would have been left sticking slightly out and this was carefully tucked inside the book.

Curious, he unfolded it.

"Blair.

"This book is yours. You will need it, and the information in it, though not for many years.

"You will not be able to pass through the mirror again. The gateway was set up so that you, and only you, could pass through it, and set to disengage when you took this book back to your own world.

"Sentinels still exist, and one day you will meet one and become a companion to him. But be careful - sentinels are possessive, and although they work tirelessly for the good of their territory, their tribe - they have quite low self-esteem; they are very ready to assume that they are only valued for what they do for their tribe, fearing that nobody sees and cares for the man behind the sentinel, to the point of accusing someone who is a completely loyal friend of being untrustworthy.

"That happened to me.

"I loved my sentinel dearly, but one day I met another sentinel who was having problems, and foolishly tried to help her. It was probably the biggest mistake I have ever made. My sentinel saw it

as a betrayal and reacted badly - and although we patched up our friendship, it never totally recovered until it was too late. He sometimes wondered if my warnings were justified or if, because of that incident, I was being unnecessarily cautious - and one day was seriously injured because of that uncertainty. He never walked again. He learned then that I would never desert him, but the price he paid is too high.

"Heed my warning, Blair. For all his apparent strength, your sentinel will be emotionally fragile, easily hurt although he will hide it well. You must be prepared to give and give, forgive and forgive, if your sentinel is not to suffer a fate similar to the one mine has. Above all, do not try to help another sentinel.

"I wish you luck... and if things go wrong for you as they did for me, pass this book on with whatever advice your experience tells you is necessary. If that time does come, you will know how to do it."

There was no signature.

Blair folded the paper carefully, read pages 20 and 21, then put the letter back where he had found it and continued on to page 22.

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The book was fascinating.

He considered sneaking it into the library, where he could read it openly, but he wasn't convinced that his grandfather, at least, mightn't find it and wonder where it came from; although he was getting steadily weaker, Aaron stubbornly refused to be invalided, though he now spent most of his waking hours in the library rather than his study. It was as if he wanted to reread all his favorite books before he died, to take the memory of them into the afterlife. Naomi, although she too read in the evenings, was less likely to realize 'The Sentinels of Paraguay' hadn't been in the library less than a month ago. Although there was a television set in a corner of the room, there were very few programs either of the senior Sandburgs wanted to watch, though Blair sometimes watched a travel documentary.

He considered leaving the book in one of the boxes in the attic, but if he started spending too much time there Naomi would wonder why, because of the habit he had formed of exploring outside when the weather was good - which, in these summer months, was most days.

So he kept it in his bedroom, reading a few pages every night, leaving it during the day in the small backpack that still held the few things he valued, although he knew that while Aaron lived, Naomi would not suddenly decide to move on, giving him barely enough time to pack his possessions.

Blair was about a third of the way through the book when Aaron died in his sleep, a few days beyond the three months of the doctor's prognosis.

Blair had expected the funeral to be quiet, with Naomi and he the only mourners; he was wrong. Within a very few hours Blair discovered he had more relatives than he had ever dreamed of. Although the family seemed to have drifted apart since Rachel's death, all Naomi needed to do was contact Betty, Aaron's oldest sister, to let her know he had died, and soon three aunts, two uncles, and numerous cousins and second cousins of Naomi's had begun to arrive, as well as the spouses of

many of them. The first aunt to show up immediately began to help Naomi prepare the empty rooms, ready for the influx.

And they stayed on for some days after the funeral, quietly offering support, helping Naomi as she gathered together Aaron's clothes and Rachel's, taking them to Goodwill for her, going through the books and ornaments in the attic. Naomi told them to take any of the ornaments they wanted in memory of her parents, keeping for herself only a fairly plain vase. It surprised Blair how happy his great aunts and cousins were to take these ornaments, but when he mentioned it to Naomi, she only smiled a little sadly. "They're actually quite valuable," she said, "and they all know it. Oh, some of them genuinely like the things, just as Mom did, but I think most of the younger ones, if they don't sell whatever they took and maybe buy something more to their liking as a keepsake, will just keep it out of sight."

Rachel's books were almost all light romance, and Naomi sent those to Goodwill as well.

A week after Aaron's funeral, the family began to drift away until, ten days later, only Aunt Betty, her son Paul, his wife Becky and their son Robert were left.

"Will you be all right, Naomi?" Betty asked, the evening the last of the others had left.

"Yes, thanks," Naomi said. "When I left before... Dad was too much of a loner; he loved Mom enough to let her fill the house with family when he'd rather it was just him and Mom and me, but he wouldn't let me do the same. I loved him, but I couldn't live the way he preferred. I miss him very much, but without him here, I can invite the family any time I want - I'll expect everyone to start visiting again, the way they did when Mom was alive. I've made a lot of friends over the last few years - I can invite them to visit too.

"I enjoyed traveling around, seeing new places, but now that Blair's ten I think it's time to settle down for a while, let him go to a proper school. I really should have started him in school when the new term began, but... well... I didn't grudge looking after Dad, but it gave me a break, teaching Blair in the mornings."

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Blair enjoyed going to school, if only because he loved learning.

His educational level of attainment was a little patchy; his knowledge of English and geography and even science was excellent, he had a working knowledge of several languages, one or two of which even his teachers had barely heard of; his knowledge of world history was good though his knowledge of American history was much poorer, but arithmetic - a subject in which Naomi had little interest, though she had done some basic work with him - was barely adequate for his age. Her expressed opinion on the subject was that for most people the ability to work with numbers, other than possibly very basic addition and subtraction, was fairly irrelevant to their lives.

Even at ten, he tended to agree with her; he had not found his relative ignorance of how to work with numbers a handicap - but he found within a week that he didn't like struggling with a subject. He recognized that he wasn't very popular - a lot of his classmates were muttering among themselves about the 'know-it-all' who had joined the class, and knew that only his almost total

inability to get sums right, as well as his skill in handling a ball, kept him from being downright unpopular. Odd how little American children respected their fellows who were good at class work, and how over-respectful they seemed to be of the ones who were good at games... Mentally he compared their attitude with that of children he had met in third world countries, children who were desperate for the education that might give them the chance to escape the poverty in which their families lived, and thought it would do some of these American kids good to have to live for a few weeks in the kind of poverty he had seen in parts of Africa and Asia.

Not that sporting ability didn't also offer a possible escape from poverty for third world children, but education was a surer one.

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Blair did well at school over the next six years, pulling his marks for math up from a dismal F (where only the fact that 'fail' was the lowest mark available gave him even that much) to a very average C, but getting straight As for everything else. During those six years, despite his poor marks in math, he was twice bumped up a class, and at sixteen he was ready to leave school.

He began to check on universities.

He already knew he wanted to study anthropology; he had always been interested in the way of life of the people of the countries he had visited with Naomi. It was one big difference between them; she was sociable, made friends easily, accepted people as she found them, but had no interest in their cultures. He, too, was friendly by nature, accepted people as he found them - but he found their various cultures, their customs, their way of life, intriguing. That being so, he wanted - needed - to find a university with a good anthropology department, that would accept a sixteen-year-old.

Blair found what he wanted in Washington State; Rainier University in Cascade.

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Rainier, he discovered, had a degree of the 'too young thinks-he-knows-it-all' mentality he had found at his Fort Worth school, but it wasn't nearly as marked, although the two years between him and the next youngest freshmen did create a barrier when it came to making friends that he could hang out with. Not that that particularly worried him; although naturally friendly, he was used to being the only child among adults, and as long as he had books it was easy for him to fill his spare time. In addition, although sporting ability was admired, Rainier's football, baseball and basketball teams invariably doing well in competition, there were enough non-athletic students that academic achievement was admired as well.

There was, at first, one cloud on Blair's horizon - his faculty advisor, Professor Buckner. Buckner had made the mistake of letting Blair see that he considered sixteen far too young for anyone to be attending university, too young to have any real life experience, and Blair reacted by acting out, determined to show Buckner that he wasn't just a kid. The first term was difficult because of that, but during it Professor Stoddard discovered just how much Blair had traveled, how much of the world he had seen, and how much of it he remembered, and at the start of the second term he took over as Blair's faculty advisor. After that, Blair was in paradise.

A few months after Stoddard replaced Buckner in Blair's life, Blair showed his new advisor The Sentinels of Paraguay - the note he had found inside the book now lived in a locked box where he kept his most valued... souvenirs, he supposed he should call them. They included a small stuffed wolf from the collection of animals Naomi had amassed in her childhood, most of which she had decided to rehome when she was clearing out her parents' possessions, and a Swiss army knife that had belonged to his grandfather. When he was older, he decided, he would use the knife, but for the moment he didn't need it and it was safer locked away.

Stoddard was fascinated by the book. "Where did you say you got this, son?"

"In the attic of my grandfather's house." Which was technically true. "I was exploring there one wet day, and found it." And that, he reflected, was totally true.

"Did your grandfather tell you where he got it?"

"I never asked."

"Could you ask him?" Stoddard asked.

"He's dead," Blair said quietly.

"Oh. I'm sorry - "

"It's okay. I didn't know him all that well. Mom started traveling when I was about four, and home-schooled me. I was ten when he told her he was ill, and she went back to look after him. We were only there for about three months when he died."

"I'm sorry you didn't get the chance to know him better," Stoddard said.

"So am I," Blair admitted. "He... he was a bit of a recluse, didn't like to leave home; Mom said he was never good at mixing with people. But he liked reading, he had a lot of travel books and books about the different native American cultures - South America as well as North. I think he liked that I was interested in reading those books... If I found something I didn't quite understand I could ask him about it, and he always tried to explain it in a way I could understand, but he was getting weaker all the time and in a lot of pain, and the week or two before he actually died I stopped asking him much - just a little so that he would know I was still interested."

"And you were just ten?"

Blair nodded.

"I think you showed great sensitivity for his needs," Stoddard told him.

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Every summer, Stoddard took some of his students on a short, all expenses paid expedition. Numbers were limited to ten, and he took only the ones with the best grades. There was some quite fierce competition among the keener students for a place - after his second year on one of them, Blair realized that Stoddard had found a very juicy carrot to dangle in front of the bright students who had found schoolwork so easy they had always obtained good grades for the minimum of work.

Here they had competition, sometimes for the first time in their lives - but for the basically lazy student, competition itself wasn't sufficient motivation to try to do better. The prospect of going on one of Stoddard's summer expeditions, however...

Blair found it mildly amusing, especially when he thought of one girl in that second year who had scraped in at tenth, and had then been horrified to discover that 'expedition' didn't mean 'holiday'. They were expected to observe, and then on their return to Rainier produce a paper on what they had seen that was suitable for submission to an anthropology magazine. Indeed, Stoddard routinely submitted the best of those papers to one of the magazines.

He did realize that these were 'expeditions' to visit tribes that had had considerable exposure to the white man's culture, while still retaining many of their own traditions - and also that these were tribes Stoddard had visited before. The second trip had seen the headman of the village they went to greeting Stoddard with considerable warmth.

The students were often split into smaller groups, but Blair was surprised when Stoddard took him for a private conversation with the headman, and asked Waleri about sentinels.

Waleri nodded. "We know of such men," he said, "although there has not been one born to our tribe for many years. Davo - our last Watchman - died just before I undertook my rite of manhood - that was when I was twelve. I returned home for the summer, and undertook my rite of manhood before I went back to school."

From politeness, Blair had tried not to show how surprised he was that Waleri spoke perfect, barely-accented English. He knew he'd failed when Waleri grinned at him. "Like quite a few of my people, I was sent to the city when I was ten and educated there, coming home only for the summer break; and then I worked there for some years before my father died and I returned home to take over his position as headman. English was spoken almost as much as Spanish because of the tourists who visited."

Blair nodded. "Steve Barry and I did wonder... " He named the only other student to have been on both trips. "You and Dr. Stoddard were so obviously on friendly terms... We suspected that the places we visited last year and this weren't as... uneducated as we were led to believe."

"You don't say 'primitive'?" Waleri asked.

"Just what is meant by 'primitive'?" Blair asked. "Your people can survive perfectly well in the city and in the jungle. The 'civilized' people who live in the city wouldn't last long in the jungle. It seems to me that so-called civilized men are not as generally competent as so-called primitive ones."

Waleri looked at Stoddard. "You were right," he said. "This young man is wise for his years."

Blair flushed a little at the compliment as Stoddard said, "Don't let the other students know. If they were to realize that this isn't a village living a total hunter-gatherer lifestyle... "

"I won't even confirm it to Steve," Blair promised.

"We do mostly live the way our fathers did," Waleri said, "though we also use some of the... knowledge we obtained from the city. All your fellow students will see, though, are a few metal knives and cooking pots. If they ask, we traded for these things."

Blair nodded. "Will you - can you - tell me about Davo?"

"I can't tell you much," Waleri said. "I was still a boy when I left to go to school, and although our fathers did begin to teach us how to hunt as soon as we were old enough to leave our mothers' care, we had little contact with the other men. And as I said, he died just before I was accepted into the tribe as a man."

Blair thought briefly about the letter he had found in The Sentinels of Paraguay. "Can you at least tell me - did he have a friend who helped him?"

"Yes. Taj was actually a little younger than Davo, but he died first, a few weeks - possibly a month - before I returned home that summer. Our shaman said his heart failed. I remember my father saying that they knew, when Taj died, that Davo would not outlive him by very long."

"So the lives of a Watchman and his helper are linked in some way?" Blair asked.

"So my father said. Davo wasn't an old man when he died - there was no reason why he couldn't have lived another twenty years or more... but Taj died, and it was as if Davo gave up. It took the men nearly a year to adjust to hunting without Davo's input. It had been so easy when he could see or hear the animals they hunted, and direct them. They had to learn to find the animals by following their tracks... the old men who had hunted before Davo became a man had to teach the younger ones, but they had had nearly thirty years of not using the skill..."

"Having a watchman in the tribe was of great value while he lived, and if another were to be born we would be very happy... but there is no doubt that losing him made things very difficult for the tribe."

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Time passed. Blair graduated, then continued at Rainier as a post-grad student working towards his PhD.

Bearing in mind what he had learned from Waleri, as well as from one or two other tribes he visited with Stoddard, he did wonder about 'sentinels' as a theme for his PhD, but anecdotal 'evidence' was hardly enough on which to base it.

He had discovered that there had been a Richard Burton, nineteenth century explorer, in this - his - universe, but he had not found The Sentinels of Paraguay listed in any bibliography of Burton's works, and he wasn't sure about leaning on the information in a book that had come from another universe - though even if it had been printed in this world, its contents were also anecdotal. Certainly much of what Burton had written had been destroyed on his death by his widow, a rigidly 'proper', repressed Victorian lady. Blair found himself wondering if that was why Burton had been drawn to exploring, to spending much of his time away from home, because he appeared to be remarkably open-minded for his era, while his wife was of the 'drape the table legs in cloth so as not to display anything so vulgar as legs' mentality. Or was Burton a man who held to the double

standard of public respectability while secretly embracing a private life of debauchery? Upper class English males of his era certainly seemed to have the fixed view that they could do anything, would not be corrupted by - well, anything that could be remotely described as suggestive, let alone pornographic - but women and men of the lower classes had to be 'protected' from anything that spoke of sex, especially (for women) sex that was pleasurable. In that era, women were expected to 'do their duty', 'lie back and think of their country', while having sex, and produce several children during the course of their married lives.

It wasn't just a double standard, Blair reflected; it was more like a triple standard. One rule for rich men, one for poor men, and one for women of any class.

Hmmm...would that make a suitable subject for a dissertation? No, he decided. He might be able to write a paper on it, but it was hardly a wide enough theme for a dissertation. However, the idea wouldn't go away, and after discussing it with Stoddard, he made the subject of his dissertation the changing face of society.

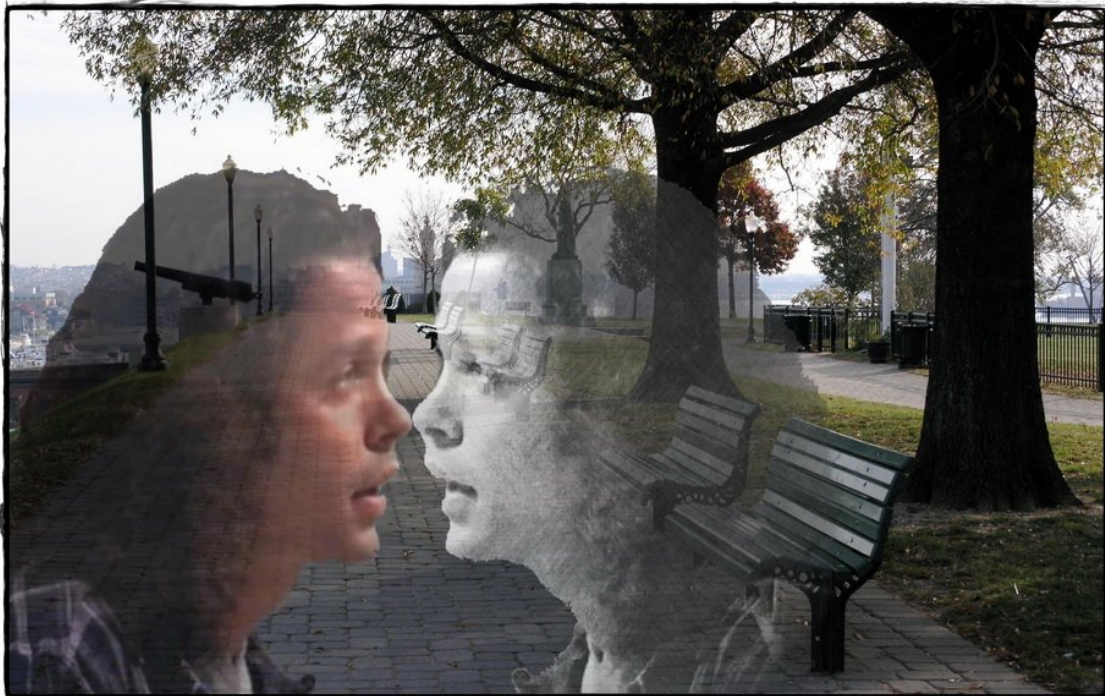
He wasn't exactly thrilled by the result, but it did gain him his PhD.

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As Dr. Sandburg, he continued to work at Rainier, lecturing - much the same work as he had done as a TA, but he was now far better paid, and had an assistant to do at least some of the donkey work.

Over the next year or two he found that he was thinking more and more about sentinels, and the letter he had found in the book he had acquired from the room on the other side of the mirror.

It said that he would meet a sentinel. Would help a sentinel.



All right, 'not for many years' - but sixteen years had passed since he had been in that other attic. Surely sixteen counted as 'many' years?

Or perhaps... had the book been intended for some other Blair, from yet another universe? Some other Blair who had been exploring, just as he had, only he had found the 'gateway' to the book first? If that were indeed the case, then somewhere there was a Blair potentially making the same mistakes as the writer of the letter...

He had all but given up on the idea that he would one day meet - and help - a sentinel.

And then, one afternoon as he was leaving Harcourt Hall to go home, he saw a man walking across the road leading from the university to the main road, stop, then stand in the middle of the road, staring at nothing, completely oblivious of the truck that collected the university's garbage once a week bearing down on him, and not even trying to slow down.

Instantly realizing that yelling at the man would accomplish nothing - at best he would look around, either wondering why someone was shouting or looking for the danger - Blair rushed into the road, caught the man round the waist and pulled him down onto the ground just a moment before the truck, its driver finally braking, rolled over the top of them. It stopped just past them.

Blair scrambled to his feet. "That sucked, man! What were you thinking?"

The man pushed himself to his feet shaking his head as the truck driver appeared, instantly saying, "Are you all right? God, I didn't think - "

"Crazy place to start daydreaming, wasn't it," Blair said matter-of-factly. "We're fine, and sorry to give you a fright."

The driver nodded and turned back towards the cab; Blair glanced at the several student bystanders who were gawping at them, and caught the man's arm. "Come and sit down for a minute."

He almost dragged the man back up the steps and into Hargrove Hall, then led him along the corridor to his office. He unlocked the door and pulled the man in. "Have a seat," he said, glad that this office, unlike his previous one in a room that was also used to store departmental artifacts, was big enough that he no longer needed to use the chairs for storage.

The man sank into the visitors' chair. "... I have to thank you," he said. "I don't know what happened. Something caught my attention, and... I totally lost track of where I was."

"Just glad I could help," Blair said, "but the middle of the road isn't the best place to stop and look at things." He managed to keep his voice light. "I'm Blair Sandburg, by the way."

"Jim Ellison." He glanced around the room, a slightly puzzled expression on his face. "I suppose you're a student here? You won't get into trouble for bringing me into this office?"

Blair grinned. "No, I'm not a student - I'm a lecturer and this is my office."

"Lecturer?Your office?But... "

"I'm too young? Certainly I'm the youngest tenured professor by a fair number of years, but when you start university at sixteen everything happens at least two years ahead of when society expects it to. And my faculty adviser pushed me, so I was only twenty-four when I defended my PhD. That was two years ago."

Ellison shook his head. "I have to be getting old," he muttered. "My lecturers were all ancient... or at least we thought they were. Your students have to think you're just a fellow student."

"I have to admit I like the informal approach to discipline," Blair said. "But there's a line - " his voice changed - "and they know just where that line is."

Ellison glanced at him. "The last time I heard that particular note in anyone's voice was when I was in basic training; when the drill sergeant said 'Jump!' we were already in the air before any of us thought to ask 'How high?' - and as for asking 'Why should we?' Not the most disruptive guy in the squad would have dared. Yes, I can see that it would be a rash student who took liberties with you."

Blair laughed. "So you're ex-army?"

"Yes."

"I hope you never had any of those 'lost track of where you were' moments back then."

It was a statement, not a question, but Ellison answered, "No. That's... fairly recent."

"Does it happen often?" Blair was aware of being possibly discourteously pushy, but something was impelling him to ask.

"Four or five times in the last month," Ellison answered as if, in his mind, Blair's actions a few minutes previously gave him the right to know. "I wondered if I maybe had a brain tumor forming, but I've seen a couple of doctors, and they can't find anything wrong." He was silent for a moment, then went on before Blair could say anything. "But I'm beginning to think I should resign before I get someone killed."

"Resign?" Blair asked. He'd assumed that Ellison was a mature student, especially since learning that the man was ex-army - Ellison looked young enough that he could only have returned to civilian life a year or two previously, and he wouldn't be the first ex-serviceman to want to improve his academic qualifications before looking for a job.

"I'm a cop - a detective with Major Crime."

It took Blair only a second to connect the dots; in the last month, several of the female students had reported being followed, and the previous evening one had actually been attacked. Fortunately for her, she had taken karate lessons when she was younger, and she had managed to defend herself even as she screamed. The attacker had run off when two male students, responding to the screams, arrived on the scene.

"The campus stalker?" he asked. Ellison nodded. "I wouldn't have thought that was important enough for Major Crime to be assigned the investigation."

"The girl last night," Ellison said. "Niece of our Captain. He went to see the Commissioner first thing this morning and demanded that Major Crime be assigned the investigation. Well, considering the number of times pretty minor cases have been given to us because someone with political clout demanded 'the best' to investigate the crime against him... Warren pretty well had to agree. So I was sent over to check out the scene."

"Alone? I thought cops usually worked in pairs."

"I work alone," Ellison said. "My last partner... well, it's no secret that he disappeared under pretty suspicious circumstances - but knowing him as I did, I think he's dead. I've refused to be partnered with anyone else. In any case... these 'lost track of time' moments... If I'm killed, well, tough; but I don't want to be responsible for anyone else dying."

"But if you had a companion - " Blair broke off, the word triggering a memory he had been suppressing for several months. 'Sentinels still exist, and one day you will meet one and become a companion to him.'

Was it possible - could it be possible - that this man was a sentinel? Maybe... his sentinel?

"It's not just losing track of things, is it," he said. "You're aware of things too... things you think you shouldn't be aware of. You're hearing things you shouldn't be able to hear, seeing things, smelling things - "

"How the hell do you know that?" Although the words sounded accusing, the tone was one of surprise.

"When I was ten, Mom and I went to live with my grandfather so she could look after him - he was dying. One wet day, I went exploring the attics in his house, and I found a book, written over a hundred years ago by an explorer called Richard Burton. It described his travels in South America, specifically the time he spent with some of the hunter-gatherer tribes that had had little, if any, exposure to the white man's civilization.

"Burton was more interested in the people he met than many of his contemporaries were - most of them seem to have regarded the indigenous people of the lands they visited, even the ones who lived in cities, as ignorant savages, totally beneath the notice of the civilized white men who visited their countries, mostly hoping to make a fortune from whatever they found there - gold, anyone?" Blair shook his head. "I suppose... I can understand their reasoning, but basically they were looking to steal the resources of those countries.

"I don't know if Burton was primarily an explorer who got interested in anthropology or whether he already had an interest in anthropology before he went exploring, but in South America he found a situation that combined the two. All of the jungle tribes had a hierarchy - shaman, chief, hunters and so on - but some also had an individual that Burton referred to as a 'sentinel', and tribes that had a sentinel were always, without exception, more successful than tribes that didn't. The tribes didn't totally understand what made a man a sentinel - they just knew and accepted that sometimes someone was born who could always find game, who could warn of approaching danger, whether that was from a change in the weather or a raiding party from an enemy village. You tend to think of the people who live in primitive conditions as not knowing much about warfare - but they're

constantly in competition for food, sometimes the hunters have to travel for miles following game, and that could easily take them into the territory of another tribe, which isn't going to look too favorably on - well, poachers stealing their food resources. Back then, too, cannibalism was more common, human flesh was another food resource, and the men of one village might decide to attack another to get captives to eat. Burton realized that what gave a sentinel that edge was more acute senses - they could see and hear better than anyone else, they could scent things at a distance - well, the village dogs could do that, but the sentinel could explain what he was scenting. Faced with an unknown food - if the tribe had to move, for example, a different region might have some different plants - he would know by smell and taste if it was edible. Even something like air pressure - he could tell, from the feel of air against his skin, if there was a change in the weather imminent, before anyone else in the tribe could.

"Burton noted that solitary time spent in the wild seemed to trigger the senses, though not in everyone, or hone the senses in someone who already had greater than usual sensory awareness - today we'd say there's a genetic predisposition to have acute senses. There are plenty of people who have better than usual eyesight, or have perfect pitch, or who can taste the subtle differences in things like tea, coffee, or wine, and work as blenders. What's unusual is to have someone with all five senses that are top of the range.

"I think you're the real thing, man - a full, five-heightened-senses, sentinel."

Ellison frowned thoughtfully. "That... could explain a lot. But... "

"But?"

"Losing track of things... when I'm just not aware of anything that's going on around me... "

"Sentinels always had a companion, whose main... I dunno, duty, purpose, responsibility? was to keep his sentinel grounded.

"You know what it's like if you're... oh, reading a really gripping story - you can tune out what's going on around you. A sentinel doing that, concentrating totally on one thing - anything - can lose track of his surroundings in exactly the same way, like you did a few minutes ago."

"How can I stop it?"

"You - " About to say 'trust your partner', Blair broke off, remembering what Ellison had said just a minute earlier about working alone. "I don't think you can, not on your own. I know you said you don't want one, but I think you have to get another partner, one you can trust with the knowledge of what you can do."

Ellison shook his head. "There isn't anyone. Oh, it's not that I distrust them, but everyone else in Major Crime has a partner. Captain Banks just never got anyone to replace Jack - partly because I was so adamant about not having another partner, partly because... well, we'd recently got two new detectives into the department, and with them there... "

"Budget considerations?"

Ellison sighed. "There never seems to be enough money. We could really use a few more men, but..."

"The city's budget won't cover more salaries to help keep it safe - though it's saving one because of losing a man - but the Mayor still has to get his new top-of-the-range car every year, wall to wall fitted carpets in his personal john, claims expenses for getting his windows cleaned every week, where once a month would probably do and in any case he should pay for that himself out of his oh-so-over-generous salary... And then he screams about 'inefficient city employees' - because it's just not possible for fifty men to do the work of sixty, no matter what he expects."

"You're young to be so cynical, Chief."

Blair shook his head. "It's a smaller world, but I've seen 'top level selfishness' here at Rainier. When I started as a TA... I had to find someplace to use as an 'office', and ended up using part of a storage closet. One of my friends was using a room half the size of the one I was in that was used by the janitors for storing cleaning supplies. We weren't the only ones. Yet there were rooms that could have been made available to at least some of us. And some, though not all, of the offices have a small secondary room that's meant for storing books or artifacts. Not all of the professors had that second room - mine didn't; if he had, Eli would have let me use it. I kept one or two things in my 'office', but mostly kept them at home and brought them in as I needed them. I still do that. I do have a second room, and let my TA use it. Gives him a more pleasant environment for his office hours, etc, and doesn't cost me anything. Granted, I'm not the only one who does that; but a lot of the Professors don't. They only see privilege, not responsibility towards what might be called their staff." He shrugged, then went on. "So... the campus stalker. Did you find anything?"

Ellison flushed slightly. "Haven't had a chance to look, yet. I was on my way to have a look around when... when..." He broke off, clearly embarrassed.

"The downside to your sensory gift," Blair said matter-of-factly. "All right, I'll come with you, if I may?"

"Don't you have your own work to do?" But there was a faintly hopeful note in Ellison's voice.

"Doesn't have to be here," Blair said. "I had a class this morning, but my afternoon today is free. I was heading home to do some work there, but I don't have to do it this afternoon. Tonight will do."

"Oh. So you aren't expected to work here in your office even if you're not taking a class?"

"Not unless I have office hours. I can leave a couple of hours early, no bother - I just have to go over my notes for a lecture tomorrow, choose the artifacts I need to illustrate it, and it's easy enough to do all that tonight. In any case, I'd be selecting the artifacts tonight anyway, and this a lecture I've given more than once - I really do know the material, but checking the notes is routine."

He locked his office door as they left, and strode easily along the corridor beside the detective.

"Do you know if all the girls who were stalked were in the same part of the campus grounds?"

"I don't think so," Blair said. "Not all of them. I don't even know that I heard about all the cases. I do know that two or three, including the one last night, were heading for the student parking lot; but at

least one was heading for the road to catch a bus. One was a TA going from the Science building to the library - that was actually mid-afternoon. She heard the footsteps behind her, but when she looked around, she didn't see anyone. But the path she was on is bordered by some bushes, and it would have been easy enough for someone following her to duck behind a bush when she began to turn her head."

Ellison nodded.

"We have been telling the girls they should at least go in pairs till this guy is caught," Blair added, "but why should the girls - the potential victims - be put to that bother? In any case, it isn't always feasible. For example, Mandy - the Science TA - was going to pick up a book for her Professor - he'd have gone himself but he was tied up with a couple of students who wanted something they didn't quite understand clarified."

"It's like saying people should stay at home at night if there's a serial killer about," Ellison agreed. "We do the best we can, but... "



"You're understaffed."

Ellison didn't answer as they walked down the steps of Hargrove Hall. He paused, looking around.

"The path to the student parking lot is this way," Blair said, beginning to cross the road. "That's where Darla - last night's victim - was."

"How do you know her name?" Ellison's voice was curious rather than accusing, although Blair did realize that pretty well any male on campus would be suspect until the stalker was caught.

"The fact that she actually was attacked, not just followed. Alan and Roy - the two guys who heard her screaming - it was too good a story to keep to themselves, made them look good - and one of them did know her quite well. In any case, she's a popular cheer... " His voice trailed off.

"Sandburg?"

"Blair."

"Okay, Blair... and I'm Jim. Something just occurred to you?"

"They were all... all the ones I know about... they were all cheerleaders; Mandy isn't, now she's a TA, but she was in the team last year."

"So that's something they have in common... and yes, that could very well be significant."

"Right, here's the path."

Ellison - Jim - stopped and looked down it.

It was a narrow, paved path with bushes growing fairly evenly along both sides of its length. Anyone going down it would be able to hear footsteps behind them, but - as with the TA (Mandy, Jim reminded himself) - as soon as she began to turn, the follower would be able to duck behind a bush.

What made Darla different from all the others? Or had it reached the point when the stalker simply escalated his approach from being frightening to attacking?

"Blair - was there anything different about Darla? Different from the others who were followed?" Jim asked as they began to walk down the path.

Blair thought about it, then shook his head. "Offhand, I can't think of anything. The only one who was obviously different was Mandy, because she's out of the team now." They went a few more steps in silence, then Blair said slowly, "Wait a minute... "

"Yes?"

"I had to think about them - the ones I know about, though like I said, I don't know that it's all of them. But Darla... "

"Yes?" Jim encouraged as Blair hesitated.

"She's black. I think all the others were white. But that doesn't really make her different - "

"Some people would say it makes her a lot different," Jim said quietly.

"I don't think there's any overt racism on campus," Blair said. "We have students of all ethnicities here, and nobody's ever said they were being bullied or anything like that."

"Would they say? Who would they say it to?"

Blair opened his mouth then closed it again. After a moment - "I don't say all the lecturers are equally approachable, but the anthropology ones certainly are, if only because we're known for being open to all ways of life. Okay, the students in the different disciplines mightn't talk much to each other - anthropology students wouldn't have much in common with the ones in the hard sciences, for example - but word gets around. Even if they feel they can't approach one of their own lecturers, they should all know there are some who would listen, and who they are."

They had been making their way along the path slowly, as Jim studied the ground, and he stopped just as Blair finished speaking. "Here," he said.

Even Blair could see the marks in the soil on one side of the path. He stood still, not wanting to get in the way as Jim bent to study the ground. "There's a good shoe print here," Jim muttered. "Male from the size of it. But does it belong to the stalker or one of the guys who ran to help?" He took a few careful steps in the direction the footprint was pointing, and stopped again. He groped in a pocket, took out a pair of latex gloves and pulled them on before reaching down and picking something up. He returned to Blair's side.

"Someone dropped a wallet." He opened it. "Wonder if there's identification - yes. A student union card. Brad Ventriss." He checked further, and whistled softly as he riffled through the notes. "There has to be at least \$200 here. That's a lot of loose change for a student to be carrying around."

"Not if the student is Brad Ventriss," Blair said dryly.

"You know him?"

"He's in my anthro class. Just why he's taking anthro, God knows - presumably. It's not as if it's a subject that's likely to be of any use to him, and he certainly isn't interested in it. He's one of the idiots who thinks anthropology is an easy, you-don't-really-need-to-work pass. Barry - my TA - had him last year in Anthro 101. He told me he couldn't prove anything, but he was sure Ventriss was cheating. I've got him this year, and I'm sure Barry was right; I'm certain that he's cheating somehow, but damned if I can prove it. That's the hell of it - the little bastard's got brains, and he doesn't need to cheat; he could earn his grades honestly with half the effort he puts into cheating and hiding how he does it." He gave an exasperated growl. "He's a spoiled brat. As far as I can see, his parents substituted toys and money for attention when he was younger - he just had to ask for something and he got it; easier to do that than actually pay attention to him. Oh, I get that his father runs a big business and his mother was always too interested in having an active social life to have time for him - but in that case they either shouldn't have had a kid at all, or hired a decent nanny to give him the attention they didn't."

"Ventriss... Is he Norman Ventriss' son?"

"Yeah."

"Norman has a reputation for being a good boss."

"A pity, then, that he isn't a good father," Blair retorted.

"I shouldn't be asking this, but in your opinion... is this Brad a good candidate to be the stalker?"

"I wouldn't put it past him, though... "

"Though?"

"I wouldn't have expected him to actually attack anyone. Follow them, get them frightened, yes - that would appeal to his sense of humor. Corner them, try to seduce them, maybe - one girl did accuse him of date rape last year, but then she withdrew the complaint a week or so later, and I always did wonder if she was bought off somehow. But actually attack them? Too much effort."

Jim looked at the wallet again. "Well, this places him at the scene - "

"No," Blair said. "It places his wallet at the scene. I'd take a small bet that he's either already reported it stolen, or will say it was when you speak to him."

"And the fact that the money's all still in it?"

"Stolen by the nasty stalker who was then chased off his victim and dropped the stolen wallet as he ran." Blair shook his head. "I know how Ventriss thinks, Jim. Nobody at Rainier has ever been able to pin anything on him. It's not just anthro - it's every subject he's supposed to be studying. I doubt even you would be able to tell when he was lying. He lies so much, so habitually, that I don't think he's even aware that he's lying. I'd guess his father believed everything dear little Brad ever told him, right from his first babbled 'Who, me?' in the nursery."

"You really don't like him, do you?" Jim commented.

Blair gave a wry smile. "Let's just say that I haven't had any reason to like him. In a way I can feel sorry for him - emotionally neglected as I think he was, what chance did the poor SOB have? But I think, now, if you can make something stick... it's time he learned that he has to take responsibility for his actions."

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By prearrangement, Jim headed back to Rainier early the next day, and headed for Blair's office.

Blair looked up with a welcoming smile as Jim walked in. "I got Barry to take my 9 am lecture, and asked him to tell Brad Ventriss I wanted to see him at 10. Ventriss doesn't pay any attention to the lectures - never participates in any class discussions - but at least he does show up. How do you want to approach him?"

"Start off by asking him about his wallet, and if he does claim it was stolen, get his fingerprints to 'eliminate them' from the investigation. There was only one set of fingerprints on it, so... "

Blair grinned. "He won't expect whoever picked it up to have used gloves. Though he could claim the 'thief' was wearing gloves."

"If you were picking someone's pocket... would you wear gloves?" Jim asked.

"And how would he know what a pickpocket, operating by stealth, had on his hands?"

They grinned at each other as they dropped into a conversation that was surprisingly easy, at least to Jim's mind. He had to keep reminding himself that they had only met the previous day. He found himself telling Blair about some of the problems he was having with his senses; Blair, very aware that 'to be a companion to a sentinel' was a task he had been given many years previously, tried to find answers to some of those problems, while not losing track of the passing of time. Eventually, just before 10, he changed the subject. "We'll be getting a visitor in a minute."

Jim glanced at his watch. "Just as well one of us was keeping track of time," he said ruefully. As he straightened into an 'official police' pose, there was a knock on the door that he could only call superficial, and at pretty well the same instant, the door opened.

He deliberately didn't turn as an insolent voice drawled, "Curtis said you wanted to see me."

"Do come in, Brad," Blair said, a totally false smile on his face. "Have a seat." He indicated the second chair drawn up facing him.

As his peripheral vision registered a figure moving into the chair beside him, Jim looked over at it, his expression that of a scientist studying a previously unknown life form. The young man frowned slightly; he obviously had no idea who this stranger was, and equally obviously he didn't like not knowing.

"This is Brad Ventriss, Detective. Brad, it's Detective Ellison who wants to see you."

"Morning, Brad," Jim said smoothly. "There was a wallet picked up yesterday beside the path leading to the student parking lot. It had a card in it with your name... but according to my information, you haven't reported it missing, or stolen, or...?"

"Oh... Yeah, I think it was stolen."

"But you didn't report it?"

"Well, there wasn't much in it, and a student union card is easily replaced. Students lose them all the time."

"Not that easily replaced," Blair said.

"Easy when you have the right... connections," Ventriss said, his voice still dripping insolence.

"Not much in it?" Jim asked. "Just over \$200. That's quite a lot for a student to write off."

"It's not much when your father is Norman Ventriss."

"Norman Ventriss... Questscape?"

There was considerable satisfaction in the young man's voice as he answered, "Yes." Implied was 'So I'm untouchable.'

"Money does talk," Jim agreed, "but how loudly depends on just how much you have. You see, I don't think your wallet was stolen. I think you dropped it when Darla Banks fought back, and then someone came to help her... and you ran?"

"Questscape is one of the biggest companies in Cascade." The combination of insolence and satisfaction sounded ugly. "So you'd better be careful, Detective. My father's lawyers won't be happy with your... accusation." There was no doubting the threat in his voice.

Jim looked thoughtfully at him for a long moment. Then he said quietly, almost as if making conversation, "You didn't pay much attention to my name, Brad, did you?"

Ventriss frowned slightly. It was quite clear that he had already forgotten Jim's name.

"Ellison," Jim said. "James Ellison. My father is William Ellison."

"William Ellison..." The insolence had gone, replaced by nervousness.

"Yes, Brad. As in Ellison Enterprises."

"William Ellison's son is called Stephen."

"My younger brother. And yes, he's the one who'll inherit the business; I was never interested in becoming a businessman, and my father accepted that I was always more interested in a life of action. But family is family, Brad, and I wouldn't recommend your trying to set your father's lawyers on to me... if only because I believe the same firm also represents my father, and I think that if it came to a choice between your interests and mine, they would choose mine. Questscape may be one of the most successful businesses in Cascade; Ellison Enterprises is undoubtedly the most successful." Jim kept his voice quiet, casual in a 'making conversation' sort of way; it was the voice of a man who was so used to having money - plenty of money - that he didn't consider it important.

"And now that we've established that," he went on, "I'm afraid I'll need to ask you to come to the PD with me, to get your fingerprints taken - "

"What?"

"You said your wallet was stolen. It'll be covered with fingerprints. We need to establish which are yours so that we can check any others against the police database."

"Is... Is that really necessary, Detective? I won't be pressing charges - "

Yes, Blair thought to himself. He doesn't like that suggestion...

"Ah, but the PD will, because whoever stole it is undoubtedly the man who attacked Miss Banks... and probably the same one who followed the other students who have reported being stalked. Now, if you would just come with me?" He rose and glanced at Blair. "Thank you for your cooperation, Professor."

Blair nodded. "I hope you can identify whoever stole the wallet, once you find his fingerprints."

"I'm sure we will."

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The phone rang less than an hour later. Blair reached for it.

"Dr. Sandburg."

"He confessed, Chief. We were halfway through getting his fingerprints when he broke down. Apparently he'd been dating one of the cheerleaders, and she broke it off about a month ago."

"So he decided to frighten them all?"

"Pretty well."

"So why actually attack Darla?"

"He blamed her for 'turning Jill against him'. I managed to phone Darla. She agreed that she'd suggested to Jill that Brad wasn't the most desirable of boyfriends, but said that Jill was already doubtful - all she'd done was confirm what Jill already knew."

"So what'll happen to him?"

"Probably not more than a slap on the wrist for attempted assault, since nobody was actually hurt, and hope that he takes it for the warning it'll be."

"I wouldn't like to guarantee it," Blair said. "Psychology minor here - he strikes me as a vindictive little... Well." He chuckled. "Thanks for letting me know." He hesitated. "Jim, would you like to come and see me tonight? We started to talk about heightened senses yesterday, then the stalker thing got in the way. There are one or two things I can tell you about heightened senses."

"Okay."

Blair gave his address, and said, "Maybe about eight?"

"Eight's fine, Chief - thanks."

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But when Jim arrived at Blair's apartment that evening, they were slow to approach the subject of their meeting.

"Anything more on Brad?" Blair asked as he ushered his visitor into the living room.

"No, not yet," Jim said as he sat. "You'd think things would move faster when he confessed, but it doesn't work like that. It'll be two or three weeks at earliest before we have a... you could say conviction. Meanwhile, his father's lawyer is already in contact with the DA..."

"Figures." Blair chuckled. "You rather swept the feet from under him this morning, with your talk of Ellison Enterprises."

"A half truth," Jim said. "I am the older son, but Dad wasn't pleased that I didn't want to go into the business. But that's not something he'd have told anyone; sheer pride would have ensured that if

anyone asked, he'd just have said I wasn't interested and he'd let me go my own way. I haven't actually spoken to him for years."

"His doing, or yours?" Blair asked, his voice sympathetic.

"A bit of both. Okay, I started it, but I was MIA for about eighteen months a few years ago - took an honorable discharge after I was eventually found; that was when I joined the police. Dad would have been informed but he never tried to contact me." He sighed. "I have to admit... it did hurt a bit that he didn't seem to care that I was still alive - on the other hand, he could simply have been sticking to my 'don't want anything to do with the family' attitude, thinking he was doing what I wanted."

"Is that likely?"

"I don't know. He... He didn't substitute toys and money for attention, but the attention he gave wasn't affection; it was... it was training in cut-throat competitiveness; it was a demand that we should be the best in whatever we did, but even when we aced whatever we did, nothing my brother or I ever did was good enough to get more than very grudging, minimal 'praise' of the 'Not bad, but you could have done better' variety."

Low self esteem, Blair remembered. Ready to assume that they are only valued for what they do for their tribe... Though in this case, the 'not good enough' mindset had been instilled.

"It was the army that taught me how to work with other people, even how to trust other people. I don't think Dad totally trusted anyone - not even his secretary, who's been with him for nearly thirty years, knows all of the firm's secrets. He sure didn't trust my mother; she walked out when I was five, saying that he wouldn't share anything with her, all he'd married her for was to breed him sons - she'd given him two, and he didn't need her any longer. Her last fight with him, when she said that... she knew I was there and could hear her, but she didn't care... " There was a bitter matter-of-factness in his voice. "God, why am I telling you all that?"

Fearing that nobody sees and cares for the man... emotionally fragile... easily hurt although he will hide it well... Do all sentinels in technological cultures have that kind of background? Betrayal by the people who should have given them most support? From what Waleri said, Davo didn't seem to have had that problem... but a jungle tribe, even one that has its children educated in the city, would retain family values, give the children support and love - hell, I saw for myself how Waleri's people operated.

Getting to his feet, Blair took the few steps separating him from Jim and put a gentle hand on his shoulder. "Sometimes events remind you of something that bothered you in the past, and you have to get it out of your system - and in those circumstances, it's often easier to tell a stranger."

Jim looked up at him. "I suppose... " he mumbled.

Time to change the subject, Blair decided. "Anyway, now you have got that out of your system... "

"Oh. Yes. Heightened senses?"

It was clear that he wasn't exactly comfortable with this subject either, but it was better than talking about his trust issues.

Blair gripped the shoulder under his hand tightly for a moment, then turned to pick up The Sentinels of Paraguay. He opened it at a picture of a warrior, and handed it to Jim. "I mentioned Richard Burton's book... "

Jim looked at the picture, and drew in a sharp breath. "Incacha... " he whispered.

Blair waited.

"I remember... I remember now. When I was MIA, I was taken in by one of the local tribes. I worked with them, hunted with them... The shaman, Incacha... He told me that it was easier to hunt with someone like me, who could always lead the hunters to game... I worked with him sometimes, if there was someone sick - somehow I could tell what was wrong... "

"You were the tribe's sentinel. I met a tribe a few years ago, and the headman told me about how, when he was a boy, they'd had a sentinel, and how easy it was for them to hunt, etc, when Davo was there. After he died they had to relearn how to track game."

Jim looked at him. "You mean the Chopek would have had problems after I left? That's poor thanks to them for giving me a home!"

"No, I don't mean that. You were with them for what - eighteen months? Nowhere near long enough for them to forget the skills they had. Davo led his tribe's hunts for close on thirty years. The younger hunters had never had to track game; only the older ones, the ones who had learned to hunt before Davo became a man, had tracking skills. It took a year or two before the younger men learned those skills.

"Even so, Waleri told me that they would welcome the emergence of another sentinel."

"Oh... But when the army found me and brought me home again, why did I forget? Why wasn't I able to see or hear more acutely? I... I went back to 'normal'."

"I'm not sure, but I think it might have something to do with the companion. You worked with the shaman, you said."

"Some of the time."

"Then I think he might have acted as your companion, but you weren't with him all the time, so when you left... A few weeks after Davo's companion died, Davo died too, but they'd worked together for thirty years. You'd only worked part time with Incacha for eighteen months - and in any case he didn't die - so you survived the separation, but your sentinel senses 'died'."

"Say I buy that - and I suppose it's possible. Why have they - well, come back to life?"

"I'd guess that a suitable companion has... well, surfaced in Cascade, maybe someone you've met recently. You said you've only had problems this past month or so... " But I've been in Cascade, at Rainier, for years, Blair thought. If it's a reaction to the presence of his guide, maybe that means Jim isn't my sentinel... The thought was surprisingly depressing.

Jim was frowning. "You said... according to this guy - " he indicated the book - "solitary time in the wild triggered the senses."

"Yes."

"I was on solitary stake-out in Cascade National Forest for eight days, about a month ago. The perp didn't turn up until the eighth day... I called for backup, which was just as well, because when I went to arrest him I lost concentration for a moment, he was able to punch me out and make a run for it, but the backup was there by then and they got him. I didn't relate that to those blank spells I've had, until now."

"It was probably a very minor one, caused not by losing concentration but by concentrating too hard on getting him. But I'd guess it means that your companion is here in Cascade, because Burton said he never heard of anyone whose senses had been triggered not having a companion."

Jim thought about that. "The companion would have to be someone who knew about heightened senses."

"Or be able to learn."

"You already know... and you've already helped me." Jim rubbed his forehead. "Though you have your own life to lead, and it's a long way from mine."

"I could take a sabbatical, work with you for a while, maybe with a ride-along, see how it works out."

"What excuse would you give for wanting a sabbatical?"

"Research," Blair said. "Having one PhD doesn't stop anyone from working towards another, even in the same discipline. I'd just have to slant it slightly differently. My original doctoral dissertation was on the changing face of society. I could do a parallel one on ways in which society hasn't changed - geared towards ways in which societies have always had someone whose job it was to protect - "

"You're not planning on writing about sentinels, I hope?" Jim's voice was suddenly very cold.

"Cool it, Jim." Blair wasn't totally surprised at Jim's reaction. Accusing someone who is a completely loyal friend of being untrustworthy..., and he wasn't even a friend yet - Jim barely knew him. "Since I've only just thought of it, I haven't had time to consider any details yet, but if I mention sentinels by that name it'll be in reference to historical protectors in hunter-gatherer tribes. The senses give you an edge, and it'd be stupid to broadcast that. I was thinking more along the lines of the police as protectors of society... I'd probably have to touch on the fire service, hospitals, even the armed forces, but I could probably get the armed forces bit from history books or biographies about some of the top generals... I'll need to give it some thought, to present at least an outline to Rainier, but I do think it's feasible. And I won't use real names. That's totally unethical. Some writers use initials, or at least first name initials, others change the names totally; I usually use the first initial and shift it three places in the alphabet, so I'd call you Detective M. If there are two people with the same first initial, I use the second initial as well, using the same system; that would make you MH." He allowed a touch of humor to creep into his voice. "That anonymous enough for you?"

Jim looked a little shame-faced. "Yes... sorry, Chief. I... I..."

"It's all right," Blair said. "I didn't take it personally. Just remember, I'll be studying the police as protectors of society; Detective MH is only one of many. The other cops'll know I'm riding with Jim

Ellison; nobody who sees the dissertation will know the real name of the cop I was riding with. And doctoral dissertations aren't exactly the sort of books that make the New York Times best-seller list."

Jim looked at him and nodded. "Okay," he said.

*

It was amazing how smoothly things went; Rainier granted him a year off on the understanding that because he would still be in Cascade he would be available, if necessary, to continue advising Barry Curtis - who, himself a doctoral candidate, was working on his dissertation, and would be taking his own research sabbatical at the end of the academic year. Jim's immediate superior, Captain Banks, granted Blair a ninety day ride-along (even though when Blair's back was turned he muttered to Jim about how young this Rainier professor looked).

*

Some three weeks after he started riding with Jim, there was an explosion in Blair's apartment block. Blair's small apartment wasn't immediately involved, and although he was evacuated along with all the other residents he was one of several in the less affected part of the building who were allowed back the next day to recover personal belongings. Jim went with him to help gather his things - Jim's truck was particularly useful because using it let him do everything in one trip.

With the truck and Blair's car (which had been parked at the unaffected side of the building) full of Blair's things - mostly books and several artifacts, plus a laptop, a guitar, a photo album, some clothes, a sleeping bag and a small stock of food - Jim asked, "Where to, Chief?"

"Rainier," Blair said. "I still have my office there and I can store everything in it till I find another apartment."

"Where did you stay last night?" Although the police had been in attendance, it had been the Patrol cops and the bomb squad, to check on what had caused the explosion; Jim hadn't known about it until Blair phoned to say he wouldn't be in that day and why, and Jim had immediately arranged to meet him at the destroyed building.

"Hotel," Blair said. "But I'll need to find a cheaper one. \$300 a night isn't really long-term-affordable unless you're a billionaire. Oh, it's a great hotel, comfortable, pretty well anything you want available instantly, and it was convenient - I wasn't going to go looking for something cheaper at 10pm. I'm not strapped for cash, but my price range is more like \$300 a week. But once I get my stuff stashed in the office I can take the rest of today to find a reasonable hotel or motel - if you don't mind?" He was very aware that he had taken on a commitment and disappearing on personal business - even the circumstances of this personal business - wasn't adhering to the terms of that commitment.

Jim looked at him. "Even though it was just one room, in that part of town you had to have been paying more than \$300 a week for the apartment you were in."

Blair made a 'so what' gesture. "Okay, so putting it that way sounded dramatic, but it wasn't far from the truth. I was paying \$1000 a month. It should have been more, but the guy who owned the building was an old friend of my mother's who knew me when I was about eight, and let me have it

at a discount. In any case it gave him an income for an apartment that was smaller than most people wanted - when I moved in it had been empty for a couple of months."

"I have a spare room," Jim said. "Okay, it's pretty small, but it would give you a bedroom, as long as you don't mind sharing the living room... and there's enough space for your things, too. Easy enough to put up another bookshelf."

Blair hesitated for a second. "Are you sure?" he asked.

"Quite sure. All it'll cost you is half the food and utilities - the place is mine, fully paid; I don't need rent. You can call helping me with my senses the rent."

"Okay," Blair said. "And thanks."

*

The explosion turned out to have been caused by a gas leak; an elderly man who had been out for the evening returned home, had - the ME decided at the autopsy - been too drunk to register the smell of gas, and - according to the accident investigation - tried for some reason to light the stove - probably to boil water. He was the only death, though the building was too damaged to be repaired; but when Blair spoke to Malcolm Sanders, the owner, it was to find that he was fairly philosophical about it. "I'll get it demolished and rebuilt to a better design," he said.

"What are the various tenants doing?" Blair had only a nodding acquaintance with two or three of them, so it was really only a polite enquiry, not one where he really cared.

"Mostly staying with relatives, and most have indicated that they want to move into the new building when it's ready. But what about you, Blair? What are you doing? You certainly can't commute from Fort Worth. And... I'm sorry, I'll give you as good a deal as I can if you want to move back, but there won't be any one-room apartments in the new building so the rent will be higher."

"I landed lucky," Blair said. "A friend is letting me use his spare room."

"I'm glad you had someone to help." And Blair knew that Sanders genuinely meant it.

*

After that, things went very smoothly for several months. The original ninety-day ride-along expired and instead of insisting that Blair go to another department if he wanted to continue studying the police, Simon - impressed by Blair in spite of his original reservations - cheerfully extended Blair's time with Major Crime by another ninety days... and then another ninety.

During that time Blair amassed piles of notes on the work done by (mostly) Major Crime, though he spoke to personnel from several other departments as well. Jim's fellow detectives (in particular those in Major Crime, but word did spread to the other departments) were impressed by the input offered by their observer.

During those nine months, Blair continued to live in Jim's small spare room. They had quickly discovered that they were very congenial housemates, and it had been no hardship for Blair to forget about trying to find a new apartment. He spent many of his evenings keeping his notes up to

date and in workable order, so that he had an ongoing rough draft of his new dissertation, but with only three months of his sabbatical left, he knew that he would soon have to settle down to polishing that rough draft into a presentable form.

Even as he came to that realization, he also recognized that he would also soon have to make a decision about his future. Whatever he decided, he would, he knew, continue to live with Jim, and help him with his senses; but would it be enough to work with him part time while returning to a life at Rainier? He had spent the occasional day there, had done two or three 'guest' lectures, kept himself available to advise Barry (though more often Barry had visited him in the evening) and Jim had managed all right, but there was a big difference between that and working as a full-time - or even a part-time - tenured professor, based at Rainier for at least half of each week and with responsibilities to his students.

The one thing, though, that he was committed to doing was presenting this dissertation.

With a week of his third ride-along to run, still unsure of what he wanted to do, Blair went to the PD one morning when Jim was in court. He had only had one meeting with the Captain in charge of Fraud, and he wanted a little more information from him, so he had arranged to speak with him that morning.

He was looking over the notes he had made the first time he had visited Fraud when Megan entered the bullpen, bringing with her a tall blonde woman. Something about the woman... He strained to hear the conversation.

"There are no drugs or alcohol in me," the woman was saying with the exaggerated patience of someone who'd said it a dozen times already.

Megan glared at her. "Cars don't just decide to demolish themselves, do they? There has to be driver error, and on that particular stretch of road, the most likely explanation for driver error is drink or drugs." She sounded as though she'd said that a dozen times, too. Reaching her desk, she waved to the seat in front of it. "Sit down."

Blair's lips twitched. Detective though she was, Megan was obsessed with stopping drunk driving, which was usually Patrol's problem; her stated opinion was that anyone who was in charge of a car was in charge of a potentially lethal weapon (not surprising, really, considering the reckless way she herself drove), and anyone who was drunk when driving was totally irresponsible and should be locked away for life with no chance of parole. He fully agreed that 'don't drink and drive' was a good and sensible adage and that drunk drivers should be penalized, but he hadn't been able to discover just why she was so much more fixated on it than pretty well everyone else in the PD.

He was about to turn his attention back to his notes when Henri Brown, carrying a piece of paper, walked past the desk. "H?"

"Yeah?"

"Any idea what's going on with Megan? Sounds like she's dealing with an accident of some kind - wouldn't Patrol usually handle that?"

Brown grinned. "Well, you know what she's like. She was on her way in this morning, fairly early - it was still at least half dark. Passed that girl - " he nodded towards the blonde - "standing beside a car that was wrapped around a telephone pole. Blondie was, like, yelling, and when Conner stopped, she started screaming that the lights were killing her eyes and then she started on about how the noise of the traffic was giving her a headache. According to Conner, there wasn't that much traffic."

Blair stiffened. "Weird," he said.

"Yeah - crazy. Anyway, Patrol arrived a couple of minutes later, Conner said she'd take the girl in and left them to deal with the car. Had a blood test done on the driver as soon as she arrived, and she's been hassling the girl ever since - I'm surprised she's left the interrogation room for here. Anyway, I happened to be downstairs a few minutes ago and they gave me the result to bring back up."

"Tell you what - I'm curious. I'll take it over to Megan for you."

"Okay." Brown handed over the paper and crossed to his own desk.

Blair took a deep breath, got up and headed over to Conner, who was saying, "An oncoming car flashes its lights so you can't see. I can buy that. But why start to take your clothes off in the middle of the road?" She sounded as if she'd asked that several times already.

The woman said, "I told you already. My skin hurt. The clothes felt like sandpaper all of a sudden. I don't know why."

Sight.Hearing. Touch... and she sounded as if she had been really suffering. But...Above all, do not try to help another sentinel, a quiet voice reminded him.

Blair reached the desk and handed over the paper. "Here's that blood test you wanted."

"Thanks, Sandy... Oh. Negative?" She sounded quite disbelieving.

"I told you," the woman said. "You have no reason to hold me. May I leave now? I've got a damaged car to deal with."

Megan nodded, still looking doubtful. "You can collect your belongings at the booking desk downstairs and... see a doctor. Not to be alarmist, but the only other explanation I can think of is that you have a brain tumor."

The woman looked at her, rose and walked out. Blair took the chair she had just vacated, thinking, That's what Jim thought might be 'wrong' with him.

"That's an odd one," he said.

Megan shook her head. "I still don't get it," she said. "Even if she was blinded by the lights of an oncoming car, she was on a dead straight stretch of road. Something had to be affecting her concentration to the point where she lost control. Even that early, drink seemed the most likely explanation - hell, she could have been heading home from an all-night party! And it wouldn't be the first time someone's still been drunk next morning even after two or three hours of sleep, either. But I can't argue with the test results."

"Well, I hope she has the sense not to try driving again till she's had a medical check-up," Blair said. He checked the time, and headed for his appointment with Captain Renton. He'd be a minute or two early, but too early was better than late... a lesson he'd taken quite a long time to learn. His mother's idea of punctual was usually 'anything up to ten minutes late, and if the bus has already left, we can always get the next one'.

After a fruitful two hours, Blair left Fraud and went back upstairs to Major Crime.

Jim still wasn't there - which didn't surprise him; he had discovered, in his months with the PD, just how time-consuming and often frustrating days in court often were, and Ricky Donahue's defense lawyer was well-known for his stretch-out-everything-as-long-as-possible tactics, his designed-to-confuse-witnesses questions, and this was the fifth day of a trial that should have lasted at most two days.

Blair sat apparently looking at his notes, but thinking desperately hard about the woman Megan had been speaking to. She had to have heightened senses... three at least... He could try to find out, perhaps give her some advice...

The voice in his mind reminded him -...one day I met another sentinel who was having problems, and foolishly tried to help her. It was probably the biggest mistake I have ever made. My sentinel saw it as a betrayal and reacted badly...

Or not.

Was this a parallel to what had happened in that other universe? If so, sympathetic though he was, sure that he had an answer for her, he must not act on it... do not try to help another sentinel. The words of the letter from the other universe repeated themselves in his mind.

With an effort, he turned his attention back to the notes he had made in Fraud and settled down to work on them, expanding them while his conversation with Captain Renton was still fresh in his mind.

*

Jim arrived mid-afternoon, looking stressed and irritated. Blair looked at him, an eyebrow lifted enquiringly.

"We got a guilty verdict. The jury was only out for ten minutes. The evidence was sound, but I think they reached a verdict as fast as that because Donahue's lawyer pissed off everyone in the jury. I could have told him two days ago that they'd already lost patience with him and even if Donahue had been innocent they'd have declared him guilty just to spite the lawyer."

Blair grinned. "So if I'm ever arrested for something, I know which lawyer not to get," he said.

Jim gave him a half-hearted grin back. "You planning on doing something you could be arrested for?" But it sounded to Blair as if the banter was forced.

"Circumstantial evidence? It's possible to be in the wrong place at the wrong time. Or mistaken identity?"

"Nobody could possibly mistake someone else for you," Jim said, but it was more than ever obvious to Blair that Jim was making a positive effort to joke back.

"What's wrong?" he asked quietly.

"I don't know," Jim said. "I... There's no reason for it, but there's something... There's been something bugging me for close to a week, and I don't know what it is. I thought it might have been the Donahue trial, knowing who the lawyer was, but..."

"Like you're considering the evidence in a case, something feels off, but you can't pin-point what it is?"

"No, not really... More the sort of feeling I get when I'm questioning someone, I'm sure he's lying but I can't... quite... get at the truth. I know that sounds sort of similar, but it isn't. It's a different feeling. Sort of...Sort of an irritation. Like an itch inside my skull... Does that make sense?"

... many villages had a sentinel... The words from The Sentinels of Paraguay rang clear in Blair's mind. He had always thought that 'a' sentinel, linked to 'many' simply meant that sentinels were relatively rare; perhaps it was more than that.

... I met another sentinel who was having problems, and foolishly tried to help her. It was probably the biggest mistake I have ever made. My sentinel saw it as a betrayal and reacted badly... the voice in his head repeated.

Perhaps what sentinels reacted badly to was actually the presence of a second one in their territory...

"Do you have to work the rest of today?" he asked.

"No. I only came in to report to Simon. Once I've done that I can take the rest of the day off. What you might call a reward for having to deal with Kaplan."

"Okay. You go and report, then we'll go home. I have something to tell you that I think might explain what you're feeling, but it'll be best to do it in private."

*

Because they had arrived separately they had two vehicles, so they went home in convoy, parked and went together up the stairs to the loft.

Inside, Blair said, "Sit down. I'll make coffee, then we can talk." But as he went into the kitchen area, he knew he was using this as an excuse to delay what he was sure would be a difficult conversation.

But making coffee took only so long, and sooner than he would have liked, Blair found himself handing one mug to Jim before sitting down with his own mug. He took a deep breath.

"Before I start, I've got to say that this is mostly speculation, extrapolating from some of Burton's phraseology."

"Even speculation would be something," Jim said - but was there just a touch of near hostility in his voice?

You must be prepared to forgive and forgive passed through Blair's mind. That hostility wasn't directed at him, he reminded himself, but at the situation; at whatever was causing him to feel irritated. "According to Burton, in all tribal cultures each village had a sentinel. I never thought about it before, but... I think that when he said a sentinel, he really did mean that each village only had one - that is, one at a time. Nowhere in his book does he speak of a village with more than one sentinel. Going by the tribe I met that had had one... after Davo died, they didn't have one; there was nobody to take his place. They were waiting, hoping, for another one to be born, and had been waiting for... going by everything I was told, I'd guess about thirty years. At least thirty years.

"But why did they only have one per village? Surely having two, three, would have made life easier for the sentinels, and for the village - when the senior sentinel died, there would be a junior one ready to fill his shoes. There had to be a reason for that." Blair took a mouthful of coffee.

"Before you arrived at the PD today... I overheard Megan speaking to a woman she thought had been driving under the influence of drink or drugs. This woman claimed to have been blinded by oncoming headlights, and wrapped her car around a telephone pole on a dead straight stretch of road. Megan happened to drive past about the same time, and found her screaming that the lights were too bright, the traffic noise was too loud - then she started taking her clothes off because - she said - they were irritating her skin."

"Wha- " Jim stared at him.

"The blood test came back negative, and Megan let her go.

"Jim, from what I heard there was evidence - if you can call it that - of only three senses... well, spiking, but I think it's possible that she's a sentinel.

"What if each tribal village only had one sentinel at a time because the resident sentinel reacted badly to the presence of another one in his territory? That he got that... itch inside his skull you say you're feeling? Something that made him aware of an interloper?"

"Are you saying that you think two sentinels could never be friends?"

"I think they might see each other as rivals. At least, I think the resident sentinel would be aware of another one coming into his territory and see him as a rival; the incomer mightn't know there was already a sentinel there, but - if he liked the place - might decide he wanted to settle there. Of course, if he did that he would then become aware that there already was an incumbent. They'd probably want to battle it out for... well, possession of the territory. If two were born in the same place at about the same time, they might grow up knowing each other, but I suspect they'd always see each other as... as competition, not knowing why until the senses came fully online."

"Another downside to having heightened senses," Jim muttered.

"?" Blair raised an eyebrow questioningly.

"Not able to have a friend who totally understands what it's like to have heightened senses. Don't get me wrong, Chief, you're a great friend and you keep me stable, but you don't know what it's like to... Hell, you don't even know what it's like to see naturally, without glasses!"

Blair grinned. "Just for reading, Jim, just for reading. My distance vision is fine."

"Yes, but how far can you actually see?"

"Well... not in the sort of detail you can, but thousands of miles, Jim."

"Huh?"

"I don't have any trouble seeing the moon. Heck, I can see the stars - again, probably not as many as you can, but I doubt even you see them as anything more than specks of light - they're just too far away. Planets... maybe. You might see things like Jupiter's moons or Saturn's rings that I can't."

"I'm not sure I could identify any of the planets," Jim muttered. "Astronomy never interested me."

"I know a few of the constellations," Blair said, "but not which planet is which. But we're getting off the subject."

"I think you've sensed this woman - this other sentinel - coming into your territory. How long have you had this... this itch?"

"Four, five days," Jim admitted. "I thought it was just a reaction to Kaplan - who would irritate a saint. But if it's another sentinel... what can I do about it?"

"Good question," Blair said. "Frankly - I don't know."

*

As soon as Jim arrived at the PD next morning, Simon called him into his office. "There's been a break-in at Oberon Security. The supervisor has no idea what information was accessed," he said quietly, "but the firm designs state-of-the-art security systems and their customers include some major corporations - so they're worried. Which of their customers is being targeted? Just one customer, or more than one? The really weird thing is... how did the thief get in, defeating Oberon's own security systems?"

"Ex-employee, maybe?" Jim suggested.

Simon shook his head. "They screen everyone who works there very carefully, and anyone they employ tends to stay there till they retire... on a very good pension. But here's the even weirder thing - one of their security cameras did catch the thief as he was escaping." He switched on the VCR.

The video was silent. It showed a hallway with a figure running down it; suddenly the person stopped and bent over, hands covering its ears.

"That has to have been when their alarm went off," Simon commented. "Has to be hell of a loud one."

"Yes," Jim said slowly. "Hell of a loud alarm... "

*

Blair had decided to work at home, trying to get the first complete draft of his dissertation on the work of the police finished. When the phone rang just before 9 am, his first reaction was irritation at the interruption, but he reached for it anyway.

"Hello?"

"I know you're busy, Chief, but can you come down to the station?" Jim asked.

"Problem?"

"I think so. It's... tied in with that itch I've had."

"I'll be there ASAP."

Blair hung up, saved the file, closed his laptop, and grabbed his coat on the way out. He shrugged into it as he went along the corridor to the stairs, fastened it as he started down.

He was worried; not so much by what Jim had said, but by how he had said it.

*

Twenty minutes later, Blair walked into the bullpen and crossed to where Jim was sitting reading a report. Jim looked up as Blair reached him, put down the paper he had been reading and stood.

"I asked Conner for the name and address of the woman you reckon has the heightened senses," he said. "We need to go and see her."

Blair nodded. "Any particular reason?" he asked as he followed Jim back to the door.

"Break-in at Oberon Security about midnight last night," Jim said, pressing the button for the elevator. The door opened instantly and they went in. Jim hit the button for the parking garage. "Security camera caught an intruder going down a corridor... and it looked like he had a sensory spike when an alarm went off. The reaction was exactly what mine would have been. Now unless there are two visiting sentinels... this has to be that woman you saw with Conner."

"Sounds like it," Blair said. "But Jim - if it was, she isn't a sentinel."

"Isn't? But my reaction to having her in Cascade... you said... "

"Yes - she undoubtedly has heightened senses, but Jim - a sentinel is a protector. If she doesn't have that awareness... she isn't a sentinel, just someone with heightened senses. Your reaction to her would probably be the same... or maybe it's because she isn't a proper sentinel - " He broke off as the elevator doors opened, and they stepped out into the garage.

*

"Her name's Alex Barnes," Jim said as he started the truck. "She's a week into a four-week lease of the apartment she's in."

"A four-week lease?" Blair repeated. "If she's only here for four weeks... why lease an apartment?"

"Apparently she told the owner that although she liked the look of the apartment, she wanted to live in it for a week or two before she decided if she wanted to lease it long-term. Meet her neighbors, see how convenient the local stores were, that sort of thing. It seemed... eccentric, but fairly reasonable. Originally she only wanted a two-week lease; the owner held out for four."

"Personally," Blair said, "I don't think I'd want the hassle of moving in and out again two weeks later. How much would you see of your neighbors in two weeks? Not a lot. Heck, I've been in your place for about eight months, and I haven't met all your neighbors."

"I've been there five, six years, and I haven't met them all," Jim said. "Most of them, on the stairs or in the elevator, yes, but there's one family I've never met... And Blair, until you want to move, it's our place."

Blair was aware of a sudden tightness in his throat. He swallowed. "Even if you want to marry?" he asked, trying to keep his voice light.

"In that case, it'll be your place; I'll be the one to move," Jim said. "But seriously - I doubt I'll want to marry again."

"Again?"

"I married the head of Forensics a few months after I joined the PD," Jim said. "Didn't last long, though we stayed friends. But we couldn't live with each other. She felt I was too... well, repressed; I found her too... " He sighed. "Feminine, I suppose. Wouldn't have thought it to look at her; she had a competent, get-on-with-business public persona, but at home? She was finicky, she had all sort of dust-catching nick-nacks that she claimed made the place look 'homey' and 'lived in', that I thought just created clutter - "

"Does that mean you find my stuff 'clutter'? Would you rather I put a lot of it away?"

"No. First of all, there isn't that much, not compared to what Carolyn had, and second, what you have isn't frippery nick-nacks, pointless little ornaments just there to look 'pretty'; it's tribal stuff, artifacts, things you use - or at least used when you were still teaching full-time. Your stuff does make the place look more lived-in, and I like it."

Blair could hear the sincerity in Jim's voice, and breathed a silent sigh of relief.

"Okay, here we are," Jim said. "Barnes' apartment is on the second floor. Number 203. Come on."

They went up the stairs to the second door opening from a short corridor; there were three other doors beyond it. Jim rang the bell.

There was no answer. "She must - " he started, then stiffened. "Plastique!" He grabbed Blair and pulled him away from the door a second before there was a loud explosion and the door blew out.

The next few minutes were hectic. The door of 201 opened, and Blair hurried to the woman who stuck her head out. "You alone in the house? Yes? There's been an explosion in 203, the apartment's burning - come on, you need to get out!"

"I'll go up!" Jim snapped, and headed for the stairs as Blair helped the shaken occupant of 201 downstairs - there was no sign of anyone coming out of any of the three apartments further along the corridor. On the ground floor, he found the tenants of two apartments at their doors; he hurried them outside. "Has anyone called 911?" he asked.

None of them had, and he pulled out his cell phone, reported the explosion, then directed the people coming down the stairs to the opposite side of the street. He watched smoke billowing from the second story window for what seemed a long time before Jim appeared, a small child in his arms, just behind a woman carrying a baby. Just as he did, Blair heard the approaching sirens.

*

Unlike the accidental explosion at Blair's former apartment block, which had damaged the building beyond repair, this one had only damaged the one apartment. Even the fire started by the explosion had been limited to the living room, though there was smoke damage throughout the other rooms. It had, it appeared, been designed to target anyone ringing the bell or trying to open the door - though just why was impossible to guess.

After the fire department left, Jim went in to check the damaged room. In it, he found the remains of a portable hard drive, with a disk in it. Blair put a hand on his shoulder as Jim felt the surface of the disk, keeping him focused.

"I can make out part of a word," Jim said softly. "O-B-E-R..."

"Oberon?" Blair murmured.

"That's the most likely bet," Jim agreed. "Let's take this to the Oberon office, see what they make of it."

*

Lunch was a sandwich eaten in the truck en route to Oberon Security.

When they explained why they were there, Jim and Blair were directed to a man called Reiger. Reiger took the damaged disk and checked it. "I've pulled info off disks damaged worse than this," he said confidently, and slid it into a drive. His audience was lost almost instantly, even Blair, who was no slouch with a computer, totally unable to follow what he was doing. After a few minutes, he looked up.

"Got it," he said. "It's our security design for the HazMat research unit at Rainier university."

Just as Reiger finished speaking, Jim's cell phone rang. "Ellison."

It was Simon. "We've had a call from Rainier - "

"Don't tell me - the Hazmat unit's been broken into?"

"How the hell do you know that?"

"We're at Oberon Security; it's just been identified that that was what was downloaded at their break-in."

"So that's how the thief managed to circumvent the security until the last level. That's a fingerprint control, and the thief went through that one with a laser."

"Yeah, he wouldn't be able to get around that one..." Jim saw Reiger looked at him, and covered the mouthpiece. "Rainier was broken into," he explained quickly, then returned to Simon. "So what was taken?" he asked.

"Two canisters of VX nerve gas."

"What the... What was Rainier doing with that?"

"Apparently Rainier is one of the places where hazardous materials are sometimes stored. The idea apparently is that terrorists aren't going to think of a university as a store for material that hazardous."

"Well, this thief clearly thought of it," Jim said grimly. "Want us to go to Rainier?"

"Not much point, Forensics is already there. Far as Rainier security could tell, it was done at about 5 this morning, though it wasn't discovered until lunch time - nobody had had any reason to go up to the unit during the morning. It was a straight in and out job, very professional; I doubt even you would find anything."

"All right, we'll be straight in."

*

About an hour later, Blair looked up from his computer. "I've got her," he said. "Alex Barnes, aka Alicia Bannister. I was right, Jim - this woman might have heightened senses, but she isn't a sentinel. She served three years at the California women's prison in Corona for industrial espionage. Known to have a partner, Carl Hettinger. So I checked on him, too. He's wanted for international weapons trafficking."

Jim paused in writing his report on the explosion and what he had learned at Oberon. "Can you find out anything more about Hettinger?"

Before Blair could reply, they were interrupted.

"Ellison!"

Jim sighed and crossed to Simon's office. Blair followed him.

"Discovered anything yet?"

"We're getting there. The Barnes woman has served time - "

"Now there's something that's puzzling me. What made you decide you needed to see this woman?"

Jim hesitated. "I thought... when we saw that video of the intruder at Oberon... I thought that was her."

"Jim, the intruder was masked. There's no way even his mother could have identified him!"

"It was the reaction to the alarm. We agreed that the intruder clearly found it extremely loud.

"Simon, a day or two ago, when Conner brought Barnes in, Barnes had been complaining about the traffic noise being too loud - but Conner said there wasn't actually that much traffic. Barnes clearly had very sensitive hearing."

"Isn't that a bit of a reach - assuming that because she found traffic noise loud, she was the intruder at Oberon?"

"In a way... but she was the intruder. Sandburg's pretty good at digging out information - I got him checking up on her, and she'd got a record. I'm just finishing my report on what we've discovered today; it'll be on your desk in a few minutes."

"All right - get out of here and finish your report."

As Jim returned to his desk, Blair said, "I think I've got something... "

*

"Simon, this guy Hettinger traveled to Sierra Verde twice in the last three months," Jim said. "We've discovered that he's known to be in contact with a drug lord there, Carlos Arguillo. I think that's where we're going to find Barnes."

"Just because they're partners - "

"Apparently the government in Sierra Verde has been cracking down on Arguillo. At a guess, Arguillo hasn't paid someone enough to look the other way. Where better to sell something that will really terrify government officials who aren't offering a high enough bribe?"

"Or there's an incorruptible official somewhere high up, trying to clean up crime in his country," Blair suggested.

"You think that's likely?" Simon asked.

"It could happen," Blair said.

"Government corruption in third world countries - " Simon began.

"Whichever," Jim broke in, seeing that the two could, and possibly would, argue cynicism against optimism for the rest of the day. "Either way, the threat of a canister of that nerve gas being used in their capital city would - or at least I'd expect it would - cause the government to fold, and give Arguillo a pretty free hand. I'd like to go there, at least alert the authorities there to the danger - and because Blair and Conner both know what she looks like, I think they should come with me. We'd

want a female arresting officer along in any case - otherwise Barnes could accuse us of sexual assault."

*

The only available photos of Barnes and Hettinger were mug shots, which, like passport photos, were very static, but were better than just describing the two criminals.

When the trio reached Santa Cruz, the main town of the Sierra Verde region, they detoured to the Hotel Santa Cruz for just long enough to claim their rooms and leave their bags, then headed for the Santa Cruz PD. There, they were shown into the office of Police Chief Ortega.

"Good afternoon, gentlemen, seniorita. I understand that you have come here in pursuit of two criminals?"

"Yes," Jim said. "We don't actually know that they came here, but one of them is known to have a contact here." He handed over the two photos.

Ortega studied them for a moment. "I have not seen them, but that is no surprise. We can publicize their pictures, of course, but what makes you think they came here?"

"As I said, the man is known to be in contact with Carlos Arguillo."

"Ah. You do know that the government is cracking down on Senor Arguillo? As yet nobody has been able to prove anything against him personally, blame has always fallen on one of his men - but we have already managed to cut his operations by at least half. Doing business with Senor Arguillo now is not the intelligent thing to do. But - and it is a sad fact - there are one or two other... what would you say, career criminals? here, who would like to take Senor Arguillo's place as the most successful of them."

"We think they have a weapon they want to sell to Arguillo that will... restore his position as top dog," Jim said.

"A weapon?"

"They are in possession of two canisters of nerve gas. If Arguillo buys those... He makes a threat - the government ignores it, and he releases the contents of one canister somewhere... populated, but not too densely. Perhaps a small town. Then he says that the next one will be released here, in the capital city where the government meets. What will the government do?"

Ortega looked at him, fear in his eyes. "We must find these desgraciados and stop them!"

*

The only direct help Ortega could give them was information on where Arguillo lived, and they went to stake it out, assuming that either Barnes and Hettinger would go there to see Arguillo, or they would contact him and it would be possible to follow him - or his men - to wherever he arranged to meet them.

"Though in their position, I'm not sure I would trust Arguillo," Megan said softly as they settled into a secure position overlooking the big mansion that was Arguillo's home, having left their rented car a short distance away.

"No?" Jim asked.

"From all I've heard about the man... He'd arrange to buy the gas, meet up with Barnes and Hettinger, and then shoot them. Get the gas for nothing."

Blair glanced from Megan to Jim. "You've been thinking the same thing, haven't you?"

"Yes," Jim said.

"Though if someone got a reputation for doing that kind of thing, how likely is it that anyone would deal with him in the future?"

"He might be honest enough in his dealings with other Mexicans," Jim replied, "but still feel free to trick non-Mexicans."

"This isn't going to be easy, is it."

"I never expected it to be," Jim told him.

They fell silent, watching the house - and in Jim's case, listening as well. Unseen by Megan, Blair laid his hand on top of Jim's, quietly anchoring him.

They had been there for nearly an hour when Blair felt Jim stiffen. A few minutes later, the door opened and three men walked out. They crossed to a car, got into it and started off. As it turned onto the main road, a land rover appeared from behind the building and fell in behind it.

"Come on!" Jim said, and ran for their car. They piled in and Jim headed off following the route the other vehicles had taken.

"We must have lost them," Megan muttered.

"Not yet," Jim said.

And then they went around a long bend and came to a fork in the road.

"Check the map!" Jim snapped. "The Zaragordo River."

Blair fumbled with the map for a moment, then said, "Go left."

About a mile further on, Jim braked and pulled the car off the road.

"This way." Jim led them into the trees bordering the road. Within moments they found themselves overlooking a clearing beside a river. Arguillo's car was parked at the edge of it; two men standing beside it. There was no sign of the land rover. "The one on the right is Arguillo," Jim breathed unnecessarily; it was clear from the way the two were standing which one was the boss.

"Where are the other men?" Megan asked softly, knowing that there had to be a minimum of two more, but that there were probably more than that.

Jim peered around. "I'd say they're hiding. Arguillo's set a trap. I think you were right, Conner; he's planning on double-crossing Barnes and Hettinger." He raised his head.

"What is it?" Blair murmured.

"Helicopter."

"I don't hear anything," Megan said.

"I do but I wasn't sure what it was," Blair said.

"There's nothing wrong with my ears, but I still don't hear anything."

"It's quite faint," Jim admitted. "Still several minutes away."

She looked doubtful, but then seemed to relax. "You must have damned good ears," she said accusingly. "I can just hear it now."

The whump-whump-whump of the helicopter got louder and then it appeared above the trees, swung around and landed gently. A woman they instantly recognized as Barnes got out and moved forward. "Senor Arguillo?"

"Si, Seniorita. We have the money here. You have the nerve gas?"

She stopped suddenly, and looked around. "We told you," she said. "You and one other. There are several people here. The deal is off." She turned and moved quickly back into the helicopter. As it took off, several men jumped out of hiding and began firing at it; but it quickly disappeared, hidden by the trees.

They heard Arguillo snarling at his men in Spanish as he turned and headed back to his car, two of the men scurrying behind him like terrified ducklings racing to keep up with the mother duck. The other men ran off at an angle that - fortunately - didn't take them anywhere near the car Blair's group had been using.

Once they were out of sight, Jim stood. "Come on," he said. He led the way to where the helicopter had landed, studied the ground, and nodded. "Someone hit Barnes' bird. It's leaking fuel." He pointed to a thin trail of oil. "Let's go," he went on. "The way it's leaking, I'd doubt it'll go more than ten miles, give or take. She won't expect anyone to be following - we've got a fair chance of catching her."

Blair followed him instantly. Megan hesitated for a moment, shrugged, and followed, running a few steps to catch up.

Jim set a fast pace as he followed the trail. It got fainter in places, where much of the leaking fuel failed to make it through the leaf canopy, but enough reached the ground to continue giving him a direction, especially since it was apparently committed to going in a straight line.

Some three hours into their pursuit they reached the helicopter, which seemed to have made a hard, but reasonably controlled, landing. The pilot was still strapped into his seat, but lay completely limp. Jim checked him quickly. "Dead," he said.

"That's Hettinger, isn't it?" Megan said, and Jim nodded.

"He's taken a pretty severe blow to the head. I'd hesitate to say it happened when they landed," he added. "I think that after they came down, she hit him with something, hard enough to kill him."

"But if they were partners, why would she want to kill him?" Blair asked.

"He made contact with Arguillo," Jim said. "And Arguillo tried to double-cross them. She could have suspected that Hettinger was working with Arguillo, knew Arguillo's plan, knew Arguillo meant to kill her - though he could well have meant to kill them both - and believing that Hettinger was double-crossing her, she struck first. She might even have believed that the crash was rigged, though - " he sniffed - "I'd have expected her to be aware of the smell of gas."

"I can smell it," Megan said, "but it's pretty faint."

"It was probably stronger when they came down," Blair suggested. "That would have been... judging by how far they got, what, five minutes after they were hit?"

"About that," Jim agreed. "The smell has had almost three hours to fade."

"So she's three hours ahead of us - about as far again as we've come," Megan muttered.

"Probably not," Blair said. "We made really good time; she wouldn't think she had any real reason to hurry, if only because she wouldn't know that anyone realized her chopper was leaking fuel and wouldn't get far; and in any case she's carrying the nerve gas. Those canisters'll be heavy. Yes, she's probably three or four miles ahead of us, but I'd guess we're going at least twice the speed she is, and she'd probably take a short break every hour."

"We're going to have to stop soon, though," Megan said. "But of course, she'll have to stop too."

"Why?" Jim asked.

"It's getting dark." Her tone said, Idiot!

"Yes, it is, isn't it," Blair put in quickly.

"We could go on for another mile or so," Jim protested.

"Yes, but don't you think it'd be a good idea to get a fire going?" Blair asked. "It'll take us ten to fifteen minutes to gather wood. If we used that time to go on for another mile we wouldn't have enough light to see to get a supply of wood for the night. I doubt it'll be cold, but a fire will keep wild animals away."

"Good point," Jim said. "Okay, let's get some wood." Then as Megan moved away, he muttered, "Barnes mightn't stop."

"Possibly, but unless you want Megan to know about your gift we have to chance it," Blair said softly before he dropped the backpack he always carried and moved off to get some fallen wood. Jim followed him. "Besides, I don't think Barnes really knows what she's capable of doing. She hadn't a clue about anything when Megan first arrested her."

"But she heard Arguillo's men," Jim protested.

"She could have been alert for a trap. In her place, I don't think I would have completely trusted Arguillo. Pay out for the nerve gas if he could get it for free by killing the seller? No, I'd definitely have been suspicious, just like you and Megan were. But I'm not sure she knows why she was aware there were more men there than were in full view." He pulled at a branch before discarding it with a muttered, "Too long..."

"On the other hand, if her hearing's been positively triggered, wouldn't she be aware of us?" Jim added a short, thick, half rotted branch to the armful he was amassing.

"Can you hear her?" Blair asked.

Jim cocked his head, listening, then shook it. "No."

"And you know what you're doing. So I'd say she hasn't a clue we're following her, and most likely catching up."

*

Breakfast was a small pack of trail mix each from the supply Blair kept in his backpack, and then they set off again.

Even Blair, who thought he had a good idea of where there were Aztec ruins, was taken aback about an hour later when they suddenly entered a huge clearing in which stood a surprisingly intact pyramid. A number of statues surrounded it - jaguars, mostly in aggressive poses that spoke of guarding the building. All three stopped, staring at the pyramid.

Blair found his voice first. "Why have I never heard of this place? Sierra Verde should be world-famous for having a pyramid this complete."

"She's inside it," Jim said.

Megan stared at him. "How can you know that?"

"I can hear her," Jim answered almost absently before Blair could say anything.

"Nobody except..." She stared at him. "Nobody except a Guardian could possibly... But..."

Blair looked sharply at her. "What do you know about Guardians?" he asked.

"They have very acute senses," she said. "They lead their tribes because although everyone knows where to hunt, how to find water, Guardians always know better than anyone else... but..." She looked at Jim again.

Jim and Blair glanced at each other. "We call them sentinels," Blair said, "but there are very few of them. We think Barnes is one."

"Of course!" Megan gasped. "The headlights that blinded her, the traffic noises that were too loud, the way her clothes felt uncomfortable... Why didn't I realize that?"

"You didn't expect to find a Guardian in an American city," Blair suggested.

"No, I didn't... but - " She shook her head as if trying to clear it. "I don't think she knew what she was."

"I agree," Blair said. "I'm sure she didn't know. But I think she's beginning to realize."

"She knew Arguillo was setting a trap - she heard his other men," Megan said slowly.

"We think so. So if she's worked out that she has acute hearing... I'd guess she knows we're here."

"I've only heard about Guardians," Megan said, "but I think you two know a lot more about them than I do." She looked at Jim. "You can hear her... what else can you do?"

"Everything," Jim admitted. "But I can't do it properly without Blair."

"A sentinel needs a companion to work with him," Blair explained. "Did your stories about Guardians never mention that?"

"No, but... well, like I said, all I ever heard were some Aboriginal stories about tribal leaders. Stories like that would always stress how good the leaders were and ignore their weaknesses, wouldn't they?"

Slowly, Blair nodded. "Yes, they would and they do," he admitted. "As soon as someone knows their weaknesses, the sentinels become vulnerable. In a tribal situation, it doesn't even have to be to a positive enemy - just someone ambitious, who wants to take over and sees the best way to do that is prove that the Guardian can be overwhelmed. In our society... "

"If the bad guys knew, I'd probably be dead within twenty-four hours," Jim said bluntly. "The contract killers would all be vying to be the one who took out the sentinel - they wouldn't even have to be employed by anyone, they'd do it just for the prestige, with a view to future well-paid contracts."

"Does anyone else at the PD know?" Megan asked.

"No," Jim said. "I've thought a few times about telling Captain Banks, but... well... "

"I don't say that nobody's noticed something, noticed that Jim does have an edge," Blair said, "because they're all detectives, after all; but knowledge of sentinels - Guardians - isn't common knowledge. You got it from the Aborigines; I got it from an old book I found when I was exploring in my grandfather's attic sixteen years ago, when I was still young enough not to dismiss it as pure fiction. I'd suspect that Dan Wolf knows something through his tribal heritage, but if he has, he hasn't said anything.

"Everyone else... they don't have the background to understand; they're too... too... " He grasped for words to explain. "Too many generations removed from even the kind of rural existence where knowledge of sentinels might still exist, where stories of people with heightened senses might be told to the kids, even as a fairy tale. Life now is too technological for that. The kids aren't told stories by their elders, they're just deposited in front of a television set or given an electronic game to keep

them amused, and local folk tales are forgotten unless someone goes around collecting them from the village 'ancients' so that the old stories won't be lost. Even then, a lot probably are."

"So everyone probably just thinks that Jimbo's very observant?" Megan asked.

"Probably, and it's safer for him that way," Blair agreed. "Meanwhile - what's the best thing for us to do about Barnes?"

"There's what looks like a doorway halfway up and to the left of that flight of steps," Jim said, "but I'd guess she has the sense to keep an eye on it."

"There might be another entrance," Blair said. "Priests in a lot of religions often used 'magical' appearances or disappearances to impress the masses - and how better than have a mysterious disappearance from inside the temple, then when the people left, the person who disappeared is standing outside to greet them. Or they pass a priest on their way in, then two minutes later, with everyone inside and the doors closed, that same priest stands up from behind the altar. Simple trickery, but oh, so effective in adding to the power of the priests."

"You think it could be worth looking for another entrance, then?" Jim asked.

"Yes. And if we split up, if she is aware of us... she won't know who's most dangerous to her."

"Be careful," Jim said.

"Always," Blair replied.

*

They ignored the front of the pyramid; a second entrance there was highly unlikely. Jim went to the right, Megan to the left; Blair accompanied Jim, then left him to go to the back, knowing that both cops believed that the sides were the most obvious place for that elusive second entrance. Blair himself thought that the back was most likely. The door would surely be where there was least chance of anyone not 'in the know' about its existence accidentally seeing something he shouldn't.

As he reached the back, Blair paused, thinking hard. The door would be where it would be easy for the priest using it to slip in and out; any climbing upwards would be done inside. So... check at ground level, not higher.

He made his way along the length of the pyramid, studying it as he went. Somewhere there would be something to betray its position...

Ah - there! The vertical line was faint, but there... He looked closer. Yes... definitely a door... Now how to open it? It would probably be easy for anyone who knew its secret...

He could call Jim. The sensible thing to do would be to call Jim. Jim's senses might help them work out how to open this door with a minimum of effort. Going alone to tackle Barnes wasn't a good idea, either - yet... if the three of them remained separate, surely, surely it would keep her confused. Jim would be able to deal with three separate opponents, but Barnes was - he believed - new to understanding her abilities and it might be possible to induce one of those 'lost track of time' spells Jim had suffered.

He examined the door carefully, pressed against it, tried to slide it sideways then tried to push it upwards. Ah! Yes. That worked; he could feel it yielding. Glancing around he noticed a fairly thick stick; he could take that to defend himself with, if it should be necessary. He picked it up, then pushed the door fully open and went in.

He had expected it to be quite dark, but something in the walls provided a faint light - enough to let him see where he was going. He moved cautiously forward. The passageway he was in sloped upwards - that made sense, he thought, because the main doorway was high. He passed an opening, and paused for a moment to glance inside. It was a small room containing ceramic jars. Hmm...the temple might be worth a visit later; a small expedition, perhaps? Eli would probably jump at the chance... He moved on.

He passed several doorways, all opening into small rooms that contained - as far as he could see without actually investigating - an assortment of artifacts. After the first three or four he stopped looking - he had a job to do, and an investigation of the pyramid and its contents wasn't involved.

Suddenly he heard a faint noise behind him; he began to swing around, and something hit him across the back of the head. He had just enough time to register that Barnes had been aware of his presence before he lost consciousness.

*

Jim raised his head from his study of the pyramid wall, frowning, aware of a second heartbeat from inside the structure. He concentrated on the outside again for a moment, and knew that the second person inside was Blair... and the two heartbeats were getting closer and closer to each other.

He raced around the pyramid. "Conner!" She looked around. "Blair's inside... and I think Barnes knows it. Come on!" He ran on, with Conner close behind him. They ran along the back wall, quickly finding the still-open doorway.

Inside, one of the heartbeats slowed... and stopped.

For Jim, the dim lighting of the corridor was perfectly clear; he ran up it without slackening speed. Megan dropped behind, unable to maintain the speed when she found it difficult to see exactly where she was going. As her eyes adjusted, however, she was able to go a little faster.

Noises ahead drew her to a room; Jim and Barnes were wrestling, neither able to gain an advantage. Drawing her gun, Megan moved closer - and then she saw that beside the fighting duo were two stone troughs full of water... and Blair was lying face down in one of them. She dodged around to the far side of the trough, put down her gun, grabbed Blair and hauled him out of the water. Leaving him lying on the floor, she scooped up her gun again. "Barnes! Give it up!"

But Barnes - despite what Megan knew had to be very sensitive hearing - was deaf to her shout.

She waited, watching for a chance to disable Barnes with a quick bullet, but the two were changing position so fast that she knew she would be as likely to put the bullet in Jim. And then Jim punched hard at Barnes' head, made contact, and she fell, unconscious.

Ignoring her, Jim immediately swung around to face Megan.

"You see to Sandy," she said. "I'll deal with Barnes."

Jim dropped to his knees beside Blair, quickly shifted him to lie flat on his stomach with his head turned to one side, and began the old-fashioned method of CPR, pressing down on Blair's rib cage and pushing slightly towards his head. The movement forced water out of Blair's lungs, to spill from his mouth onto the floor. He did that several times, then rolled Blair over, pinched his nostrils shut and began mouth-to-mouth.

Meanwhile Megan had removed Barnes' blouse, ripped it into strips and used them to tie her hands and feet, bending her knees and joining the bonds round wrists and ankles with one strip of the material. Then, satisfied that Barnes wouldn't be able to move, she joined Jim and began chest compressions.

Together, they worked on Blair for several minutes but he remained limp, unresponsive.

"I think he's gone," she murmured unhappily, sitting back.

Jim raised his head for a moment. "No! No! He can't be gone!" He bent back and refastened his mouth over Blair's.

/Enqueri./

Jim raised his head although he knew the voice could only be sounding in his memory. But standing in front of him was a shadowy figure he recognized immediately. //Incacha?// he thought, knowing that his Chopek mentor couldn't possibly be there physically.

/You know how to revive your guide - but think well before you do, make sure it is what you truly want, for if you do, if he returns for you, it will bind your spirits together, not just for this life but for all of your future lives./

//I would be happy with that - but will he?//

/If he is not, then he will not return for you./

And then he knew what to do. He laid his hands on Blair's forehead, thinking, Come back to me, Chief. Please... come back to me.

For a moment, nothing happened. Then it seemed to the anxious sentinel that a wolf materialized from Blair's body as a black jaguar emerged from his own; the two animals stood for a second looking at each other, then they ran towards each other, jumped... and merged in a flash of light. A moment later, Blair coughed and spat out another mouthful of water.

At the same moment, there was a scream from Barnes. "No! No! Come back! No... "

Jim glanced towards her in time to see a spotted jaguar step out of her body, and she went limp. The jaguar looked towards him, its body language speaking of apology - and then it turned and walked away, not hurrying but not wasting time either.



Unable to see the spirits, Megan had been watching open-mouthed as Blair revived, not quite understanding what had been happening but clearly prepared to accept it without questioning it. She squeezed Blair's arm, then went to where Barnes lay, and bent to check her.

She raised her head. "She's dead." The disbelief in her voice would have been funny if the situation had been less serious.

Jim looked over to where Incacha's... spirit?... waited.

/She killed, here in the sanctuary. A serious crime in itself - but more than that, she killed a sentinel's companion, making her crime that much more serious. When Yachachiq chose to return to you, she died in his place./Incacha's voice was clear in Jim's mind. /It is the justice of the spirit world./

//I understand,// Jim thought. //But if Blair had chosen not to return?//

/Her body would have lived, but her mind would have died as punishment for her crime./

Incacha faded from Jim's sight.

*

Blair scrambled to his feet surprisingly quickly, apparently having suffered no ill effects from his drowning. Megan unfastened the strips of cloth binding Barnes while the two men looked for the canisters of nerve gas, finding them behind the second trough where they were hidden from immediate view; Jim suspected that although he was no longer showing himself, Incacha had something to do with the ease with which they found the canisters.

Megan and Blair took one each, while Jim pulled Barnes' body over his shoulder and they left the pyramid.

Back at ground level, they stopped.

"We'll have to close the back door," Blair said. Jim nodded.

"And what do we do with Barnes?" Megan asked.

"I doubt Ortega will worry too much about her - she's - she was - a criminal, we're cops; she's been neutralized," Jim said. "He'll probably just be happy that the threat to his jurisdiction no longer exists."

"So what do we do?" she repeated.

"Well, I'm not about to go dragging her body back," Jim said.

"Wait a minute," Blair said thoughtfully. "We're only about three miles from the helicopter, right?"

"Yes."

"So we take her body back to there, leave it there; claim we found the nerve gas still in it with both occupants dead. Simplifies everything."

"Except the time scale," Jim objected.

"Who's to say we found the helicopter last night? We spent the night about quarter of a mile from it; who's to say which side of it we were? Okay, we had a fire, but it won't take long for fresh growth to hide all traces of that, and nobody will be searching beyond the chopper anyway. So we made about seven miles last night; started again this morning, found the chopper about an hour, hour and a half into the day, it took us time to check it and its occupants and retrieve the canisters and start back; we spend another night out here, maybe a couple of miles from the road, and finish the journey tomorrow morning. We had better take half an hour to bury the bodies, though - because we wouldn't just leave them, would we?"

So Jim and Blair went together to the back of the pyramid and closed the secret door, then rejoined Megan. Blair did wish he could have taken time to explore the pyramid - such an intact one, and so near to the town, yet he had come across no mention of it in his studies. But there was no time, though he decided that he would suggest to Jim that they return here the first chance they had.

Jim looked thoughtfully at Barnes' body, shrugged, and heaved it over his shoulder again in a fireman's carry. It was the simplest, easiest and quickest way to get it back to the chopper, and it wasn't going to hurt her the way it might hurt - or at least cause discomfort to - someone alive.

With Blair and Megan each taking one of the canisters, it was surprising how quickly they moved, returning to the downed helicopter in a little less than an hour. A lot of the ground was already plowed up by the crash, and they used that softer ground to bury the two bodies. Hettinger's was already showing the damage that a corpse lying unprotected in the jungle could suffer.

Jim took the canister Megan had been carrying and led them back towards civilization. He stopped when - he estimated - they were about a mile from their starting point. There were still two to three hours of daylight left.

"We need to be careful now," he murmured. "There's no reason to believe that Arguillo or his men have stayed anywhere near here, but we don't want to risk being seen."

"Especially when we've got the gas," Blair agreed. "But you should be able to tell if there's anyone close."

Jim glanced at him and he grinned encouragingly. "Okay..." He concentrated, and could hear nothing but some bird calls and - somewhere in the trees behind him - an animal growling softly. "Nothing," he said. "I think we could go straight in."

*

The car was still where they had left it, and they drove direct to the police station. Leaving the nerve gas carefully locked in the trunk, they went inside, to see Ortega.

He looked up as they entered, and they could see the worried frown on his face. "Ah - you have news for me?"

"Arguillo tried to double-cross Barnes and Hettinger; they recognized the trap and got away, but the helicopter they were using was damaged and crashed after it had gone a few miles," Jim said. "We found it this morning - Barnes and Hettinger were both dead. We buried them - we'd no way of bringing their bodies back - and retrieved the nerve gas, which we'll return to the facility they stole it from."

"Thank you," Ortega said quietly. "If there is ever anything I can do for any of you, you only have to ask."

"Just doing our job," Jim replied. "If you want to check out the crashed helicopter and do anything about the bodies - "

Ortega shook his head. "Ideally we should, but we really don't have the manpower to do that," he said. "The jungle will soon cover the wreckage, and the bodies are buried. Nothing can be gained by digging them up except to confirm they died in the crash, and then we would have the cost of reburying them. You are cops; I trust your assessment of events."

*

With Ortega's help they had no problems getting the canisters of nerve gas aboard the plane returning them to Cascade; there, they retrieved Jim's truck from long-term parking. It was a short trip to Rainier where new security measures were already in place, and they handed the canisters over with silent sighs of relief.

Jim dropped Megan off at her apartment building, and headed on home.

Once settled in the loft, mugs of coffee on the table beside them, Blair said softly, "Want to talk about it?"

Jim hesitated. "I'm not sure how much of it I can believe," he said.

"At least you were basically an onlooker," Blair murmured. "I was the one who died."

"You... you know you were dead?"

"They say drowning is relatively peaceful... it isn't. Although she'd knocked me out, somehow I was aware of trying to breathe... and the harder I tried, the harder it was. Next thing I knew, I could see a bright light not too far away. I felt drawn to it like a moth being attracted to a lit window... but at the same time I could hear a voice behind me calling me away from it. I could have resisted, could have gone to the light... but I didn't want to. It was you calling me, wasn't it."

"Yes. I... I'm sorry if I took too much for granted, but... "

"Our spirits are linked now," Blair said.

"For always," Jim admitted. He hesitated. "I know I'm not always easy to live with - "

"I know that," Blair said. "I've always known. What, you think I didn't realize how touchy you can be? The day we met you told me about... well, disowning your family. That was a pretty strong clue."

"All I can promise," Jim went on, "is that I'll try to do better... and if I can't in this life, well, there's always the next."

"And I promise you... " Blair said. "I might screw up occasionally - everyone makes the occasional mistake - but I promise I will never deliberately fail you."

Their hands met in a firm, confirming clasp. "Sentinel," Blair murmured.

"Companion," Jim replied.

"And together - "

" - we'll be unbeatable," Jim said.

They smiled at each other, then Blair said briskly, "Okay, what's for dinner?"

"Let's go out," Jim said. "My treat. There's that Thai place near Rainier that you told me about just before we left for Sierra Verde - we didn't have time to try it then, but now... "

"That," Blair said, "sounds perfect."

He followed Jim as the older man headed for the door, grinning happily. He still hadn't decided what to do once he had submitted and defended his second dissertation but he was becoming more and more convinced that he couldn't combine an academic career with being Jim's companion. He would have to discuss things with Eli Stoddard and also with someone in authority at the PD to see just what his options were... which would probably mean explaining Jim's gifts to that person in authority.

But that was for the future.

He had found his sentinel, and avoided the mistakes made by whoever left the letter in Burton's book. But he would keep the letter, and reread it occasionally, to make sure that he didn't forget the warnings and advice in it. And when he was old... would he somehow know how to pass the book

on? Or had he, by taking the advice in the letter and choosing not to help another sentinel, broken a chain of mistakes made by one or more Blairs before him? He was unlikely ever to know for certain.

All he could know was that he and his sentinel were linked with an unbreakable tie; and he couldn't be happier.

